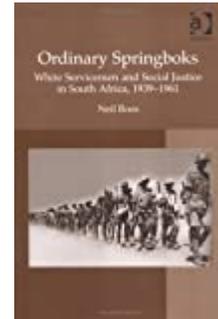




Neil Roos. *Ordinary Springboks: White Servicemen and Social Justice in South Africa, 1939-1961.* Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2005. xvi + 233 pp. \$89.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7546-3471-3.



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As a child in the 1960s, I grew up in an environment in which some of my uncles, neighbors, and many of my father's colleagues, as well as the fathers of school friends had served in the Union Defence Force (UDF) during the Second World War. Passionately interested in the history of the war, I never passed an opportunity to question these veterans on their experiences. I hung on to their every word—the tales of the dust, flies and upset stomachs in North Africa, the battles with General Rommel's Africa Korps, the cold and hunger in Nazi Germany's prisoner of war camps and the joy on being liberated, made a lasting impression on me.

My father gave me a copy at the age of thirteen of Neil Orpen's *War in the Desert* (1971), the third volume in the official history of the South African forces in the Second World War. To my disappointment, I did not recognize the war that my heroes had fought as Orpen's account was that of senior officers and the various military units. It was as dry and indigestible as the sands of the Western Desert. The struggles of the lower ranks, or Springboks as they were popularly called, simply disappeared under an avalanche, or rather a dust storm, of relentless detail.

Unlike Orpen, Roos views the war from the perception of the ordinary soldier who did the killing and dying, but mainly had to survive the tedium and bureaucratic bungling of the UDF. Although for many outside

the ivory towers of academe, the theoretical sections on racism, whiteness and masculinity will be heavy going, it will be worth the effort as Roos succeeds admirably in conveying the Springboks' experiences. The book, for example, vividly brings to life the misery of Helwan Camp, the major UDF base camp in Egypt, some 90 kilometers from Cairo. The slow repatriation process and horrendous living conditions in the camp led to a riot in August 1945. The military leadership and government of Jan Smuts, aware of the legitimacy of the soldiers' frustrations, took a lenient attitude to events at Helwan. The authorities were, however, more concerned about the soldiers' sense of entitlement of special treatment as whites as part of their desire for social justice after the war.

A large segment of white UDF volunteers came from the ranks of the poor. The desire to escape poverty, and not to serve King or country—although this was also a factor for many—was a powerful motive for volunteers. Many Afrikaner recruits were definitely not "King's Afrikaners" as they had no sense of loyalty to the British Empire, nor were they filled with the desire to fight fascism. The need to counter potential extravagant expectations of how servicemen should be provided for in the postwar world, as well as the fear of extremist political tendencies, especially a Nazi-inspired fifth column in the UDF or the possibility of a postwar fascist or Soldiers

Party, led to the creation of the Army Education Scheme (AES). The intention was to school troops as citizens of a liberal democracy to counter exclusive Afrikaner nationalism and to encourage a more enlightened form of paternalism toward blacks. The AES succeeded in encouraging South Africanism by strengthening the ties of cooperation between English- and Afrikaans- speaking South Africans. The troops' love of freedom also was bolstered, but within the limits of a racist culture as the strict segregation in the UDF countered a more enlightened attitude toward blacks.

Apart from the AES, the Springbok Legion, which was formed by soldiers to look after their own interests as a type of soldiers' trade union, also attempted to encourage more tolerance toward blacks. The Legion's ability to mobilize soldiers sparked the interest of communists who hoped to use it to make the white working class more progressive and to spread the message that "native" policy in South Africa should be revised, to secure the dream of a non-racial working-class alliance. The Legion's reputation that it got things done for soldiers meant that many joined the Legion, but after demobilization the organization lost its hold on them. Most ex-servicemen wanted to use their status as white veterans to negotiate a better deal for themselves, and could not relate to the non-racial ideals of those leading the Legion.

After 1945, according to Roos, most white veterans found themselves in a politically ambiguous position. Because of the bureaucratic bungling with demobilization they turned away from Smuts's ruling United Party (UP), but they were not prepared to support the National Party (NP) with its extreme Afrikaner nationalism and pro-Nazi Germany history. *Ordinary Springboks* argues that after the NP victory in the 1948 general election, white servicemen were alienated from both major political parties and found a home in the Torch Commando. This organization was founded in 1951 to protest the NP's abuse of the constitution when the government attempted to remove "Coloureds" from the common voters' roll. The Torch Commando was, however, more a platform to express the frustrations and discontentment of veterans in a white society that did not recognize their service. The Torch went into decline after the NP's victory—with an increased majority—in the parliamentary election of 1953. Following its collapse, white ex-servicemen would never again feature as a political category capable of challenging the state. Most veterans, Roos claims, turned largely to the Memorable Order of Tin Hats (Moths), an apolitical conservative veterans organization, to advance their needs. According to Roos, only a small group of radi-

cal white veterans in the Springbok Legion, the Communist Party, and after its banning, in the Congress of Democrats (COD), had hopes for postwar social justice pinned on a non-racial society. Some of them eventually ended up in the armed wing of the African National Congress.

Ordinary Springboks is a pathbreaking study on the historiography of the ordinary white South African soldier in the Second World War, and yet, it also has some serious flaws. Roos is wrong in stating that the veterans' disappointment with the UP led to their disenchantment with the party political culture. Until the 1970s, all white political parties with parliamentary representation, except the NP, were led by ex-servicemen. Veterans dominated especially the UP, with its paternalistic policy of white leadership with justice. Japie Basson in his memoirs, *Raam en Rigting in die Politiek*, reflects that by 1948 the party's election machine was fatally weakened by the influx of electorally inexperienced ex-servicemen who, on Smuts's insistence, had replaced seasoned party workers. The UP's parliamentary caucus also had a significant number of ex-servicemen. One of them was Sir de Villiers Graaff who had been captured at Tobruk. His leadership in the prison camps ensured him a large and loyal following among veterans. He became the UP's leader in November 1956 and remained so until the party's disbandment in 1977.

As a result of his war experience Graaff preferred loyal, disciplined party men, especially ex-servicemen, who did not rock the boat. Graaff's favorite type of MP was epitomized by Vause Raw who, after a distinguished service (he had been mentioned in dispatches), became a powerful and conservative influence in the UP. In 1959, as Graaff's hatchet man, he led a successful campaign to purge the party of its liberals, including Helen Suzman, who were seen as an electoral liability. With the collapse of the UP in 1977, Raw became the leader of the party's rump, the New Republic Party. By then he was to the right of many in the apartheid government, but his war service made it impossible for him to join the NP.

In 1959 the UP liberals formed the Progressive Party (PP). Roos ignores this party and the fact that its leader, Jan Steytler, was decorated for gallantry while serving with the UDF Medical Corps in the Western Desert. Colin Eglin, Steytler's successor as PP leader, was a combat veteran of the Sixth Armoured Division in Italy. The UP did not lose all its enlightened members in 1959 and Harry Schwarz, leader of the so-called reformists, was a former Air Force navigator in North Africa and Italy.

Roos also makes no attempt to look at the role of ex-servicemen in the Liberal Party. This is surprising as one of the founders of the party was Jock Isacowitz, a former National Chairman of the Springbok Legion. According to Randolph Vigne in *Liberals Against Apartheid: A History of the Liberal Party of South Africa, 1953-68* (1997), a number of veterans made their way to the Liberal Party through the Springbok Legion. Ex-servicemen also played a leading role in the party, including Peter Brown, the National Chairman, who had served in Italy. Walter Stanford, holder of the Distinguished Flying Cross, and Leslie Rubin, a former AES officer, were elected as Native Representatives in terms of the Natives Representative Act of 1936. They used parliament as a platform to propagate the ideal of a non-racial South Africa and to expose with relentless criticism the evil and folly of apartheid.

Roos's argument that only a small cohort of white radicals in the Communist Party and the COD were prepared to challenge the very precepts of apartheid in their quest for a non-racial state, and suffered state prosecution and vilification at the hands of whites, is thus also open to questioning. That the veterans in the PP and Liberal Party advocated a qualified franchise for "civi-

lized" men does not negate their desire for social justice based on non-racialism. For the apartheid state liberals were agitators without whom Africans would have been blissfully happy with apartheid, and the government saw liberalism as more devious and dangerous than communism. The state as a result unleashed its full powers against the Liberal Party. A succession of party members, including Brown, were detained and banned without trial. Although not harassed by the state, the PP under the leadership of Steytler and Eglin had to endure in election after election the contempt of the white electorate, which believed that the party was a danger to the existence of white rule in South Africa, and that it consisted of communists and traitors.

Ordinary Springboks's curious blind spot regarding the role of ex-servicemen in white party politics does not, however, detract from Roos's achievement. His pioneering chapters on the hitherto neglected Springbok Legion and Torch Commando fills a crucial historiographical gap in South African history, and will endure. The book will be obligatory reading for those with any interest in the motives, ambitions and frustration of white servicemen during and after the Second World War.

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