

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Adèle Kirsten. *A Nation without Guns? The Story of Gun Free South Africa.* Scottsville: University of Kwazulu-Natal Press, 2008. xx + 244 pp. \$38.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-86914-135-6.

Reviewed by Annie van Wyk (University of South Africa)

Published on H-SAfrica (December, 2009)

Commissioned by Lindsay F. Braun (University of Oregon)

Guns and Violence in South Africa

A Nation without Guns? is a contemporary book that addresses the controversial matter of regulating and reducing the private legal possession of firearms to combat violent crimes and to create a safer environment in South Africa. Adèle Kirsten tells the story of the Gun Free South Africa (GFSA) movement from her perspective, both as an activist and as the director of the GFSA (1995–2002). She stresses the point that, through participatory democracy and organization, mobilization, and campaigning, ordinary people can bring about social changes that have a profound impact on their lives. GFSA illustrates this point through the efforts and commitment of a few full-time members and some volunteers, working in sometimes stressful and life-threatening conditions. These people work relentlessly to sensitize communities to the correlation that exists between private legal ownership of guns and the high levels of violence in the country. By raising communities' awareness, the support for their campaign grew to such an extent that they were able to influence the laws of the country, resulting in a safer environment for people to live in. This valuable lesson serves as an inspiration and seems to be the ultimate objective of this book, as it is clear that the book was written for general readers and citizens in South African society.

This book is divided into eleven chapters. It starts off in chapter 1 by validating GFSA's belief that "guns became the currency for violence in South Africa" (p. 6). A

definite relationship is revealed between homicide rates and the level of private legal ownership of firearms using statistics and recounting shocking gun-related events (which I remember because they have been highlighted in the media). To prove her point, the author cites the statistics showing that many male homicide victims are the firearm's owners who have the gun turned against them, and that approximately half of all female homicide victims are killed by their intimate partners using legal firearms kept in the home.

Chapter 2 sketches the background of the GFSA movement's emergence and its involvement in the National Peace Accord and with independent organizations, such as Ceasefire and Peace Action, against the escalation of violence in South Africa during the country's period of the negotiated transition. Kirsten ascribes the proliferation of guns to the legacy of *apartheid* and a difficult transition to a new society among blacks and whites in South Africa. Very significant is Kirsten's reference to the fermenting criminal violence that took place under the mantle of political violence during this time and the fact that after political violence ceased post-1994 criminal violence spiraled. GFSA saw a challenge in changing the norm when violence became a legitimate solution to conflict—hence, the origination of its vision to create a gun-free South Africa.

That this vision has become a reality is discussed in chapter 3, in particular the campaign to hand in firearms

on December 16, 1994. In spite of the campaign's own problems, such as a lack of financial support, reluctant church support, the African National Congress's (ANC) immovable attitude against surrendering firearms before the election, and the disappointing numbers of firearms that were handed in, the campaign at least achieved a working relationship between civil society and the state (police). The greatest achievement of the campaign was, however, the extensive and positive media reporting, which raised public awareness about the link between crime and the proliferation of firearms and made it an issue of public debate.

Chapters 4 to 7 describe the mobilization of GFSA at the grassroots level in communities, in banks, in government, and in churches, through building strategic partnerships with government and the NGO sector, forming important alliances under the umbrella of the Gun Control Alliances (GCA), conducting research and providing informative reliable data to influence public policy, making contact with international gun-control movements, withstanding personal threats, showing the effects of gun violence on economic and health issues, and partnering with the health sector and influencing all sectors through the media. Chapters 8, 9, and 10 give an insightful clear account of the long law-making process of tabling the gun control bill through Parliament by examining the drafting of the bill, public hearings (involving individuals and communities), opposition from the gun lobby organizations, and work with incompetent civil servants. In the final debate on the gun-control bill in Parliament on October 12, 2000, politicians used the opportunity to criticize the government of the day and the bill received an overwhelming vote of support. It is admirable that, in spite of the complex legislation process, GFSA activists stayed focused and used every opportunity to mobilize a wide range of sectors including the grassroots level.

In chapter 11, the proof of GFSA's success is its membership profile's growth from a primarily small white group of activists, whose Christianity was the driving force for their antiviolence beliefs, to a largely black, township-based, young adult constituency. The orga-

nization also opened offices in the Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal and by 2002 had twelve full-time staff members and more than thirty branches across the country in eight of South Africa's nine provinces. GFSA has continued its tireless efforts by becoming involved in the implementation of the law, developing training programs, being party to amendments to the law, and becoming noticed by the United Nations and leaders in gun control through the creation of the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA), which has a network of 800 organizations in 120 different countries.

At the beginning of chapter 11, Kirsten succeeds in convincing the reader of the growing success of the GFSA to such an extent that the last two pages of the same chapter come as an unexpected shock. The reader may experience this as a jarring last-minute addendum, because it briefly mentions the loss of GFSA's momentum. This could create the suspicion that the rest of the book has been written from a subjective viewpoint, because of Kirsten's own membership and leadership in the organization. Although the content is sufficiently nontechnical and was written for the general public, it could have included more comprehensive statistics comparing, say, firearms issues in South Africa with other countries. The title of the book is misleading in that South Africa is *not* a gun free country.

This book can be recommended for its insight not only into the efforts of GFSA to make South Africa a safer country but also into such important issues as the process of law making, involvement of individuals and communities on a grassroots level, and interaction with governmental and NGO sectors. This book definitely creates an appreciation for GFSA's efforts and its contribution to the tabling of the Firearms Control Act, which reduced the number of gun licenses issued, and with it curtailed the legal arms trade, arms dealers, and the number of guns in circulation. Crimes committed with firearms are still a burning issue in South Africa, and this book is an appeal to the reader's conscience and an effort to influence attitudes toward firearm-related issues.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-safrica>

Citation: Annie van Wyk. Review of Kirsten, Adèle, *A Nation without Guns? The Story of Gun Free South Africa*. H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews. December, 2009.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=25636>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.