

## Violence and the self-fashioning of liberation

Ismay Milford 

Friedrich-Meinecke-Institut, Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, Germany

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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An author cannot know the events that their book will be read alongside. In October 2023, when I was three chapters into *Spear* and Landau had compellingly set out the conditions in which ANC “took up the spear” after half a century of pursuing non-violent methods, Hamas carried out violent attacks in Israel. I was not necessarily preoccupied with historical parallels or lessons from the past. Instead, the high stakes of the narratives built *around* violence during its unfolding and in its aftermath seemed clearer than ever, especially as Western states worked to legitimize Israel’s (violent) military response. I felt disarmed by my inability to shake off the absorbing story of Mandela and the revolutionaries (and an absorbing story it certainly is) while I followed events in Palestine and Israel, oscillating (probably like other scholars external to the situation) between the necessity and the uselessness of scholarly analysis in times of mass despair. Perhaps all the more so because I was reading and am writing (a month later) in Dar es Salaam, set apart from my usual environment of discussing current affairs and instead doing so in halting Swahili at newspaper stands, in a city that still prides itself on its history of hosting exiled liberation movements. If I were I to read Mao’s *On Guerilla Warfare* today, like Mandela did in Johannesburg around 1960, I considered, we would hardly have read the same book at all.

This context explains why my reflections on *Spear* turn to the historical method and the role of the historian. Nevertheless, I read the book not as an expert of violence, terrorism, or revolution but instead as a historian of the era of decolonization in East and Central Africa, notably in countries which obtained flag independence *without* large-scale armed insurgency, during the same years of the early 1960s that Landau focuses on in his book.<sup>1</sup> I would like, then, to situate *Spear* within recent historiography on African decolonization, and in particular to use the provocations Landau makes regarding methodology to ask where we can go next with certain

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**CONTACT** Ismay Milford  [ismay.milford@fu-berlin.de](mailto:ismay.milford@fu-berlin.de)

<sup>1</sup>Namely Uganda, Tanganyika, Malawi, and Zambia. See Milford, *African Activists*.

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concepts that have gained prominence in this field in the past decade, notably world-making and future-making.

At the basis of the dialogue between *Spear* and the wider historiography on African decolonization is the ambition to challenge the “integrity of any narrative climax” with the moment of democratic self-determination.<sup>2</sup> A linear and almost fated trajectory toward flag independence—as toward the end of Apartheid—was a hallmark of early histories of liberation struggles on the African continent. Long since challenged by research on conflict within anticolonial movements and the unevenness of popular support, the most recent body of scholarship—much of it indebted to Frederick Cooper’s reflections on “possibility and constraint”—has brought to light potential futures pursued around the time of independence that never came about.<sup>3</sup> Like Landau’s impressive book, this manifests as a work of recovery, arguing for the breadth of initiatives concealed under a metanarrative of national liberation and the real consequences of their pursuit.<sup>4</sup> It is in part through this line of thinking that the “worldmaking” ambitions of many anticolonial thinkers have been brought to light: leaders sought to bring into being a global order completely unlike the one in which we live.<sup>5</sup> To reiterate that historical actors do not know the future has thus become a tenet of recent histories of decolonization that has generated important scholarship but is beginning to feel slightly glib.

By cutting through the myths of South Africa’s linear road to democracy—very effectively—with some of the same conceptual tools, Landau raises new questions about not only the specificity of South Africa in histories of decolonization but the endeavor of “recovery” itself. Stylistically, *Spear* is perfectly geared to conveying contingency to the reader: Landau’s pared back language takes readers through events sometimes hour by hour. Discussion of the problematic nature of interviews, under duress or in specific political situations years later, is confined largely to the preface, while core chapters quote sources without diverging into extensive analysis or even noting their origin (for once, endnotes rather than footnotes make sense, so as not to pull the reader away from the unfolding action). Reminiscent of R. F. Foster’s *Vivid Faces*, on the Irish revolutionary generation, Landau’s success in integrating personal and family lives into the picture is part of this too: the reader is taken to kitchens and bedrooms to see how what happened there could be decisive.<sup>6</sup>

In this respect, Landau’s achievement itself speaks to the specificities of the South African case. *Spear*’s level of detail and the documentary-like narrative it yields is possible precisely because of the multidirectional and prolonged nature of the struggle against Apartheid. This produced not only vast court records but widespread international interest in interviewing and corresponding with *Spear*’s (ex-)revolutionaries—many of whom moved in and out of exile during the second half of the twentieth century, as Landau recounts. Almost ironically, the perceived need for a unifying narrative (and some inevitable resistance to it) inspired precisely the

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<sup>2</sup>Landau, *Spear*, 291.

<sup>3</sup>Cooper, “Possibility and Constraint.”

<sup>4</sup>To cite just two examples, Gona, *Zarina Patel*; Skinner, *Fruits of Freedom*.

<sup>5</sup>This is of course only one of the many insights of this body of scholarship, and I cite only two landmark works: Lee, *Making a World after Empire*; Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire*.

<sup>6</sup>Foster, *Vivid Faces*.

accounts that now allow Landau (through a career of meticulous research across continents) to dissect this same narrative. Whether this would be possible for contemporaneous anticolonial movements elsewhere on the continent seems doubtful, although the recent biography of Julius Nyerere goes some way in challenging that assumption.<sup>7</sup>

Among the implications of this level of detailed scrutiny from which wider histories of African decolonization could benefit most is Landau's rigorous delineation of revolutionary and radical, drawing concrete lines between the theorizing of the intellectual cadre of MK and violent acts committed by some ordinary people who were thinking along very different lines. Importantly, Landau's chapter on Mandela's bookcase restores the global and eclectic reference points of revolutionary thought in MK, when discussions of violence in African liberation are today often reduced to the singular (frequently decontextualized) figure of Frantz Fanon.<sup>8</sup> Now that we are able to dismantle the myth of national liberation in South Africa alongside those in other parts of (especially Anglophone, sub-Saharan) Africa, one thing is remarkable: where postliberation narratives erased the revolutionary aspects of struggle in South Africa, they typically highlighted revolutionary aspects elsewhere. Tanzania is a good example, where the powerful national revolutionary image was derived from postindependence Dar es Salaam rather than rural or small-town Tanganyika during the 1950s.<sup>9</sup> The global context of the 1960s demanded different stories than in 1994, after the "end of history," after all.<sup>10</sup> The self-fashioning of liberation movements no longer needs to be viewed as an obstacle to historiography, but rather can be treated as a subject of enquiry itself.<sup>11</sup> This much is implicit, I feel, in *Spear*, but the stylistic features mentioned above are to some extent in conflict with a deeper analysis of the phenomenon.

Where does this leave us for thinking about worldmaking and future-making? Have these just been buzzwords in the ongoing consideration of structure and agency? Or, if *all* creators of historical sources are surely actors engaged in self-fashioning who cannot know the future, then maybe part of the value of this conceptual approach is explaining why this is more relevant and marked in certain times and places. For me, a set of linked enquiries seemed important as I came to the end of Landau's magisterial work. If the emphasis on futures has encouraged historians to present the world as actors saw it, is this an end in itself? The prevailing moral and political consensus among historians (at least of my generation, but I venture shared by Landau too) seems to be that indeed it is most worthwhile to strive to write histories that specific historical protagonists would have recognized as "true" in the moment of their unfolding. Cognizant of the inadequacies of Marxist histories and the elitism of early postcolonial scholarship, should historians not nevertheless feel compelled to add a layer of analysis that those in the throes of it simply could *not*

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<sup>7</sup>Shivji, Yahya-Othman, and Kamata, *Development as Rebellion*.

<sup>8</sup>Davis, "The US Academy and the Provincialization of Fanon"; Omeish, "Reading Fanon in Algeria, Reading Algeria beyond Fanon."

<sup>9</sup>Hunter, *Political Thought*, 106–34. Another example is Macola, *Liberal Nationalism in Central Africa*, 2–4.

<sup>10</sup>Fukuyama, "The End of History?"

<sup>11</sup>Strong examples of thinking along these lines are Manoeli, *Sudan's "Southern Problem"*; Martin Luque, "Disparando imágenes."

see? To suggest one possible way forward, might the research behind *Spear* prompt us to examine how the violence orchestrated by MK lent feasibility to avowedly *non-violent* contemporaneous campaigns elsewhere? That conducted by UNIP in Zambia, with significant international backing, would be a case in point. Landau, in Chapter Two especially, explains circumstances in which MK came to justify violence; the next question could address what that violence, in turn, justified through its afterlives in the narratives formed around it, in and beyond South Africa.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### Notes on contributor

*Ismay Milford* is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Postdoctoral Fellow at Freie Universität Berlin, currently interested in histories of information professionals, technology, and environmental knowledge in East Africa. Her monograph, *African Activists in a Decolonizing World: The Making of an Anticolonial Culture, 1952–1966*, was recently published by Cambridge University Press.

### ORCID

Ismay Milford  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5761-2348>

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