# Under Covers: South Africa's Apartheid Army – an Incubator for Artists' Books

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South Africa was the pariah of the contemporary western world because of its legalised and enforced racism, between 1948 and 1994. Apartheid touched the lives of all South Africans, explicitly or implicitly. Oppression of the black majority was accomplished in many ways—through legalism and legislation, indoctrination and education. The South African Defence Force (SADF), which between 1961 and 1993 conducted the forced conscription of young white men, is an odd incubator for artists' books.[1] Yet, it is my argument in this paper, that selected work made by five South African artists, which fits the rubric of artist's book, developed directly out of the artists' experiences in the army, or their thoughts surrounding the realities of being forced to subscribe to certain political (and racist) values by virtue of their gender and skin colour. The works I will be examining here are Willem Boshoff's *Bangboek* (1977-81)*, Steven Cohen's *Alice in Pretoria* (1988) series and the progression of his work from this point*, selected pieces from the collaborative oeuvre of Anton Kannemeyer and Conrad Botes, who created *Bitterkomix*, and Paul Emmanuel's *The Lost Men (Grahamstown)* (2004).

But, what is an artist's book?  Must it be a paged document with a spine, pagination, a foredge and a colophon?  Must its content comprise text?  Must it be a unique item, collectable by galleries and upheld as precious? David Paton argues that over the years, the artist's book has shifted in its defining characteristics from the codex as 'fixed artifact to that of a work whose existence is contingent on the active engagement of the reader', thus giving the codex a dynamism previously not credited as possible (Paton 2006:16).[2] Each of the artists whose work I examine challenges these notions, exploding an understanding of the artist's book in a manner which reinvents it, while claiming ownership of it.

Willem Boshoff (b. 1951) is a South African conceptual artist. Through the years, he has often been alone in his construction of a visual arts language that segues with the idiosyncrasy of written language. He is an Afrikaans-speaking individual, who enjoys a fascination with the social and political connotations of language, and he exploits this fascination on various levels, in the form of artists' books, installations and in two- and three-dimensional works.  In the early 1970s, Boshoff was conscripted to the SADF. The ruling at that time was that conscriptees were obliged to attend camps sporadically, after an initial two years of basic training. Boshoff was outspoken about the value of the army: 'To my mind, the army was doing wrong, intimidating and killing instead of helping', he said at a camp during the 1970s (www.willemboshoff.com, accessed July 31, 2008). Voicing this type of criticism of the army was punishable, and Boshoff was informed upon, by the men in his platoon, for making this statement. He was publicly humiliated and 'relegated to the rank of potato-peeler' (www.willemboshoff.com, accessed July 31, 2008). Thereafter, he became 'much more careful about what I say and to whom. My private diaries were filled with contentions against military service' (www.willemboshoff.com, accessed July 31, 2008).

These private diaries saw surreptitious light of day a couple of years later, when Boshoff was called up for another camp. This time, he refused to handle a weapon, and was relegated by a kindly chaplain to a desk job. During this period he typed up an 86-page document on a military typewriter and official paper. It ridiculed army practices and criticised military principles.

> The following year, as another camp loomed, he resolved to refuse to wear a uniform or to obey orders, actions which were then punishable by imprisonment. In preparation for spending time in jail, he devised a secret alphabet and wrote up his notes … in this code … As it turned out, he had already completed the required number of camps, and so the crisis was averted. But *Bangboek,* 'The Book That Is Afraid', remains as a record of the moment (Vladislavić 2005:40).[3]
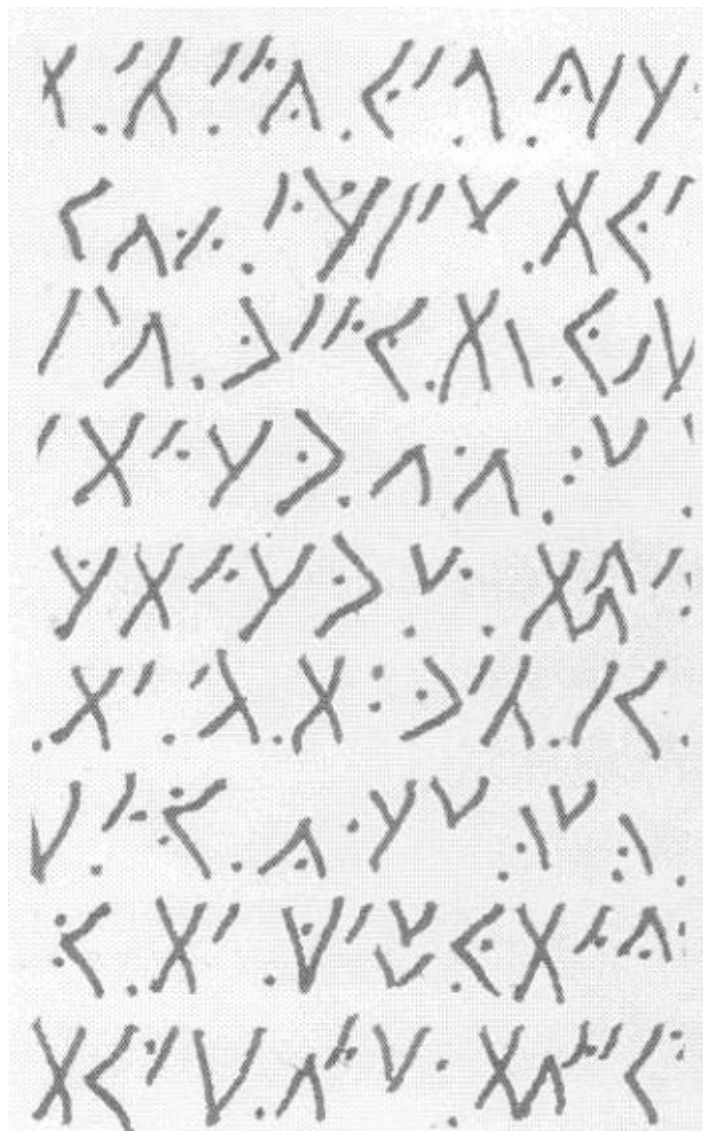


*Bangboek* detail (1977 – 1981) Willem Boshoff.
Ink, paper, masonite. Unique work.
Photograph: John Hodgkiss.

In 1984, Boshoff submitted the completed book in partial fulfilment of his National Higher Diploma in Fine Art at what was then the Technikon Witwatersrand.[4]  This 'secretly knitted armour against arguments I would encounter'

(www.willemboshoff.com, accessed July 31, 2008), comprised a thicket of dots and lines; its original text is in phonetic English, even though the title is in Afrikaans. Boshoff's employer and promoter for his diploma (he was, at that time, teaching in the Fine Art department at that institution), was a staunch supporter of apartheid politics, and Boshoff was afraid of revealing the true content of *Bangboek,* which he only allowed to be revealed after South Africa's transition to democratic rule in 1994.  The work takes the form of a conventional codex, bound between covers of masonite.

Steven Cohen (b. 1962), currently resident in France, is a Johannesburg-born artist best known for his impromptu performances in the public domain, which deal with xenophobia and homophobia. Cohen is white, male, South African, homosexual and Jewish, and he uses all of these determining characteristics in the construction of his bold and controversial art. He began working with the medium of screenprinting while he was in the army during the 1980s.  Anecdotally, the period he spent in the army served as a catalyst for him. He told a magazine journalist:

> I was a frigid, boring boy at school and a bit vacuous at university. I always wanted to be an artist and gay and never dared to be. The army turned my head around … out of the destruction of the army I made myself what I wanted to be (Raphaely 1991:131).

During the time that he was conscripted, he refused to hold a gun, an aberration for which he was sent to the lunatic asylum associated with the army, for long periods of time.  He also, at one point 'AWOLed' from the army, in order to attend a course in silk-screening at the Ruth Prowse School of Art, in Cape Town, which offered occasional courses in different art techniques. Pnina Fenster comments:

> The other students on the four-month course produced eight serviettes and a tablecloth—nice florals, pink abstracts. Steven left with 30 repeats of Voortrekker Monuments,[5] the whole *Alice in Pretoria* series, and the decision to print fabrics professionally (Fenster 1989:30).

In 1988, he exhibited *Alice in Pretoria.*  This work comprised silkscreens on canvas in which Cohen had quoted from the original 1911 John Tenniel illustrations of Lewis Carroll's (1866) *Alice in Wonderland.* Cohen photographically manipulated them to fit a criticism of the local status quo, which included political and sexual censorship. In these hand-coloured works, the Alice figure is placed in a context juxtaposed with a diversity of disparate sexual and violent images, including giant penises, small Voortrekker Monuments, casspirs,[6] hand grenades, cockroaches and other vermin, symbols not only of an aggressive sexuality and a potent sense of filth, but also of the internecine war that was ongoing in South Africa at the time.

*Alice in Pretoria* (1988) Steven Cohen.
Hand-coloured screenprint on canvas.
Unique work. Photograph: John Hodgkiss.

The silk-screened fabric, stretched and hung like paintings gave voice to other display possibilities for Cohen, that would engage the viewer on a more intimate and personal level. In 1989, he took part in a two-person exhibition at the Market Galleries in Newtown, Johannesburg. Entitled 'The Living Room', the exhibition represented a move toward three-dimensional articulation, and in my representation of the concept, into creating artists' books on a particularly conceptual level. This exhibition comprised generally period style furniture, which Cohen had reupholstered with his printed fabrics. By this time, the subject of his fabrics had shifted to becoming even more politically outspoken than they had been, and he began using the faces of important apartheid leaders and social icons, such as Paul Kruger and Hendrik Verwoerd[7] as repeat design elements. It is my contention that these pieces of furniture and fabric promote interactivity in a manner in which traditional two-dimensional or three-dimensional art does not. It is also my contention that without the catalyst of the army, Cohen would not have developed as politically articulate a repertoire.

It is significant to bear in mind that during apartheid, with particular reference to the 1980s, when in many respects, the struggle for liberation was at its most violent peak, South Africa's political atmosphere was characterised by extreme censorship. The Publications and Entertainment Act of 1963 defined categories of undesirable literary material:

A publication or object shall be deemed to be undesirable if it or any part of it
a)      is indecent or obscene or harmful to public morals;
b)      is blasphemous or is offensive to the religious convictions or feelings of any section of the inhabitants of the Republic;
c)      brings any section of the inhabitants of the Republic into ridicule or contempt;
d)      is harmful to the relations between any inhabitants of the Republic;
e)      is prejudicial to the safety of the State, the general welfare or the peace and good order (De Lange 1997:8).

Other governmentally imposed Acts included the Indecent or Obscene Photographic Matter Act, the Customs and Excise Act, the Protection of Information Act, the Internal Security Act and the Public Safety Act, all of which had definitions that were largely subjective and that effectively 'meant that the South African public … lived in a state of varying degrees of ignorance, often unaware of what [was] … happening in their own country' (Jacobson 1993:47). These campaigns were made known nationally through the media and one of their effects was the rendering taboo of many socio-political issues for discussion. Another effect was the burgeonings of an underground movement, in which artists were creating work that completely contradicted all of these values as radically as possible.

Sexuality was also potentially a volatile issue, which could represent deviation from the white parochial mindset that ruled South Africa at the time. Homosexuality was a punishable crime. In 1985, an ad hoc committee was set up by the President's Council to investigate the Immorality Act. This committee recommended an investigation into 'what programmes of rehabilitation or forms of punishment would be desirable' for society to 'express its abhorrence to homosexuality' (Gevisser 1995:60).

This type of mindset opened the possibilities of irreverent art wide; there are many manifestations of this, particularly from the late 1980s. Artists Anton Kannemeyer (b. 1967) (a.k.a. Joe Dog) and Conrad Botes (b. 1969) (a.k.a. Konradski) met at Stellenbosch University in 1988 and began collaborating on a comic strip which developed into *Bitterkomix* (launched in 1992), a series of hand-drawn comic narratives contained in sporadically produced anthologies, which aggressively parody the comic genre, bringing sexually explicit images and extreme violence in its story lines. Kannemeyer and Botes collaborate with other artists in creating this project, which aimed to be distributed widely at retailers. Andy Mason comments that comics 'are often regarded as the quintessential 20th century pop art form, linked to the emergence of mass literacy and the rise of the great newspaper and popular publishing empires' (Mason 2006:5). In some respects, this makes reflection on *Bitterkomix* as artists' books anachronistic, yet, the culture to which *Bitterkomix* subscribes is anti-comic in the mainstream understanding of the

concept; the artists draw from beyond the mainstream arts community. Rather, the project serves as a platform for generating controversy.

> For Kannemeyer, it has been a concerted campaign of revenge against the hated authority figures of his boyhood—his father who abused him, 'Barries' who caned him, and all the headmasters, *dominees*,[8] policemen and rugger buggers who in one way or another attempted to indoctrinate, punish and belittle him … Botes … explore[s] the subterranean, subtextual dimensions of graphic storytelling (Mason 2006:7).

This may be seen in Kannemeyer's *Boetie* (1995), a sequential story which tells of the main protagonist, Boetie, a child living with an abusive father. It's a direct and horrifying in its detail, honed in a format that would make it intelligible as a comic for a young child to read, and yet, its content represents an insight into domestic abuse that society demands be hidden behind the proverbial lace curtains. Similarly, Botes's cover for the *Best of Bitterkomix* (1998) offers a complex layering of socially precious values which press on sensitive taboos of the contemporary Afrikaans society, from religious to state-based values, as well as ones concerned with political history and sexuality.
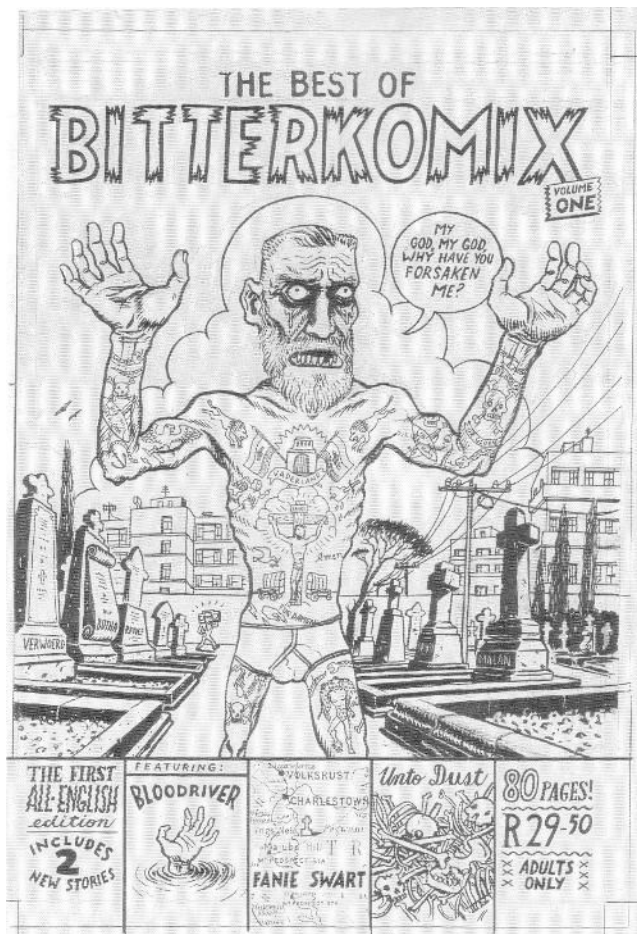


*Best of Bitterkomix Volume 1*. (1998)
Conrad Botes (a.k.a. Konradski)
Pen and ink.

The work is controversial on several counts. According to Liese van der Watt:

> … these works are directed against some or other taboo within Afrikaner society with Calvinism and patriarchy particularly under attack. Whether through crude and obscene language … or explicit sexual scenes preferably juxtaposed with some or other reference to religion, these works have elicited much attention in especially Afrikaans media. The reception of these works have centred around arguments about freedom of expression. In most instances the works were either censored, … removed from being exhibited in public spaces, exhibitions closed down or altogether boycotted (van der Watt 1997:120).

Van der Watt argues, however, that rather than upsetting values irreparably and exposing flaws in the mindsets that propagated these values, the work of *Bitterkomix* represents a direct 'flipside' of the situation. Drawing explicit sex and gratuitous violence becomes a gesture for its own sake, rather than one bearing a message about sexism or racism or xenophobia, for instance. Rita Barnard corroborates this, with her reflection on the type of criticism *Bitterkomix* garnered from the time of its inception. Poet and communist cadre, Jeremy Cronin challenged the makers of *Bitterkomix* and other young rebellious Afrikaner-focused projects to 'grow up, move beyond the oedipal and bohemian politics of 'flashing rude signs at the Voortrekker Monument' and 'stand shoulder to should with the great majority' in the fight for an inclusive democracy' (Barnard 2006:142). Cronin argued that *Bitterkomix*'s preoccupation with the Afrikaner patriarchy and its satirising of 'the hypocrisy, venality and outright perversion of parents, teachers, ministers and politicians' (Barnard 2006:142), was juvenile and escapist. On the other hand, the satire evoked by *Bitterkomix* embodies a politics of confrontational negation, like that of Cohen's silk-screens and early furniture pieces.

Contemporary South African printmaking boasts an uneasy relationship between classical printmaking and the attention-seeking gestures that have historically informed protest art, lending itself to performance culture. It is my belief that the medium and discipline of the artist's book sits, possibly uncomfortably, but nevertheless dynamically between these two approaches to art. Paul Emmanuel (b. 1969) is critically positioned after South Africa's transition into democracy; he engages with the notion of performance art, exploiting a technique derivative of printmaking in which to do so. The nature of the work is such that it confronts the notion of textual readability; it opens up the body in a manner which forces it in the rubric of a book of sorts. In *The Lost Men (Grahamstown)* (2004), Emmanuel employs the technique of blind embossing onto the surface of fleshy parts of his own body. He examines the political implications of his gender through the names and thus the identities of young men killed in South African wars. He embosses hot lead text bearing the names of these fallen soldiers into vulnerable parts of his own body.

Emmanuel is critically positioned after South Africa's transition into democracy; he emerged into the cultural sphere as a professional artist after the struggle period. Emmanuel missed forced conscription because he was not born in South Africa.[9]

He makes performance art and artists' books, using his body as a matrix for blind embossing and to explore issues of his own genderised identity.
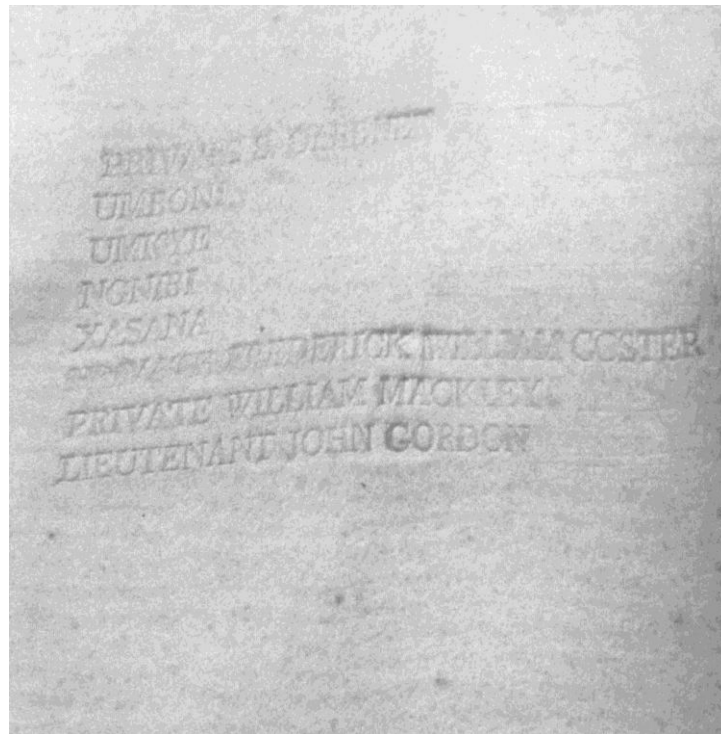


*The lost Men (Grahamstown)* detail (2004).
Paul Emmanuel
Photograph: Andrew Meintjies.

The direct use of the body offers a spin of values, which force the art to become confrontational on several levels. With reference to the use of the living human body in art, Kathy O'Dell explains the 'it's me' quality, a term developed by Roland Barthes with regard to the readability of photographs and the domain of touch.

> [I]n masochistic performances, not only because of the enormous attention the artist brings to the body but also because of the focus on the performer's skin … [the viewer is provided with] … a general point of identification (O'Dell 1998:15).

In *The Lost Men (Grahamstown)* (2004), Emmanuel explores connotations of his gender, through extrapolating on the identities of young men killed in wars. This work is an installation of 21 sheets of silk, 1 x 2m in size, printed with photographic images of parts of the artist's naked and shaved body that have been embossed with an old serif font lead typeface, bearing the names of actual British, Boer and Xhosa men killed in the Frontier Wars in the Eastern Cape of South Africa, between 1820 and 1850. The sheets were hung on washing lines within the landscape. The installation's appearance was determined by unpredictable movement of the sheets in the wind. 'The Xhosa names were never recorded except in stories told by the white soldiers', Emmanuel explained in an interview. 'They aren't even full names' (Tipping Woods, 2004). The body parts onto which the texts have been embossed are male and white, but without other recognisable identity.

Trained and employed as a printmaker, Emmanuel's articulation as an artist has been shaped by the disciplines that inform classical printmaking. He first earned critical repute for his intensely detailed mezzotints. In *The Lost Men,* Emmanuel contextualises himself: '…making and working with material objects [is] … a way of 'cheating death'' (Sassen 2006:9). He explains part of his motivation in creating this work as resting on impermanence. Using the body as a matrix to create these embossings becomes particularly poignant for this reason. Unlike a plate that has been permanently etched or cut into, the flesh will heal itself from a bit of hot lead pushed into its surface. This series offers an astute engagement with the body as medium and support, but also on the history of marking the body to denote ownership by others. Emmanuel alludes to the idea that his maleness could have led him to be a casualty, fighting a war in which he may have had no vested interests or even opinions. He elects to represent the manner in which he has used his body as printmaking matrices in another means of printmaking—the photograph. Rather than inking up and printing this matrix, he gives it life and socio-political resonance by photographing it. Yet, Ariella Azoulay who considers the role of photography in a world coloured by the prevalence of death in the media, groups casting and stamping together with photography as a form of reproduction of images. She cites Heidegger: 'we are living in an era of the conquest of the world as a picture' (Azoulay 2001:17). In many ways, Emmanuel's work resonates with the clinical genre of photography that documents medical anomalies for research purposes. This type of imaging relates them to the traditions of colonialism which stereotyped specific groups of people for the purposes of scientific study, often very destructive in its implications and isolation of 'human types'.

A consideration of the work and thinking methodologies of these five artists reveals, I believe, a potent and grown up artists' book aesthetic coming from a country that was handicapped by cultural embargo and economic sanctions during the Eighties and Nineties. The visual language articulated by these artists is coloured with a violence, at times explicit, at others, internalised and self-questioning. Boshoff's *Bangboek* is intentionally closed to a potential reader. The whole narrative it contains has effectively been censored from any prying eyes whatsoever, into a key-less code. Cohen's work is visually outrageous with its use of penises in a culture where issues relating to sex was prohibited, and his trivialising of political figures' faces in a manner evocative of flower borders in decorative fabric flew in the face of the authorities' values. *Bitterkomix* created by Anton Kannemeyer and Conrad Botes has achieved cult status amongst Afrikaner youth as well as art aficionados. Emmanuel's confrontation with a viewership is troubling—he has attempted to travel this work to different international arenas, where war has informed a lot of the local mindset and litany, including Ireland, Botswana and Lebanon. The work has met varying success in terms of its reception and in principle. Communities thwarted by the presence of war and enforced restriction on freedom of expression remain frightened and resistant to work of this nature. I believe that the presence of violence in a given society, particularly governmentally-imposed and often dictatorially established violence, opens up challenges to creative practitioners to develop a visual grammar that counterpoises this violence with a corollary. The artist's book, or a manifestation of it, in South Africa, is still fairly marginal as a medium or support in contemporary art making, but the five artists in this article offer insight into its dynamism.

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[1] The Union of South Africa was established in 1948, shortly after the end of World War 2. After the establishment of the Union, the government began to 'Afrikanerise' the pre-existent military force, expanding service obligations and enforcing conscription. In 1957, the Defence Act was ratified, which gave identity to the South African Defence Force (SADF).  By 1958, this force numbered 20 000 men. Within the next two decades, it would grow fourfold.

In 1961, the Republic of South Africa was established. And the 1960s brought in a new military era. 'South Africa's growing international isolation and the intensified black resistance to apartheid prompted the government to increase military service obligations repeatedly and to extend periods of active duty' (http:encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com. Accessed August 2, 2008). In 1961, The Defence Act authorised the deployment of citizen force troops and commandos for 'riot' control, by the minister of defence. In 1967, a further Act expanded these obligations, obliging white male citizens to perform national service, including 'an initial period of training, a period of active duty and several years in reserve status, subject to immediate call-up' (http:encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com. Accessed August 2, 2008). Initially conscription was by ballot, by the 1980s, it was made compulsory for all white males over the age of 16. Recruits were obliged to register for service at this age and to report for duty when called up, which was usually shortly after their 18th birthday. The period of initial conscription was two years and the commitment for serving in the reserves for a period of 10 to 12 years, generally representing 50 days per year.  By the end of the 1970s, the army was principal defender of the apartheid regime. The requirements for national service shifted several times. They were suspended altogether in 1993. (http:encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com. Accessed August 2, 2008)

[2] Paton is citing Johanna Drucker in this regard: The Virtual Codex from Page Space to E-Space. Drucker J. (2003). Saracuse University. http://www.philobiblon.com. Accessed August 5, 2005.

[3] *Bangboek* is a play on the Afrikaans term *bangbroek*—coward, which literally means 'scaredy-pants'.

[4] It is today known as the University of Johannesburg.

[5] The Voortrekker Monument located in the city of Pretoria is a iconic monolithic structure built in celebration of Afrikaans-speaking people and their history in South Africa. The Voortrekkers were the first Europeans to go into the interior of South Africa. It was designed by Gerard Moerdijk and built over a period of twelve years from 1937. The Monument is controversial; some see it as an important memorial for Afrikanerdom, while others view it as a reminder of apartheid (www.skyscraperpage.com. Accessed July 31, 2008).

[6] The Casspir, comprising an anagram of the acronyms SAP (South African Police) and CSIR (Council for Scientific and Industrial Research), was designed by Denel/Mecham in the late 1970s and introduced into military service in the 1980s. It was designed to combat the difficult conditions in the South African landscape, particularly during periods of insurgency where the threat of mines was extremely prevalent. The Casspir was an armoured vehicle with four wheels, used for the transport of troops; each unit could hold up to 14 soldiers with gear. It provided for passive mine defense. Its main body was broader than that of a normal vehicle, it had a v-shaped hull and was raised above the ground. This gave it a lower centre of gravity which enhanced its stability, as well as a high vantage point. It was heavily armoured against mines or small arms fire. It was normally armed with either one or two machine guns: it had a firing port opposite each seat. It was a vehicle ubiquitous in apartheid South Africa, and widely used for crowd and riot control (www.globalsecurity.org. Accessed August 2, 2008)

[7] Known as the 'father of the Afrikaner nation', Paul Kruger (1825-1904), was elected president of the South African Republic in 1883. (www.sahistory.org.za. Accessed July 31, 2008).  Henrik Frensch Verwoerd (1901-1966) is colloquially recognised as the architect of apartheid.  He was the Prime Minister of the Union and later the Republic of South Africa from the late Fifties and was responsible for establishing many of the notorious apartheid Acts.  He was assassinated in 1966. (www.nationmaster.com. Accessed July 31, 2008).

[8] Afrikaans for "clergyman, minister or parson".

[9] He was born in Kabwa, Zambia.