

the Progressive

SEPTEMBER 1985

SOUTH AFRICA

Whites Who Won't Fight

BY DAVID L. GOODMAN

The train rolled toward the Botswana border. I shared a compartment with Marc, a white South African teen-ager, and Jim, a white refugee from Zimbabwe (or Rhodesia, as he still insisted) who was returning home. Jim was going on about how the white Rhodesians would have won the war in the late 1970s if the South African regime had only allowed them to. The blacks, he declared, would have wanted it that way. "They knew that the white man was superior," Jim said. "Now they don't give the whites no respect, the way the kaffirs down south do."

I was leaving South Africa, having heard quite enough of this kind of talk during my stay there. I got up and walked out of the compartment.

Standing in the passageway looking out the window, I watched the last of the spectacular South African landscape go by. Marc, who to my surprise had tried in vain to argue with Jim, came out and stood next to me. "It's a beautiful country," he said softly to no one in particular.

Later in the day, I was startled by a knock on the door of my new compartment. My nerves were on edge because I was taking some prohibited material out of the country. But it was Marc. He wanted to talk.

"Where are you headed?" I asked.

"Zimbabwe."

"Holiday?"

"Well, sort of. My uncle lives there."

"Have you served in the Defense Force already?"

"No, I decided to go to university first."

"Are you planning to serve?"

Marc became agitated. "We'll talk later, okay?" he said, and got up and left.

He returned shortly after we crossed the border. More relaxed now, he was willing to open up.

"I'm leaving my country because I don't want to fight in the army," he said. "I'm not sure when I'll ever be able to come back."

Marc belongs to a fledgling antiwar movement among South African whites. Though they are largely ignored by the Western press, the protesters pose a fundamental challenge to the apartheid system.

STOP THE CALL-UP, NO WAR IN NAMIBIA, LET US CHOOSE—banners bearing those slogans covered the walls of a community hall in Cape Town where young white, black, Indian, and "col-

David L. Goodman, a free-lance journalist in Boston, recently returned from four months in southern Africa.

'One cannot go into the army and take on the role of soldier and oppressor and then protest the system of white domination'



SARA SCHWARTZ

ored" (mixed race) South Africans had come to launch the End Conscription Campaign (ECC) last October. In the back of the hall, fifteen plain-clothes security police officers toted South African flags and itched for a fight.

The Campaign's goal is simple: to deny the South African authorities the obedient white soldiers they desperately need. "Young men are conscripted," the Campaign's October declaration stated, "to maintain the illegal occupation of Namibia, and to wage unjust war against foreign countries [and] to assist in the implementation and defense of apartheid policies."

The ECC, a spin-off of the small South African conscientious objector movement, takes an explicitly anti-apartheid position. "We do not believe that apartheid or white domination is a just cause," a Campaign pamphlet states. "The intention of the South African Defense Force (SADF) is to preserve apartheid at the expense of the majority of South Africa's people." From these premises, the ECC argues against conscription. "South Africans have a legitimate and incontestable right to refuse to serve in the SADF," asserts the pamphlet. "We call for an end to conscription. We call for a just peace in our land."

Ivan Toms, a physician at the Crossroads squatter camp outside Cape Town, refuses to complete the second term of his national service. "The SADF is increasingly being used to uphold and implement apartheid policies and repression inside the country," says Toms, a leading organizer of the ECC.

Last October, the government dispatched 7,000 troops to quell anti-apartheid protests in black townships. Conscripts provided crucial support in large-scale raids aimed at intimidating and di-

viding organized township residents. It was the first time in South African history that the army was used to combat domestic dissent. But it was not the last. Since October, conscripts have been called in several times to back up the beleaguered Southern African Police. When South African President P.W. Botha declared a state of emergency in July, troops were dispatched to black townships.

All South African men are required to register for military service at age sixteen and are drafted a year later unless they defer to attend college. Conscription began in 1961 in response to growing black resistance, epitomized by the Sharpeville massacre of 1960. At the start, only 7,000 men were being drafted each year, but after the launching of *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (Spear of the Nation), the military wing of the banned African National Congress, the government more than doubled the number of draftees.

In 1977, this time in response to the Soweto uprising the year before, the military doubled the length of required service to two years, to be followed by 240 days of training in the next ten years. National service was again extended in 1982 when the government mandated two years of follow-up training. "The permanent force and the present number of national servicemen are no longer able to guarantee your safety," General Magnus Malan, South African Minister of Defense, warned parliament when the last extension was granted.

During the 1970s, a small but persistent conscientious objector movement took root in South Africa. More than 5,000 men have been prosecuted since 1973 for failing to report for military service. About 6,000 white men

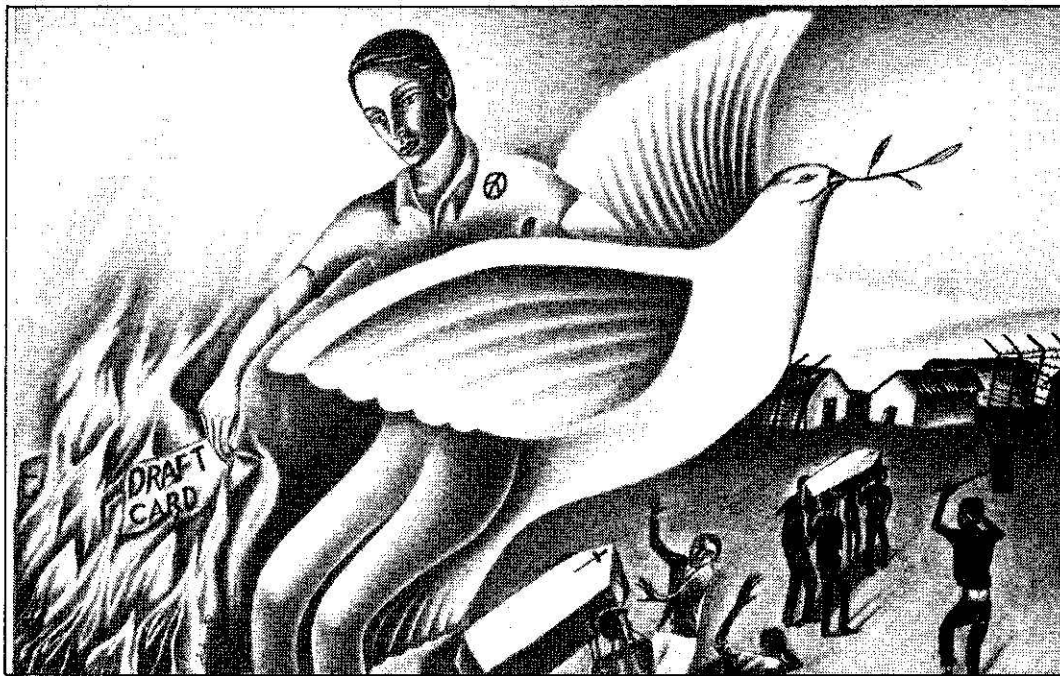
left the country between 1976 and 1980, the ECC says, and they continue to leave at a rate of 2,000 per year.

The early refusers were religious pacifists—in large number, Jehovah's Witnesses—and they received C.O. status from the government. But in 1976, Anton Eberhardt rejected military service on grounds that the army was not fighting a "just war" based on Christian principles. For refusing to serve, he was sentenced to six months in prison but was released after three. In 1983, Peter Hathorn became the first South African to object to military service on strictly political grounds; he was sentenced to one year in prison.

"One cannot go into the army and take on the role of soldier and oppressor and then protest about the system of white domination and oppression in this country," Hathorn testified at his trial. Since 1980, seventeen other men have gone to prison for resisting on the basis of political or moral objections to the Defense Force and the apartheid system.

In response to the conscientious objection movement, parliament amended the Defense Act in 1984 to stipulate that non-pacifist objectors would be subject to a maximum sentence of six years—one-and-a-half times the length of required service. "The new Defense Act has forced us to approach war resistance in a different way," says Hathorn. "With such stiff penalties, the C.O. movement is no longer viable as a mass movement."

Forced to regroup, South Africa's antiwar activists decided to launch a nationwide political campaign against conscription. It quickly won the support of diverse organizations around the country: the National Union of South African Students, the Congress of South African Students, committees of the United Demo-



**Last January,
15,000 young men
were called up
for military service;
7,589 did not report**

cratic Front, the South African Council of Churches, and the Quakers.

Such national figures as the Reverend Allan Boesak, Nobel Peace Prize winner Bishop Desmond Tutu, author Nadine Gordimer, South African Council of Churches General Secretary Beyers Naude, and United Democratic Front Co-President Oscar Mpetha also backed the movement. And in a surprise decision that occasioned a split in party ranks, the opposition Progressive Federal Party called for an end to conscription, though it has declined to endorse the ECC and is often critical of the Campaign.

The African National Congress, the leading liberation organization, has lent public support to the ECC. After years of debate over the role whites should play in the liberation movement, the ECC has emerged as a way for whites to "work in their own backyard" organizing other whites opposed to the apartheid government.

While women are not the focus of the ECC's organizing, they have played an important role in the anti-draft movement since its beginnings. A liberal women's organization, Black Sash, which provides counseling for black pass-law offenders, catalyzed the growth of the ECC at its 1983 annual conference. And the men and women spearheading the campaign are attempting to reach out to South African women by emphasizing the role that women will be asked to take on as the civil war in South Africa intensifies.

The *Objector*, the news bulletin of the antiwar movement, quoted from an article in the *Cape Times* about women in the military. "Women could play crucial roles," the story noted, "in community improvement projects (civil action); as air traffic controllers; nursing aides; radar op-

erators and pilots of light aircraft, and release a lot of men from administrative work for fighting."

The campaign appears to be having an impact. In the semi-annual call-up last January, for which approximately 15,000 young men were required to report, 7,589 men did not show up. This compares with 1,596 men who did not report during all of 1984.

The success reflects a change in consciousness among critics of apartheid. Several years ago, some progressive white men thought they could work for change from the inside by joining the Defense Force. But as once-progressive whites returned from tours of duty in such places as Namibia, the illusion gradually dissolved.

"A friend of mine who was very much against [the Namibia occupation] is now, eight months after entering the SADF, a strong supporter of what's going on," says Ivan Toms. "Being in the SADF wears you down, because you have no support mechanism there."

The ECC is preparing to face a new challenge—the expected extension of compulsory national service to the "colored" and Indian populations. "Up to now," State President P.W. Botha said in 1983, "we did not bring this matter forward because we did not have the accommodation, we did not have the financial capability, and we had to be satisfied with the voluntary service they have rendered. . . . But when they have the vote, gradually we will extend their service too, naturally, as we did with the whites." Some critics say the tricameral parliament that brought "coloreds" and Indians into the system was nothing more than a gambit to fill the ranks of the Defense Force.

ECC activists report a "big increase in

interest" in the Campaign. The movement has spread quickly in the past year from its base in Cape Town to virtually every major city in South Africa. In June, the ECC held a three-day "peace festival" attended by 500 delegates from South Africa and the international community. It was an effort, said ECC Chairman Mike Evans, "to put the issue of compulsory call-up and peace in southern Africa in the public spotlight."

Not surprisingly, the state has kept a watchful eye—and an occasional strong arm—on the ECC. A government front group known as the "Moderate Student Alliance" has distributed smear pamphlets against the ECC that were later reprinted in all the major newspapers. "The Soviet Union Needs You!" one of the pamphlets declared. "End Conscription."

There have been other, more aggressive, forms of government harassment. In December, an off-duty policeman threw a tear-gas bomb into the hall where an ECC benefit concert was taking place. And in January, security police raided an ECC conference and announced they were going to bring charges against the activists. To date, no charges have been filed. But Ivan Toms has been warned that he may soon have to serve his remaining time in the military or go to prison.

Despite the repression, the Campaign has no intention of letting up the pressure. Along with the continuing black protests, the anti-conscription movement raises the stakes for the South African government. South Africa's rulers are used to protest from blacks. But civil disobedience from within the white community is something new. If the South African government insists on persecuting these dissidents as well, the civil war in South Africa may take on a whole new dimension. ■