



Report on XXXIII International Congress of Military History, Cape Town,

12-17 August 2007

The theme of the Congress was Regionalism, Regional Conflict and Alliances and, as usual, the papers varied considerably between very focused case-studies and wider surveys, and between campaign histories and political science analyses. I found the mix interesting because I teach the Cold War generally. Ioannis Loucas gave a very stimulating paper on 'Regional Conflicts and coalitions in the 21st Century' and William Alberque and Joseph Harahan produced a fine guide to the dissemination of small arms and light weapons in sub-Saharan Africa 1989-2006. One theme was the liberation struggle in southern Africa and there a number of excellent papers by our South African hosts on that subject. Andre Wessels provided a probing evaluation of the prospects for a rapid reaction force for Africa. A number of contributors queried the extent to which various conflicts in the last 40 years can be categorised as essentially proxy wars. Some papers, however, had limited military historical content and there was, again, the usual problem that some approaches to peace maintenance seem to factor out any role for force or the threat of force. The distinguished head of the Chinese commission gave a short address on his country's policy to promote harmony. There was occasional emphasis on playing down the role of organized armies, exploring oral traditions in constructing the military history of Africa, and seeking alternatives within Africa to the involvement of external influence.

The congress was generally well-organized and our outings were accompanied by an array of police outriders. Those ceremonial occasions involving the presence of politicians were subject to delays necessarily arising from the pressures of time arising from the onerous commitments undertaken by such dignitaries. Our host president, Maj Gen Solly Mollo, was gracious and probably much more interesting than he allowed himself to be. The South Africans wish to recapture as much of the history of the liberation struggle since the 1960s as possible before the participants die; most accounts will rely on extensive oral histories. How much progress has been made in this endeavour and how much it will be shaped by current political influences was unclear at the conference. The South Africans also seek to lead the development of the International Commission in south and central Africa without, of course, appearing too much the regional hegemon.

The president of the ICMH emphasized the importance of expanding the number of affiliated countries and extending the themes addressed by the Commission. He also emphasized the importance of academic quality in the commission's work. There was a brief foray into inclusiveness when the Portuguese proposal for the international conference in 2009 was aired. Hinged on 1809, the conference propose to focus on war and nationalism in the revolutionary era. This was deemed by some to be excessively narrow, especially in the context of expanding the commission's membership in Africa and China. An historian might feel that the period offered at least some resonant themes; for example, Bonapartism, military professionalization, the intensive use of conscription, national resistance, and the role of the ex-slaves in the Saint Domingue all seem to be subjects of some interest to a more general understanding of the reach and impact of military power.



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Page 2 / 2

I attended 7 of the 11 sessions, plus the business meeting. I gave a paper in the opening session and was the commentator on a session on Regional Security and the Role of Foreign Actors. This included papers on Soviet Intervention in Egypt before the Yom Kippur war, Spanish-Equatorial Guinean Military Co-operation in the 1980s, and the South African-Mozambique Conflict 1975-1989. These were good papers giving rise to the thought that perhaps we need a collection of case-studies on the role of the foreign military advisor in the development of 'third world' countries' armies and in 'small wars' from the 1960s to 1990. Perhaps this might be a useful topic for a future BCMH conference.

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