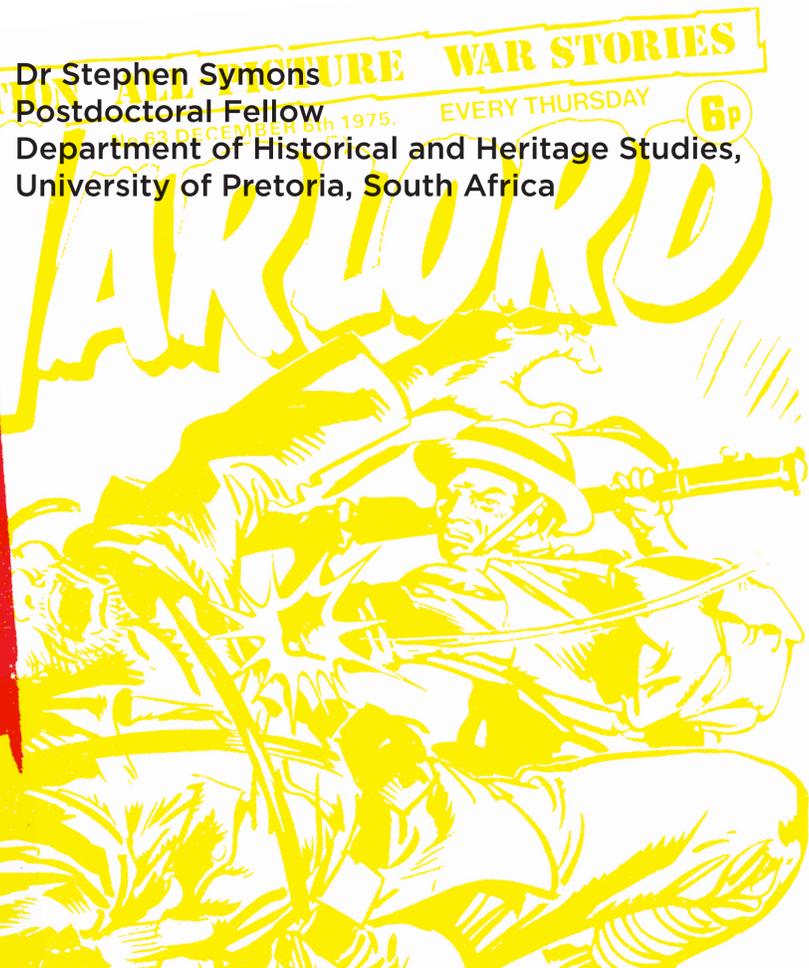


ACHTUNG Spitfeuer!

BRITISH WAR COMICS AS AGENTS OF
MILITARISATION DURING APARTHEID...

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How British war comics of the 60s, 70s and 80s aided the formulation of a militarised state-of-mind among white English speaking boys during apartheid.

This exhibition explores the under-researched domain of British war comics and their indelible influence on English speaking boys during apartheid, aiding the tacit construction of a militarised state-of-mind, and buttressing the ideologies of the apartheid regime and former South African Defence Force (SADF).

The germination of a militarised masculinity begins in childhood and toys are often echoes of the adult world. War toys such as toy guns reinforce the notion that a military solution is a masculine, collective and socially acceptable response. Cock and Nathan (1988: 299) cite Jochelson and Buntman who note that “toys embody social and cultural definitions of what constitutes appropriate interests, activities and (the) behaviour of children”

The mythology of combat, perceived as inherently honourable and courageous, often has its origins within the formative realms of childhood, aided by toys, the media and popular literature. Apartheid-era war toys and comics books were almost exclusively masculine, including boy’s comics of the 1980s (Battle, Warlord, Battle Picture Library and Action). British comic books focused mainly on World War 1 and 2 narratives and dominated the children’s magazine shelves of newsagents such as CNA and Paperbacks of the 60s, 70s and 80s. These weekly comics provided largely idealized scenarios, entrenching stereotypes of a non-human enemy (in most cases, the Axis powers), indirectly serving the militaristic ideals of the apartheid regime that relied heavily on a dichotomous *us and them* mentality, underpinned by a racist ideology.

Although these comics included narratives of unrelated historical conflicts, their depictions of war were driven by moral or political means. It can be argued that these comic book narratives served a two-fold function in apartheid-era South Africa. The historical narratives of World War 2, including the Korean and Vietnam Wars, served as titillating distractions from the realities of the Border War, but also served to reinforce and romanticise the heroics of soldiers in battle. Many English speaking ex-SADF conscripts recall the formative role of comics in during their childhood, eagerly awaiting each weekly British war comic or the hardback cover annuals that were often added to Christmas stockings. The realities and horrors of battle were the one-sided afflictions of a dehumanised Axis enemy, whilst honour, survival and heroics were reserved for the victorious Allied forces.

Additionally, this exhibition draws attention the use of language and visual imagery as a means of cementing the concept of an alien other. Japanese soldiers were referred to as *nips*, *yellow bastards* or *Japs*, whereas German soldiers were referred to as *krauts* or *Fritz*. The dehumanising of an enemy by means of language and visual imagery continues into the present, yet within the racialised divides of the apartheid era, comic book representations of an objectified enemy dovetailed ideally with the regime’s references to the enemy as *terrorists* or *commies* and concept of the *swart* and *rooigevaar*.

Ultimately, this visual exploration of the influence of British war comics on white English speaking apartheid-era boys offer a “disturbing view” of how popular media allowed for subtle “manifestation(s) of nationalism” that echo into the present.