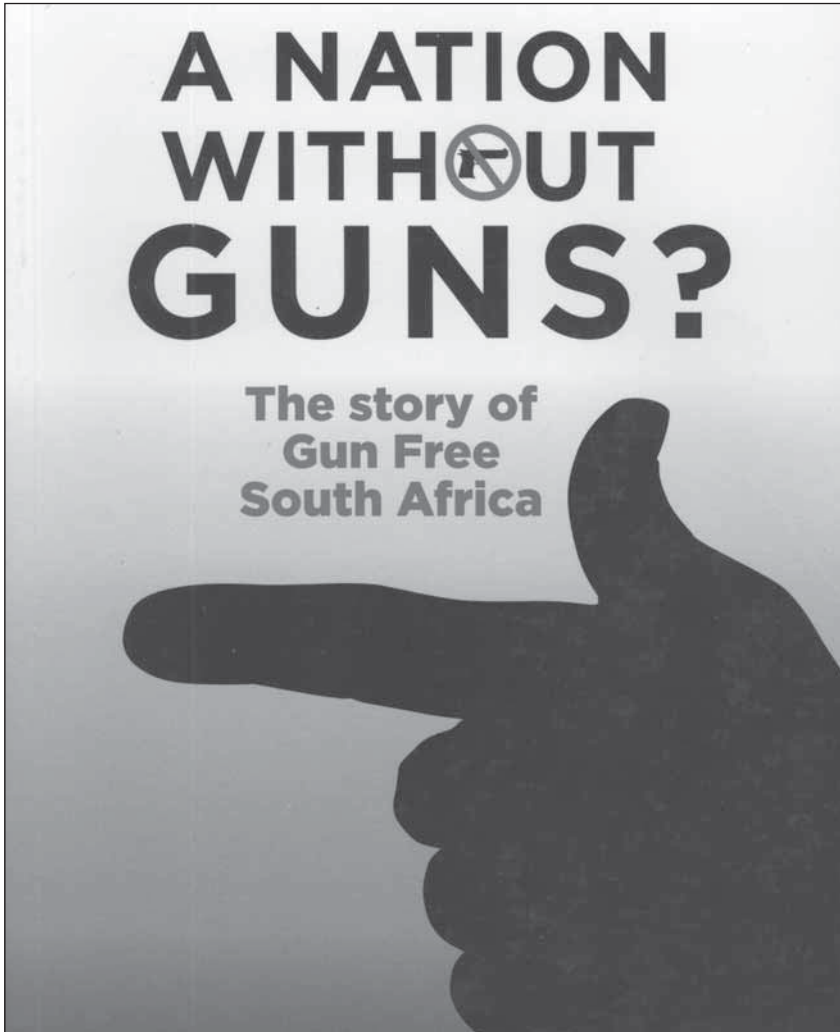


# Review

*A nation without guns? The story of Gun Free South Africa*

Adèle Kirsten (University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2008)

Reviewed by Janet Shapiro



Although an account of the origins and story of Gun Free South Africa (GFSA), this book is much more than that. It is a detailed, and often moving account of a campaign born in the dying days of apartheid and intended to help build a new society, one worthy of the miracle that unfolded in South Africa in April 1994.

It is the story of how an activist, her skills honed in the height of the

repression of the eighties and early nineties, turned to organising and campaigning on peace-related issues. This campaign was to achieve the long-term goal of a gun-free nation in a newly democratic state.

In many ways, it mirrors the realisation of apartheid era activists that the end of apartheid was the beginning of the long haul. It provides a 'how-to' book for those engaged in the many struggles that

remain to be fought to make South Africa the country we want it to be. *Appendix 5*, covering both the law-making process and a guide to successful advocacy, is particularly useful in this regard.

As well as this more general application, the book paints a clear picture of the impact of gun violence on South African society, a picture in which real people kill with guns and die from gun-shots wounds. The statistics are there (for example, South African civilians now own 3.7 million licensed firearms, compared to the 567 000 in the hands of the police and army), but the book is also haunted by the very real victims described in the first few pages.

The book describes the culture of violence that occupies the front pages of our newspapers almost every day, and its origins in the years before 1994. The remarkable way in which GFSA tapped into "the ability of ordinary people to bring about change – by mobilising, organising and campaigning" is also charted.

The chapters of the book map out the steps of a mobilising campaign, beginning with what Kirsten calls "the defining moment", in this case the weapons hand-in of 16 December 1994. This was based on a government-agreed 24-hour amnesty in terms of which no questions would be asked of anyone handing in a weapon, and there would be no prosecutions based on the hand-in.

Although it represented the culmination of months of intense campaigning, it was a beginning rather than an end. Indeed, the closing chapter makes it clear that the end is not yet in sight and, despite the passing of the Firearms

Control Act in 2000 (surely another defining moment), and a reduction in the number of firearm deaths in South Africa, “the struggle continues”.

Nevertheless, the chapter dealing with the largely symbolic hand-in in 1994 (a total of 900 firearms were handed in at the 167 hand-in points), in addition to making clear how much of a contested area the idea of a gun-free South Africa is, also relates a number of moving stories. These include some powerful moments such as the simultaneous handover of guns by two rival Western Cape gangs, and the picture of a group of pre-schoolers in Diepkloof, Soweto, handing in their toy guns for destruction.

The chapter describing the grassroots mobilisation against guns explains the GFSA’s strategy. This was to influence public policy on firearms legislation, engage people at the grassroots level, and raise awareness about the danger of guns “in order to shift public attitudes away from accepting guns as a norm”.

Kirsten goes on to describe how the grassroots part of the strategy was translated into action using the Gun Free Zone campaign to connect communities to what was happening at the national policy level.

A gun-free zone is a space where firearms and ammunition are not welcome. The symbol of a crossed out gun, with the slogan “This is a gun-free zone” was distributed widely by GFSA and became a familiar sight. It went with a workshop pack for community leaders and activists who worked with communities to set up gun-free zones in public places.

The Gun Free Zone campaign challenged the idea that people feel safer when guns are present. The book presents a case study of one community in which the gun-free campaign became an active project, generating considerable media

interest, and inspiring similar activities in other communities.

At the same time, GFSA was building up relations with like-minded organisations and with government departments such as Safety and Security, Justice, Defence and Education. It also worked with the media and built research capacity within the organisation to make a strong case for gun control. This led to the formation of the Gun Control Alliance (GCA), using a Gun Control Charter, with the aim of stricter gun control as its rallying call.

As Kirsten notes, the purpose of the GCA was “to get as many people as possible to support an achievable short-term objective” as a step in GFSA’s vision of a gun-free nation. This included involving communities in discussion around the Firearms Control Bill when it was published at the end of 1999. The GCA ran workshops with communities prior to the public hearings on the Bill and, when the hearings took place, brought people from communities to parliament and provided them with the support they needed to stand up and speak their minds.

The experience of Samuel Kobela, spokesperson from the Mapela community in Limpopo, a community which embraced the Gun Free Zone campaign, at the hearings, is recorded in his own words as well as those of Kirsten, in the chapter ‘Making Democracy Work: The People Come to Parliament’. This touches the heart of what is best about our democracy, something we lose sight of too often.

Less dramatically, but equally importantly, GFSA analysed the legislation carefully and prepared their representation methodically and strategically. Kirsten sees the passing of the Bill as a “solid victory for gun control” and as the result of “a joint effort between the MPs and civil society”.

The chapter dealing with winning over public opinion through media advocacy and campaigning is particularly fascinating. GFSA formed a dynamic relationship with an advertising agency as a ‘charity account’. This partnership produced provocative and exciting material, examples of which are provided by Kirsten. GFSA also worked well with the media and developed useful guidelines for itself in making this relationship as positive as possible.

The description of the carefully planned and creatively executed strategy is punctuated by a background of intense antagonism to what GFSA was doing. This is illustrated by harassment GFSA received in the form of obscene threatening phone calls, break-ins, theft and vandalism. The book conveys the fear, despair and, ultimately, strengthened conviction, this brought to staff and dedicated campaigners.

Gun control is a contested issue and the gun lobby presented a formidable challenge. Kirsten provides a useful analysis of where she thinks the lobby got it wrong. Contrasting with the overt hostility and more sophisticated lobbying and messaging of the South African Gun Owners’ Association (SAGA), was the ongoing support from other organisations and activists involved in similar campaigns in places such as Brazil, Canada and Australia.

This book is very readable, both for the specific story it tells and for its wider application. It should be a ‘must read’ for anyone involved in advocacy work that aims to make our Constitution a living reality rather than just a self-congratulatory reference point. LB

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