While there has been strong research interest in the areas of voluntary and self-repatriation, work on the actual process of return has maintained a focus on description rather than explanation. One explanatory concept that has been employed has been ‘the myth of return’. Using a case study of South African returnees, this article challenges the value of this concept. Instead, it argues that the process of return—and, in particular, the ways in which members make sense of the return—should be analysed within the context of the ideologies that underpin both displacement and repatriation. The article explores the impact of the changes in South Africa in 1990 on a ‘return group’ established in exile in Europe by the Committee on South African War Resistance. It discusses how the group prepared its return to South Africa and examines the ideologies of exile that sustained the decision of its members as individuals and as a group.

Introduction

In 1978, a new organization was established by exiles in the United Kingdom. Formed largely by young white male South Africans and their partners who left the Republic after 1974 as a result of their refusal to fight in the South African Defence Force (SADF), the Committee on South African War Resistance (COSAWR) grew through the 1980s to encompass a few hundred people. In 1990, the start of political transition in South Africa meant that war-resisters based in the United Kingdom who were associated with COSAWR could contemplate returning to South Africa.

Since the 1990s, researchers working in the fields of migration and refugee studies in Africa and Latin America have shown increased concern with the concept of return. This interest has encompassed return migration and forced repatriation. However, interest in the area of voluntary and self-repatriation has been particularly acute (Fagen and Eldridge 1991; Ortega and Acevedo 1991; Rogge 1994; Zinser 1991), partly a reflection of the broad political support for repatriation as the preferred solution to refugee crises (Chimni 1998). Unfortunately, work on the actual process of return has remained patchy, maintaining a strong focus on description rather than explanation (Gaillard 1994; Warner 1994). Where researchers have looked at the
communication networks of refugees, the role of exile organizations, and repatriation mechanisms, some theoretical development has taken place. However, even that literature has tended to overlook the ideological bases of displacement and repatriation (Ortega 1991).

This article explores the impact of the changes in South Africa on the 15 or so COSAWR activists who became known within the organization as the ‘return group’. The article is based on semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted in 1990 with COSAWR activists; all have been given pseudonyms. These included interviews with seven members of the return group—Charles, Simone, Gareth, Simon, George, André and Andries—immediately prior to their departure for South Africa. The interviews formed part of a larger research project on South African exiles in the United Kingdom (Israel 1999). In these interviews, members discussed the changes in South Africa, why they wanted to return and what they expected to face on their return. I argue that the ways in which members made sense of first the return process, and second the relationship between the individual and the collective were, in part, structured by the ideologies of exile that they had developed and fostered during their time outside South Africa.

Myths and Ideologies of Exile

The theoretical tools necessary to analyse the end of exile need to account for the way that the exiles perceive the process. Several authors have noted the importance to migrants and refugees of expressing a commitment to return (Gmelch 1985; Stepputat 1994; Voutira 1991; Warner 1994). Given that not all migrants who engaged in this rhetoric have returned, one concept drawn into refugee studies from research on migration has been ‘the myth of return’ (Al-Rasheed 1994; Graham and Khosravi 1997). Within this literature, the myth of return refers to migrants and refugees idealizing and reinventing a past and imagining a fictitious future that would reconnect them to their home. While sociologists and anthropologists have developed the concept of myth to a significant degree it seems that, in the arena of return migration at least, the concept is both poorly theorized and potentially offensive, implying romantic delusion rather than political commitment, continuing yearning rather than evolving identification. Some concerns about the limits of the concept have already been expressed by Zetter (1999) who argued that we should distinguish between myths of home and myths of return. While Zetter’s distinction is a useful one, I would like to suggest another approach, one that draws on a language of ideology rather than myth.

In earlier work on South African political exile in the United Kingdom, I argued that South Africans who moved to the United Kingdom in the 1950s and 1960s invented and maintained identities and supporting ideologies of exile. For South Africans—as for other migrants and refugees—exile was not a natural category. It was and is a social construct, a ‘creative act’ (Breytenbach 1991: 71), simply one way of describing what people are doing outside their
homeland. As such, it had to be imagined, constructed, negotiated and defended.

South Africans in the United Kingdom created an identity of exile both to legitimate their decision to leave South Africa and to improve the collective position of South Africans outside South Africa. It helped underpin the creation of rudimentary community structures and political organizations (Israel 1999). The development of the identity also fulfilled an ideological function. In ‘The Mind of Winter’, Edward Said (1984), a Palestinian exile, reflected on the activities and experiences of exile. He argued that exile represented a discontinuity. Exiles were ‘cut off from their roots, their land, their past’ (p. 51) leaving a rift, what he later described as ‘an apparently unchanging abyss’ (1986: 149). According to Said, exiles often lacked the institutions to bridge the gap and so they looked to ideology. Ideologies of exile both structured and were structured by exiles’ lives. Through ideologies of exile, exiles perceived and understood their lives outside their home country in a way that might allow them to ‘reassemble an exile’s broken history into a new whole’. The project implied that multiple and shifting demands on migrants to accommodate themselves to their new environment in the United Kingdom could be sidestepped by developing a new meta-identity of exile. Consequently, the identity of ‘exile’ provided a sense of stability for some South Africans who migrated to the United Kingdom (Said 1984: 51).

A number of ideological constructs were central to such an identity: ideologies of exit, displacement and, of specific importance to this paper, ideologies of return. A useful starting point for a discussion of ideology can be found in Sumner’s work (1979). In Sumner’s argument, each ideology originates in social practice and forms a sign of something other than itself. As a sign, following Saussure (1974), it comprises a signifier (a word, image, sound or object) and a signified meaning (image, concept or impression). The relationship between signifier and signified is not a ‘natural’ one. It is a socially-based, historically and spatially specific, relation, ‘an outcome and element of social practices which reflects and designates the world of that practice within the consciousness of human beings’. Consequently, for Sumner, an ideology can be neither true nor false.

Instead, ideologies are reflections of the life of a social group. They exist within people’s heads and form a mental grid through which the experiences of life are perceived and understood in a way related to a particular group’s social practice. Ideologies influence, though not necessarily in any obvious way, how people make choices and live out their social relations. They both structure and are structured by the lives that people lead. Sumner departs from other Marxist writers such as Althusser by maintaining that non-economic practices such as politics, law and the media may also influence social consciousness. Two important conclusions follow: first, members of dominant fractions are not the only people who elaborate their common sense meanings into a philosophical consciousness or ideology; second, the ideologies of non-dominant fractions are not simply determined by those of the dominant. So the ideology of exile
represented a way of structuring and making sense of life outside South Africa in the face of symbolic and physical violence by the South African state and the process of creating new lives in the United Kingdom (Israel 1998).

In this article, I draw on the return to South Africa of the war-resisters, a small and rather unusual group, to discuss how an analysis of these ideologies of exile and return could play an important role in the emerging field of return studies.

**War Resistance in Exile**

In South Africa, military service had been compulsory for all white males between the ages of 18 and 55. It was one of the few aspects of apartheid that placed a real burden on white citizens (Nathan 1989). Although the periods of service that were required changed from time to time, all conscripts had to complete an initial period of service—which during the 1980s lasted for two years—and were then liable to be called up to ‘camps’ each year. Through the 1970s and 1980s, young white males became increasingly unwilling to be conscripted into the SADF. In 1989, 25 per cent of the citizen force and commando members called up to attend camps asked for deferment. Another 15 per cent failed to report for duty and 38 per cent of troops in the civilian force applied for exemption from service in the townships (Price 1991). Conscientious objection was only recognized on narrowly-defined religious grounds (Berat 1989; Seegers 1993). Those who refused to serve were liable to imprisonment of up to six years (Abel 1995; Amnesty International 1991). One estimate suggested that, as a result, 10,000 people had gone into exile rather than face conscription (Cawthra et al. 1994).

Several of the early organizations dedicated to resisting conscription to the SADF were established outside South Africa. COSAWR had been formed in 1978 as the result of an amalgamation of two small groups: Advice for South African Conscripts (AFSAC), a group of five to ten people who leaned towards the African National Congress (ANC) and the Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM), and the other, the South African War Resisters (SAWR) and its fundraising wing South African Military Refugee Assistance (SAMRA), formed by the South African Liberation Support Committee (SALSCOM) which represented a white response to Black Consciousness (Collins 1995). COSAWR brought together pacifists, ANC activists, as well as some people who were simply scared by the prospect of serving in the army (Garson 1990):

The exiles that COSAWR dealt with were mostly conscripted young white men, although a number of women played an important role. The motives of the exiles varied—some were hardened political activists determined to continue the struggle, others were concerned to escape what they saw as a looming conflagration, some had more personal reasons for not wanting to fight in the apartheid armed forces…(Cawthra 1990: 30).
Through the 1980s, COSAWR remained a small organization with no more than a few hundred close supporters (Cawthra 1990). While several COSAWR activists were members of the ANC and its military wing, Umkhonto We Sizwe, and received support from those organizations, for the most part COSAWR acted independently of the liberation movement, as a specialist pressure group highlighting the issues that affected young white men in South Africa (Rauch 1994). Members of its committee undertook research to strengthen the arms embargo and campaigned to isolate South Africa (COSAWR 1987). Drawing on very limited funding from European Christian organizations (Collins 1995), they published 67 issues of a journal called *Resister* and circulated it to 3,000 subscribers in over 50 countries as well as distributing copies illegally inside South Africa (Cawthra *et al.* 1994; Collins 1995). During the 1980s, COSAWR picketed the South African embassy in London in support of those who had refused conscription, and the organization also acted as a link with the Anti-Apartheid Movement for peace groups and soldiers’ movements.1

Within South Africa, the Conscientious Objectors Support Group had been founded in 1978. In 1983, the End Conscription Campaign (ECC) was formed by white war-resisters (Nathan 1989; Jaster and Jaster 1993). ECC was denounced by the South African Minister of Defence in parliament in 1986 as consisting of ‘leftist radicals’ who ‘were doing the SADF, the country and its people a great disservice and should stop the devilish onslaught against the SADF’ (General Magnus Malan in Hansard (A) 7 cols 2160–2161). In 1988, ECC was formally banned from engaging in any activities other than its own internal affairs. Nevertheless, the campaign against the SADF continued. In 1987 in Capetown, 23 people had declared in public that they would refuse to serve in the SADF. In 1988, 143 and then in 1989, 771 people living in South Africa made similar declarations. By July 1990, an international register of resisters collected almost 200 names, over half from British-based resisters (*Weekly Mail* 23 March 1990; *Weekly Mail* 27 July 1990; *Cape Times* 31 July 1990).

As resistance to conscription increased within the Republic, COSAWR developed an important symbolic presence in the international anti-apartheid struggle: white people were organizing around apartheid’s oppression of white South Africans. As such, war-resistance demonstrated the crumbling of white determination to fight for apartheid. As the ANC acknowledged, it showed that the liberation struggle was not a race war, but rather a war against apartheid:

...the struggle in South Africa was not a struggle between White and Black, it was a struggle between justice and injustice and...the end goal was not to replace White domination with Black domination but to establish a just and non-racial society...through our involvement we sought to demonstrate to both the White and the Black community that not all Whites were racist and some of us at least were committed to a struggle for justice and peace (Laurie Nathan, former National Organizer of ECC, testimony to Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Capetown, 23 July 1997).
Return to South Africa

In 1989, some of the core activists within COSAWR began to feel that their ability to contribute to the struggle against apartheid from exile was declining. With the emergence of ECC, war-resisters no longer had to leave the country in order to make a stand. Slowly, some of the war-resisters in the United Kingdom began to consider returning to South Africa so that they could participate in the struggle.

They also hoped that their return would precipitate change, challenging both the Nationalist government (COSAWR 1990a) and the ANC to take seriously the continuing fight against conscription. Those who planned to return wanted to test the way and serve as an example for others who might return, and sought to alert the ANC negotiators to the need to bring war-resisters, including deserters, within any definition of political exile. Nevertheless, some activists were wary that a public return might provoke the state and right-wing groups into targeting war-resisters, and others were worried that a publicized return might jeopardize the claims of war-resisters to asylum outside South Africa (COSAWR 1990b).

‘Shaking the Whole Day’

On 2 February 1990, some war-resisters in exile in the United Kingdom were woken by telephone calls from South Africa. Leaked copies of a statement to be made by de Klerk disclosed a fundamental shift in the policies of the South African government. The rumours were confirmed later that day. In his Presidential address to Parliament, de Klerk announced that he intended to undertake major reforms of apartheid. Nelson Mandela was to be released. Nine days later, still stunned, exiles waited next to televisions for Mandela to come through the prison gates. None of the return group had any difficulty recalling the events of that day. Several explained to me how they had felt:

...we all gathered and sat around, the TV going, champagne and wine and food...it was this tremendous exhilaration and excitement. There was this sense of disbelief that it was happening, I just couldn’t believe it when he actually walked out of Victor Verster Prison (Gareth).

Andries, a war-resister and member of the ANC, recalled ‘shaking the whole day’ and André cursed the fact that he was ‘missing history’ by being in exile. Charles, ironically, was in transit through Jan Smuts airport in Johannesburg.

I remember...I had a job to do down in Swaziland and Lesotho, and I was going to the airport in a minicab [in London]...at about four o’clock in the afternoon and I suddenly jumped—the radio comes on and they say...President de Klerk is announcing tomorrow at three p.m. that they will be releasing Mandela.

I mean, that was it, you know. I never believed it was going to happen. And there I was on a plane through Jan Smuts, and I was in Harare on the day that Nelson Mandela got released. It was all a bit much really.
In London, celebrations were held in Trafalgar Square to mark the unbanning. Taking over from a pre-planned demonstration outside South Africa House, the party took place almost 30 years after the first demonstrations there in 1960:

It was an incredibly exciting day, because we thought we would zoom down to the South African Embassy, make a fist at them... there was a huge crowd there, I think everybody realized that was going to be the place to be... once it was true that the ANC had been unbanned, everybody flocked to the pickets, so that was incredibly exciting (Gareth).

The party atmosphere lasted all month:

It was a very strange month because you kept on bumping into people you hadn’t seen—and you would say ‘isn’t it amazing?’ and go off and have a drink to celebrate. I remember having a succession of hang-overs for a whole month (Jeremy).

Only a few discordant voices were heard: apartheid was still in place; the same government was still in power; and there had been only a change in policy, not a full repudiation of the past abuses of the regime. The unbannings led to a time of intense soul-searching for many, forcing South Africans to make a number of choices, if they had not done so already. They had to decide first where their home was, and second if it was important for them to live there (Israel 1999). The deliberations of COSAWR activists are just one part of this larger story.

‘I Also Want to Go Home’

With the unbanning of the ANC and several other organizations (including the ECC) in 1990, the need to make a decision whether to return became much more pressing:

It started last year [1989]. There was a small group, there was only a few individuals, myself and Simon and maybe a couple of other people. We felt that somehow to make a stronger contribution we had to go back to South Africa and to somehow force the issue of conscription, you know... this was just talk and talk and talk, it took a long time before we actually sat down and made a real decision... (Andries).

In March 1990, COSAWR held a Consultative Conference which brought together in excess of 60 war resisters and 15 partners, supporters and observers to discuss how the organization would respond to the release of Mandela and the prospect of change in South Africa (Levy 1990; Temple 1990). In one session, the issue of return emerged:

... I think what happened was they starting introducing people—they had a lot of people—I think about 30 or 40—I’m so and so, I’m so and so and then one guy said: ‘I’m so and so and I want to go home, you know’. And then all the other people started saying, ‘well I’m so and so and I also want to go home’. So this is how the return group was born (Charles).
COSAWR and the ECC agreed to demand the safe return of war-resisters. As part of the Release Objector Campaign, these organizations lobbied for war resisters to be granted an amnesty and to be exempted from military service once they returned. Both organizations hoped that if returnees were prosecuted, there would be a mass refusal to serve by war-resisters inside South Africa in support of the returnees.

After the March conference, COSAWR established a group of between 15 and 20 people, an advance party ‘committed to returning without any guarantee about their safe return’ (COSAWR 1990c: 4). Members of the group decided to enter South Africa as a coherent entity, declare their intention of ‘contributing to the broad struggle to end apartheid’ and refuse to be conscripted by the apartheid state. A flight was booked to Johannesburg for 30 November 1990. Membership of the return group changed slightly over time, but some generalizations can be made about the people who joined: they were all aged in their twenties and thirties, almost all were white, the majority were male—though women played a larger part in this group than they had in COSAWR itself—and none had spent longer than 15 years in the United Kingdom (Rauch quoted in Collins 1995). While most were English-speaking South Africans, the group included Afrikaans-speakers as well as non-South African partners. Several of the group were professionals (engineers, researchers, administrators, teachers, journalists). Others were employed in a wide range of jobs which included tree surgery and carpentry. Twelve members of the return group had South African, British or German passports and so did not need to obtain a visa in advance. Three were travelling on United Nations refugee documentation, including two ANC members who needed to get clearance to return from the South African government (Kingsley-Nyinah 1991; World University Service 1991; Israel 1999).

A farewell had been organized for the group by COSAWR and the Anti-Apartheid Movement, and the last few days were taken up with saying goodbye to friends and family and with packing. As the time to leave neared, different members found different ways of dealing with the strain. Some speculated about what their future would be like back in South Africa. On the other hand, Charles chose not to think too carefully about the practicalities of his return. He appreciated that it would not be easy making a new life again, and that the whole move would be emotionally charged. He tried, not entirely successfully, to neutralize the impact by not contemplating it too much. Instead of spending months pondering how he would feel, he preferred to just wait until the day came, get his ‘stuff’ together and ‘go for it.’

Although he was returning with a group, Charles knew that he and his partner, Simone, would be the only returnees going back to Natal. The network that they had so painstakingly developed in Britain would inevitably dissipate as even those who returned would end up in different parts of the Republic. Again, Charles could only cope by blocking invitations to mull it over:
My partner, she says to me: ‘Do you think it’s going to be difficult for us to make friends when we get back to South Africa?’ I said, ‘I don’t know—depends how outward going you are’. And it is a problem, you know, it’s—it takes a long time to build up a ring of friends and a social circle—so I said, ‘Well, again, if you worry about those things by the time we go home you’re going to be such a wreck—you won’t be any use to South Africa—don’t worry about it—don’t think about it—cut it out of your mind—you’ll handle it when you get there’.

In the last few weeks before they left, the ten final members of the return group were warned about threats that were being made against them by the right wing and the police in South Africa. Rumours circulated in South Africa that they might be arrested upon their return. No-one dropped out but, as George noted, they were all concerned about the reception that they might encounter:

I was feeling fairly OK, until I heard that there’re rumours going around in Capetown that the right-wing are... saying death threats and all kinds of shit—and ‘why must these people come back like heroes, when we served?’ and there some suggestion of right-wing groups arriving at the airport with—all wearing yellow, you know cowards kind of thing and I wasn’t really until then too concerned, because I had lived there for my life, and you learn to live with it but, you know, I’m worried for [my wife and baby].

‘This was a Different Place’

The existence and value of ‘repatriation information systems’ (Koser 1997) that structure the receipt, evaluation and use of information about home conditions by refugees have been acknowledged within refugee studies. Partly through political links with the opposition inside and outside South Africa and partly through extensive social and professional networks, members of COSAWR were able to maintain close watch on and a sophisticated understanding of conditions and events in South Africa. Returnees also had the benefit of knowing the experiences of war-resisters who had already returned for short trips. The messages that they had brought back to Britain were contradictory. Gareth went back to South Africa for the first time in May 1990 to address an ECC National Convention. During the rather intense ten days he spent in the country, he sensed both the euphoria that still hung over from the February unbannings, and the confusion and uncertainty amongst the domestic opposition. He found being back very exciting—getting used to physical changes to the environment, seeing at first hand the social conditions in the squatter camps about which he had read so much, and meeting for the first time the ECC activists with whom COSAWR had become so closely linked. Gareth also saw his family and had to break the news of his political activities to them. He had wanted to shield his parents from the attentions of the Security Police so, although he knew that they would be supportive, he had hidden his association with COSAWR from them. He recalled that they were quite surprised to find that it was their son who was going to address the
Conference: ‘the fact that I was in the Saturday evening *Star* on page three, I think it was a big thing for them to get their minds round . . . ’ (Gareth).

In September 1990, Jeremy went back to South Africa as part of his work for a development aid agency. His feelings about the country were dramatically different from Gareth’s. It took Jeremy three months to obtain a visa from Pretoria. He was terribly nervous, convinced he was making a huge mistake. He found it very difficult to respond to the changes in South Africa and continued to react on the basis of his experiences of the country when he had left 11 years before:

I was convinced I was going to be pulled in and questioned when I arrived, even though I had a visa. So I was terribly tense on the plane and I didn’t sleep and when I arrived I was really nervous . . .

It was a very powerful experience. I have always lived for the moment that I would be able to go back. And suddenly you reach that point where you’re actually physically on South African soil and then you enter a whole new level of experience. You’d left all that behind. Everything that’s defined your life up to then comes to an end.

Nevertheless, his past experiences continued to punctuate his stay. While staying with friends in Johannesburg he was woken in the middle of the night by a loud banging on his neighbours’ door:

And I just sat bolt upright in bed convinced it was the police—because that was the time the police would come round—it was really a bad moment. But after that it was fine—I realized that in fact this was a different place and those sorts of things didn’t happen any more.

Although his reactions slowly changed, South Africa still seemed foreign. Visiting Capetown felt like visiting an old school. He remembered its incredible beauty and wonderful people, but his expectations fell completely flat:

I found it really small, really claustrophobic, very inaccessible . . . mentally I was prepared for the fact that the place obviously couldn’t be the way you remembered it—but at the same time it was quite deflating . . .

He found that white people’s lives were restricted by their overwhelming fear of violence and was assailed by advice about what was dangerous, where he was likely to get mugged, why he should not walk around. Disturbingly, he believed he was no longer street-wise. He could no longer trust his own evaluation of safety, but was subject to the paranoia and multiple fears of white middle class South Africa.

These experiences had been taken seriously by a number of returnees. They knew they were going to have to face a different country, but one saturated with memories for them, memories which might invoke bitterness and anger as they recalled what they had had to forgo:

I think emotions are very hard to describe. I suppose there’s a sense of loss and that’s when one is wrenched from society’s bosom. I think everybody has that
feeling. You suppress it but it’s always there I think. There’s a sadness and a feeling of alienation I suppose. When one returns I’m sure that comes flooding back, that sense of what you’ve missed and what you’ve lost and how different things are (Julian).

Returnees appreciated that they would have to rebuild broken relationships with their families, particularly if they were returning to live with them. The sudden loss of independence that accompanied the return to the parental home after having made such significant decisions also troubled some.

**Ideologies of Return**

The reasons why migrants might wish to return are not simply dependent on the way they have been received by a host country, nor are they simple reactions to changes in the home society. Instead, voluntary return is also affected by the way migrants understand their position in host and home societies. In the case of many South African exiles, their life in Britain had been underpinned by an ideology of return which interpreted migration as a temporary state to be terminated by an eventual return to South Africa (Israel 1999). The idea of return gave some meaning to the time in exile. Not to return, for some members of COSAWR, became inconceivable, even among those who did not in fact go back to settle when the opportunity first arose:

I’ve always wanted to go back. My life revolves very much around South Africa. Not to go back would be to create a black hole there. It’s something that has to be done and I didn’t really think about whether I would or wouldn’t. It was automatic (Julian).

Part of the way that South African exiles defined their identity was through the fact that they would have found it oppressive to return. Consequently, the unbanning of the liberation movements and the establishment of a process of indemnity represented the end of exile for many, the symbolic resolution of their temporary existence. Many South Africans in the United Kingdom believed that once exiles could return and did not, they were no longer exiles. Of course, because of the drawn out nature of the negotiations in South Africa, the point at which the decision could be made was rarely clear cut. The decision to return was sometimes underpinned by the fulfilment of a perceived patriotic duty and sometimes by a need to lay to rest personal ghosts.

Some of the COSAWR activists felt that they had an obligation to return. Philip Dexter, a 27 year old ANC member from Pietermaritzburg who had left South Africa in the early 1980s, explained this sense of moral imperative:

I feel that the period of exile is now over. The new climate following the announcements on 2nd of February obliges us all to commit ourselves to this final phase of the struggle to end apartheid. We can best achieve this by returning home and engaging the regime ‘face-on’ (COSAWR 1990c).
A new sense of patriotic duty was clearly beginning to emerge in exile, fostered by the political and cultural structures established by the opposition movements in exile. Return could be viewed as a political act. Nevertheless—despite high levels of politicization—most COSAWR activists explained their decision in personal terms, in ideas that reflected the individual decisions that many of that generation had taken to leave South Africa. Return also constituted a resolution of a personal conflict, albeit one that was part of the wider struggle. André, for instance, felt strongly by the end of 1990 that it was time to go home because he believed that ‘the only way to end exile is to go home and to resolve the issues that cause you to leave…’

For some, return marked the point at which they could resume their normal life. For these people, return had enormous symbolic importance and was worth undertaking even if they had been happily settled in the United Kingdom. Charles told me:

...there’s one question that I feel you can ask of me:... ‘You’ve been an exile for ten years, you’ve sort of got your life together in the UK in a certain way, and seem quite settled, what is it that makes you so sure that within five months you can just drop all this and go back to South Africa and expect to be assimilated and to be able to assimilate yourself into South African society?’ The answer to that is: ‘That’s something that’s going to give me sleepless nights, I think, as we come closer to the 30th November’. I think—being an exile—your dream—the thing that keeps you alive, the thing that keeps you motivated, is that you’re going home.

I’m going to have to force myself, because I’m going to say: ‘Right, conscription’s out of the way, that’s the thing that made me go into exile, therefore, I’m here’.

Resuming what they saw as a normal life gave back to some exiles their freedom to make choices. While several prospective returnees believed that it was important to be part of the new South Africa, they could imagine leaving again as part of their work, in the same way that other professionals migrate around the world. Both André and Charles thought—accurately as it turned out—that some of the returnees might end up leaving South Africa again either to further their careers, or because they could not stand the country any more.

Some of the COSAWR contingent spoke of returning to South Africa simply to touch base, and were satisfied by the fact that they could go back later if and when they wanted. For Jeremy, the unbanning of the liberation movements signalled a release of political obligation, a normalization of his existence. He thought that after returning to the United Kingdom from just a short trip to South Africa, he needed to get on with his own ‘quietish life’.

2nd February has been very important for me, it’s been an unburdening in a psychological sense, because I feel that for the first time in my life that I don’t have to be involved...while all the repression was going on and there was no prospect of the place changing, you felt a kind of commitment to putting at least some of your time to trying to change the place.
Subliminally, there is a little voice saying ‘You ought to go back because that’s what your life’s been about, and that seems like a logical thing to do’. On the other hand, there’s another voice saying ‘You’ve spent enough time on South Africa, why don’t you now explore some other options. Is this what you want to do for the rest of your life?’

Having been away from South Africa for 11 years, he felt ambivalent about the prospect of going back to live there. Jeremy was able to contemplate not returning, because he was no longer sure that South Africa was his home.

As the literature on the myth of return has suggested, going back involved not just reconnection with space, a physical movement, but reconnection with a time before departure, and a chance to heal the wounds of the long displacement. And yet, return could never simply be a return, even though it may be ideologically structured as one. The group knew that they would face some very obvious difficulties. They appreciated that the return would involve many of the experiences of the original migration. Returnees had changed as a result of their experiences of exile and their absence from developments in the home country. As a result, many accepted that South Africa would feel foreign, weird, strange. For example, Andries thought he would be merely an observer for a while, while he went around ‘trying to make sense of the situation’. Like André, he knew he faced the possibility of three years in jail if he refused to serve in the SADF. Unlike André, he knew that he and his wife would have to contend with all the left-over prejudices of apartheid. Andries’ relationship with his Afrikaner Nationalist parents had suffered when he refused to serve in the army. It was all but ended when he married Sonita, a black British woman. His father, a senior Afrikaner journalist, had told Andries that he was no longer welcome in his house. Andries also worried how Sonita would adapt to the racism that she would meet in South Africa, something for which he as a white man could ill prepare her.

Some South African exiles spent much of their time criticizing Britain—its weather, crowds, traffic, grime and cost. However, the insight of a cartoon by Stent in the Johannesburg Weekly Mail was closer to the truth for the COSAWR returnees. It was reproduced and circulated among COSAWR people. The cartoon depicted a returnee who having left South Africa loaded up with African music and food now tried to take back elements of his London life including his A–Z street directory, Irish music, videos and subscription to the Guardian. Pubs loomed large among the things that returnees would miss, along with friends, summer days in the countryside, films, television, good newspapers, food and easy access to Europe. The return group might believe that it was going home but its members knew that during their time in Britain not only had South Africa changed but so had they (Stent 1990).

Conclusion

South Africans who left the Republic to avoid serving in the SADF in the 1970s and 1980s constructed an identity as war-resisters. This identity was
mobilized to justify decisions to exit South Africa and legitimate the position of young white men (and, to a lesser extent, women) among the broader South African exile networks (Israel 1999). War-resisters in the United Kingdom presented themselves as people forced to leave their country to make a stand against the militarization of white South Africa, who were working to end conscription and disrupt the ‘apartheid war machine’ (Cawthra 1986).

The period from 1989 to 1991 was a turbulent time for these people. Changes in South Africa allowed exiles to return. Although some still feared for their safety in the Republic, several exiles did go back to live in South Africa. For those who did go back, the process of return was rarely smooth. By and large, exiles were not returning collectively and in victory but singly and uncertainly to a country that was still governed by the National government, albeit one that was unlikely to survive for much longer.

Within this context, the return of COSAWR activists was an unusual operation. This reflected both the nature and the aims of the group. COSAWR was dominated by educated, white, English-speaking males, most of whom had been away from South Africa for less than 15 years. Some returned to contribute to the liberation struggle, some to raise awareness in South Africa about the ambiguous legal status of war-resisters, while others sought to resolve personal dilemmas.

Many South Africans, including some COSAWR activists, believed that war-resisters had had it easy compared to the experiences of other South Africans in exile (Bernstein 1994; Israel 1999). However, as a former COSAWR worker explained to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission during their special hearings on conscription, many war-resisters had struggled outside South Africa:

There was, and perhaps still is, a misperception that we had an easy time in what some people referred to as the flesh pots of Europe, but ... for many young men exile was an extremely stressful period and we spent much of our time trying to sort out personal needs and integrating new arrivals into the larger exiled community. Many were without financial and emotional resources and for the first time I think, many were confronting the conscious and I think often unconscious fears and racist attitudes of White South African society and there were casualties. During the time that I worked for COSAWR I can recall one suicide and six people who were hospitalized for nervous breakdowns (Roger Field, former COSAWR worker 1985–1989, testimony to Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Capetown, 23 July 1997).

Although many of the return group recognized that they had significant advantages over other returnees, many were returning at considerable risk, facing the prospect of conscription and imprisonment or violence from right-wing groups.

In this article, I have argued that the attention paid by refugee studies researchers to the myth of return has left the field poorly equipped to understand voluntary and self-repatriation flows such as the return of
COSAWR. Instead, I suggest that a study of the ideological basis of displacement and repatriation can make a significant contribution to the analysis of return migration in two ways. First, it encourages an examination of an ideological project—the construction of identity in the host society. This project of identity building may be undertaken in such a way that exit from home is legitimated, and the displaced coalesce as a coherent group committed to political activism and return. Of course, many South Africans who came to the United Kingdom did not identify as war-resisters or exiles and, even if they did, did not return to South Africa.

An investigation of ideology also reveals the links between the language and rhetoric of public and private, and of the political and the personal. In this study, activists used two different languages for expressing their motives and commitments. In interviews, they revealed a private need to return to family and friends and to repair the personal damage that had been caused by their exit and time away from what had been home. In public declarations, this was overshadowed by the need to portray return as a political act, demonstrating war-resisters’ commitment to the new South Africa. COSAWR’s return represented one of the few attempts by South African exiles in the United Kingdom to return as a group, a gesture that returnees thought was necessary in order to alert the ANC and the government to the struggle that many white men had waged to avoid fighting for the apartheid regime. Consequently, the importance of the return group was not its size, but the simple fact that its members went back, confronted the authorities and said ‘we’re back, arrest us or make us go into the army at your peril’.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank those members of COSAWR who were generous enough to spend time talking to me, particularly those members of the return group who were interviewed in the last few hectic weeks before they departed for South Africa.

1. In 1990, the Huddleston International Register of South African War Resisters surveyed signatories to the register in North America, Europe, Africa and Australasia. Over 100 resisters responded, ranging in age from 19 to 42. Although it is unclear how many of the respondents were based in Britain, the picture that emerged of war-resisters was one of diversity: in terms of age, time spent out of the country, time spent in the SADF, and current legal status. Over two-thirds had not undertaken any military service in South Africa. Of the 32 per cent who had, some still faced the prospect of camps, others court-martial for desertion. One-fifth of all respondents left in 1986 as a result of the State of Emergency, and 12 per cent did so in 1989, reflecting the sentencing of three people who refused to serve in the SADF to a maximum six years imprisonment under the terms of the Defence Act. Forty per cent of the respondents had obtained the citizenship of their country of exile, while 30 per cent had been granted refugee status (see Israel 1996).


*MS received December 1997; revised MS received March 2002*