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SOUTH AFRICA'S SPACE HERITAGE: THE HIDDEN DECADE OF THE 1980S

**Abstract**

South Africa's most spectacular space project before the SKA bid was the missile and space launcher project of the apartheid 1980s. The challenge for space historians is that this military project was throughout its life cycle under total military censorship. Even in the current democracy, with no possibility of prosecution, not one of the space engineers will talk publicly about it.

After South Africa became a democracy, various brief accounts – all but one foreign – have appeared in the public domain. These are problematic in at least three ways. First, they focus on the atom bomb project, devoting only a few pages, or even only one page, to the RSA-3 rocket, as merely a future delivery mode for the A-bomb.

Second, the published accounts focus on what Israelis did in South Africa, instead of what the South Africans did in South Africa. Third, rather than making the most probable deductions, each account competes to be more sensational or alarmist than rival publications.

Space historians may take comfort in the fact that this current situation is no different to that which confronted authors at the start of research into Peenemünde, Tyuratam, and Jiuquan. This paper probes literature, brochures, and all other fragments of the jigsaw puzzle in the public domain, for both contradictions and independent confirmations. One methodological pitfall to avoid is ascertaining if one publication is an unacknowledged derivation of another.