Soldiers in the struggle : aspects of the experiences of Umkhonto we Siswe's rank and file soldiers- the Soweto generation and after / Lynda K. von den Steinen.

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Abstract

What has been written on Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) has focused particularly on diplomacy, strategies and tactics, and issues of leadership. Issues of human rights abuses and military failures have also been touched on. But largely neglected has been the history and experiences of the rank and file soldiers of Umkhonto we Sizwe.

This thesis will touch on only a few crucial aspects of MK's history. It aims to provide a picture of what life was like for the ordinary members of Umkhonto we Sizwe from the Soweto generation until demobilisation. It enquires as to their motivations for becoming involved in politics and armed resistance. It explores the events and feelings that led them to leave South Africa and join MK and the act of going through this process, as well as their lives in the training camps in Angola in the mid-70s and 1980s, issues of the security department and the mutiny in 1984, deployment and operations inside South Africa, women's experiences in MK, and the soldiers' return home to South Africa. This thesis also looks at the feelings and experiences that the soldiers went through, and the influences that made them who they are today.

This thesis provides only a glimpse of the experiences of MK's soldiers. It rests largely on interviews, with support from other works written about MK and documents from the ANC's organisation in exile. But many people have not told their stories and many documents and issues are still unavailable for view to the public. This author hopes that this work will provide an introduction to these issues and an impression of life in MK for the rank and file soldiers.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, this thesis is dedicated to all of the people who fought for the liberation of South Africa, particularly those who chose MK as their way of fighting. And to those who did not live to see the fruits of their efforts, but will be remembered still.

To my two supervisors, Eddy Maloka and Christopher Saunders, for all of their help, input, and suggestions, that helped shape my thesis. They deserve great thanks for their support and excitement about the project and for their good advice and helpful contacts.

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To Weziwe Ncame, for her friendship, discussions, support, and advice in writing the thesis. She also deserves a badge of bravery for her openness and honesty in allowing me to interview her and her insight into life as an MK soldier and life as an ex-MK soldier.

To all of the people who were good enough to let a young, white, American girl interview them, and for their openness and honesty in their interviews. Without them none of this would have been possible. Thanks are also due to Wolfie Kodesh, Hilda Bernstein, and various anonymous interviewers for their efforts to record interviews with a wide variety of exiles, many of which were integral to this project.

To the staff of the Mayibuye Centre at the University of the Western Cape for their help and advice during my research in their archives.

To Howard Barrell, for letting me copy and consult his PhD thesis, offering me advice, contacts, and encouragement throughout, which was particularly impressive considering his horrendous schedule.

To my family and friends in the US for their unconditional support of my voluntary exile to South Africa, and of the work I did there. And to my friends in South Africa, who provided encouragement, contacts, insight, and well needed nights out to escape my work on occasion.

Preface

> These were people like that. The ones who cared so terribly much- enough to risk everything, enough to change and do things. Most people aren't like that, you know. It isn't that they don't care, but that they don't care so greatly . . . Are some people destined for a great fate, or to do great things? Or is it only that they're born somehow with that great passion- and if they find themselves in the right circumstances, then things happen? It's the sort of thing you wonder, studying history, but there's no way of telling, really. All we know is what they accomplished.[1]
>
> -Diana Gabaldon

I arrived in South Africa for the first time in the middle of 1996 for postgraduate work at the University of Cape Town. One of the first classes I took there was a history of the liberation struggles of Southern Africa. As the end of the semester approached, and exams loomed, I was able to explain the local, regional, and international influences that led to resolutions in each Southern African country we covered. I could tell you about the leaders and the strategies and tactics of each of the liberation movements, relate the important events and turning points in each struggle and outline the way these struggles overlapped and influenced each other. I could talk of the ways of the white governments and the methods used to combat these struggles, and explain exactly why each one turned out the way it did. I was sure that I was coming to some sort of understanding about the liberation struggles in Southern Africa, and my marks at the end of the year reflected this certainty.

However, while I was sitting in my room at residence, memorising dates and names, events and their consequences, and producing papers on particular parts of the struggles, another side of the issue presented itself to me. A friend of a friend found

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[1] Gabaldon, Diana, Voyager, Dell, New York, 1994, p. 106-7.

himself in dire straits, with a thesis that needed to be submitted at the end of the weekend, and a typist who had become so drunk as to pass out for the whole three days he was supposed to polish the thesis and print it out for submission. I found myself with a couple of friends, as well as the unlucky thesis writer, desperately putting together the thesis in time. Somehow we managed it, and I was able to write a paper for my own class at the same time, and the thesis, though a bit rough, went in on time. Later that week, in gratitude, the thesis writer appeared at my door with a case of Castle Lager bottles with which to celebrate. As the night wore on, and the case became full of empties rather than unopened bottles, he gradually related his life story, and it was an amazing one.

He had been a policeman, and a black one, in South Africa under Apartheid, but found himself gradually moving over to the other side of the fight. He joined Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the armed wing of the African National Congress (ANC), and spent years in their camps in exile, learning to be a soldier and desperately waiting for his opportunity to go back to South Africa with his gun and fight against the racist government. He told us of the way of life in the training camps in Angola, of fighting against UNITA (the rebel army in Angola), of love affairs with women soldiers, of deaths, diseases, low morale, and of the camaraderie and justness of their struggle. He told of his problems with the security department of the ANC, and of his eventual return home to South Africa. The story didn't end there though: it dealt with the physical and psychological problems he struggled with upon his return, of his family issues and drinking problems, and of his eventual rehabilitation and return to finish his education. He told me of so many aspects of the liberation struggle in South Africa that simply didn't appear in the history books, didn't cross the minds of the

researchers, and did really strike at my heart in a way that dry statistics and oft-repeated narratives did not. One can read in the histories of the ANC and its armed wing that "Thousands of young militants left the country, most of them seeking out the liberation movements for training as guerillas,"[2] but that offers no understanding of what it was like to live in fear of the security police; to decide to leave behind your family, your friends, your education or employment, and even to be willing to sacrifice your life; to leave your country never knowing if you would return; to find yourself in foreign countries, in harsh conditions, with nothing but your certainty that your struggle is a just one. And even less is told of the problems encountered in exile: the terrible homesickness, the years of waiting for orders to go back, the loss of friends to malaria or to UNITA bandits, the fear of both enemy agents and your own security department, not to mention the problems upon return to South Africa after the release of Nelson Mandela and the un-banning of the ANC. His story made me realise that there is so much left untold in the stories of the struggle for liberation in South Africa, and of the importance of the stories of the ordinary South Africans who gave up everything for a cause they believed in. In order to have any idea where the country stands at the moment, and what the population has been through, we must draw away from statistics and documents, from leaders and negotiations, and consider the experiences of the ordinary people involved in the events of history.

Recently, two and a half years into my stay in South Africa, I went to a presentation by one of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) commissioners, who was presenting the newly released final report, and answering questions about it. One

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[2] Brooks, Alan and Brickhill, Jeremy, Whirlwind Before the Storm, International Defence and Aid Fund, London, 1980, p. 3.

middle-aged woman stood up and expressed her gratitude to the commissioner and her colleagues for their work in digging up the "truth" about apartheid and the struggle against it. She told of her time in the civil service under the apartheid government, and of how she had known of all the atrocities that were going on, but couldn't do anything about it at the time. After all, she had a job and a family, and somebody had to keep the country running. When I heard this statement, I thought of all of the people I had interviewed personally and others interviewed by other researchers, I thought of the stories of loved ones who had perished in the struggle or never been heard of again, and I thought of the mental anguish that was related to me of giving up all that one had to join the struggle, and of the surety of these people that there was nothing else they could do, given the circumstances. And I thought that their story needed to be told more than ever. In the TRC final report, one entry really caught my eye,

> One of the most intriguing applications came from a young Indian woman, who applied for amnesty for what she describes as her "apathy". The application stated that those applying on these grounds recognised that they:
> *as individuals can and should be held accountable by history for our lack of necessary action in times of crisis... in exercising apathy rather than commitment we allow(ed) others to sacrifice their lives for the sake of our freedom and an increase in our standard of living.*[3]

While it is not necessary to blame those who did nothing to change the status quo in South Africa, indeed, it is easy to understand their reasons for inaction, this submission really marks the bravery and dedication of those who did do something, and they deserve to be remembered. While this thesis will in no way present the whole story of MK, nor will it document many other forms of struggle that were equally important and equally dangerous, I hope that it will at least serve as a starting off point for studies of this nature, and provide something of a deeper view into the hearts and

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[3] Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report, Volume Four, Chapter Ten, entry 130, p. 313.

minds of the ordinary people who left behind everything they knew to join Umkhonto we Sizwe and fight for the liberation of South Africa.

Introduction

> Wars are often summed up as the decisions of leaders and the movements of armies. It is often forgotten that these depend on ordinary soldiers, who make personal sacrifices to achieve advances and victories, and who suffer the consequences of retreats and defeats physically. But their experiences are usually obliterated in the manufacture of histories and may even be lost to popular memory. The result is the propagation of an official mythology of war, with heavy emphasis on its abstract and glorious aspects.[1]

The History of Liberation Struggles

With the dawning of the 'New South Africa', many avenues are opening up in the study of history. One such opportunity comes in writing the history of the liberation struggle against the system of Apartheid. Many works have been written on this subject already, but due to the constraints of researching while the struggle was going on, they often tell only pieces of the story. Also, in their focus on certain aspects of the liberation struggle that were key concerns at the time, such as political structures, diplomacy, and ideology, these works neglect other aspects of the history, such as the story of the 'ordinary people' involved in the struggle.

Many problems have arisen in past works focusing on liberation movements in Southern Africa. One major restraint on research has been the lack of resources on which to base a study. Until the release of Nelson Mandela and unbanning of the liberation movements in 1990, and even beyond until the election of the Government of National Unity in April of 1994, utmost secrecy was necessary to the survival of the liberation movements both inside the country and in exile. This condition made it extremely difficult for researchers to gain access to detailed and accurate information.

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[1] Barnes, Teresa A., "The Heroes' Struggle: Life after the Liberation War for Four Ex-combatants in Zimbabwe," in Bhebe and Ranger, eds., Soldiers in Zimbabwe's Liberation War, Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publications, 1995, p.118.

Often information came only from official sources in South Africa, which were notoriously biased against the liberation movements, or from defectors or police agents. Even if these testimonies were true, which was not always the case, one person's story or one group of people's stories (in this case those who had been 'turned' by the South African police) is rarely representative of the entire group he or she comes from. Information also came through the liberation movements themselves, in the form of recruitment material and journals, which were usually biased towards the liberation movements. Furthermore, even if it had been possible to obtain accurate and detailed intelligence of the operations of the liberation movements, many scholars would have hesitated to use this information as its publication could have endangered the liberation movements and jeopardised the movements' efforts. In his Umkhonto we Sizwe, Howard Barrell acknowledges that, "the story this book tells remains only a sketch... ANC and MK security remains an issue at the time of writing.[2] While there is little doubt that many of the writers involved in documenting the history and workings of the liberation struggle in South Africa had good intentions to do as much justice to the topic as possible, it is impossible to ignore the circumstances that restrained them from successfully accomplishing this.

Beyond the issue of scarcity of sources as a problem in writing the history of liberation struggles comes the question of loyalties. While the struggle against Apartheid was going on, the loyalties of the authors had a major effect on the products they produced. Colin Leys and John S. Saul discuss this problem in relation to the history of the liberation struggle in Namibia,

> The history of the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO), the liberation movement that came to lead that struggle, has been particularly prone to either demonization or canonization. For South

[2] Barrell, H. MK: The ANC's Armed Struggle, London: Penguin, 1990, p. vii.

> African historians of the struggle SWAPO have been 'terrorists, 'communists', 'hapless bunglers', while too much of the solidarity literature presents a SWAPO incapable of error and free of all shortcomings.[3]

This problem also arises in the literature about the liberation struggle in South Africa, as is discussed below.

There is ample room for new interpretations and investigations in the exploration of the history of the struggle against Apartheid in South Africa. It is an opportune time to rewrite the history of the liberation movements and to take advantage of the vast range of sources now available, explore new aspects that were not addressed in the past, and look at these issues from a greater distance.

A Brief History of *Umkhonto we Sizwe*

The African National Congress (ANC) was founded in 1912, under the name of the South African Native National Congress. Originally it was a rather elitist organisation, focusing on the rights of the small professional black middle class. In 1944 this emphasis changed dramatically with the formation of the ANC youth league. The youth league stressed the ideas of African Nationalism, and eventually introduced the 'Programme of Action' in 1949 after the election of the National Party. The 'Programme of Action' proposed more mass action in passive resistance against the racist laws becoming more entrenched day by day as opposed to the earlier methods of petitioning the government done by only a few elites. This programme was implemented in the Defiance Campaign of the early fifties, which saw boycotts, stay-aways, deliberate law breaking, and other forms of passive resistance gain much support. In 1955, the ANC, together with other like-minded organisations, convened

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[3] Leys, C., and Saul, J., Namibia's Liberation Struggle: the Two Edged Sword, London: James Currey Ltd., 1995, p. 2.

the Congress of the People and adopted the Freedom Charter, which provided general guidelines for a South Africa under democratic rule. With the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960, however, it became clear that the government was more than willing to meet passive resistance with deadly force, and a new strategy had to be found. The ANC was banned (along with other organisations) and many of its members fled into exile in order to keep the organisation together.

Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), or the 'Spear of the Nation', was launched on December 16, 1961 in all of the main urban centres of South Africa. Its manifesto claimed that MK was to be seen not as an alternative to traditional and more peaceful methods of struggle, but as a complement to these. The first few years of its existence saw MK execute many successful sabotage attacks, but the make-up of MK remained rather elitist, with small cells of members moving underground within the country, organising and executing attacks on strategic places important to the government or the economy, in a type of 'armed propaganda'. This first phase of MK's operations came to a dramatic halt when the leadership was caught in Rivonia in 1963, tried, and sent to Robben Island. The rest of the 1960s and the beginning of the 70s saw little MK activity within South Africa, as the external mission tried to rebuild the organisation. The only visible attempt on their part to infiltrate South Africa on this occasion occurred in 1968, when they sent a group of soldiers to accompany the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) into Zimbabwe, and most were caught or killed.

The early 1970s saw the re-emergence of black opposition to the government inside the country, particularly linked with the Black Consciousness movement, with an increase in strikes, school boycotts, and other unrest. However, the ANC played

little part in this new wave of protest. The Soweto uprising in 1976 in South Africa caught the ANC off guard, and they were largely unable to capitalise on the unrest inside the country. The uprising and the resultant government repression, however, led to a large number of South Africans fleeing into exile and joining MK there to get training for operations inside the country as well as for guerrilla warfare. The following years saw a dramatic increase in attacks within South Africa, though the majority of the soldiers did not return to the home front. Some did see action in Angola in assistance of the MPLA (Movimento Popular de Libertacao de Angola). The early 1980s saw a huge increase in attacks on South African soil, and by the time of the township uprisings in the mid-1980s MK was more prepared to assist the unrest inside the country. Because of this fewer South Africans fled into exile, though many still did leave the country to join MK. With the unbanning of the ANC and release of Nelson Mandela in 1990, MK activities and demobilisation became a vital point of argument for the negotiations towards a change of government.

Literature Review

A number of books and articles have been written about *Umkhonto we Sizwe*. There are autobiographical accounts written about and by the original leaders and members of MK, covering the decision to turn to violence and the original sabotage campaigns, as well as a few that touch on the later development and operations of MK. Most of these either strictly toe the ANC party line, or strongly oppose it. Nelson Mandela's Long Walk to Freedom[4], which covers his whole life, from birth, through his activities in the ANC and MK, to his incarceration on Robben Island and to his

[4] Mandela, Nelson, Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela, London: Little, Brown and Company, 1994.

release, and Natoo Babenia's Memoirs of a Saboteur[5], which talks of his activities as a saboteur in both South Africa and India, are among the autobiographies which focus in part on the early sabotage campaigns of MK and the authors' parts in them, often stressing the ANC party line about the role and ideology of MK. Ronnie Kasrils' autobiography, Armed and Dangerous[6] also deals with the early sabotage campaigns, then moves on to the nature of his work in exile in MK until he returned to South Africa in 1990, but also toes the ANC party line. He discusses his life and his motivations as well as including several detailed descriptions of his activities. Bruno Mtolo[7] and Mwezi Twala's autobiographies[8] provide the counter-view to these, taking a particularly anti-ANC point of view, dealing with the early sabotage campaign and the mid-70s to 1990s, respectively. 'Official' ANC historians also deal with the formation, strategies, heroes, and ideology of MK within a broader history of the ANC and its struggle against Apartheid, notably including Francis Meli,[9] John Pampallis,[10] and Govan Mbeki.[11] These are all restricted by their loyalties, and tend to deal primarily with the leadership, diplomacy, strategy, and ideology of ANC. They are largely similar, dealing with the same leaders, events, and speeches, and covering the

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[5] Babenia Natoo, as told to Edwards, Iain, Memoirs of a Saboteur, Bellville: Mayibuye Books, 1995.

[6] Kasrils, Ronnie, Armed and Dangerous: My Undercover Struggle Against Apartheid, Great Britain: Heinemann, 1993.

[7] Mtolo, Bruno, Umkhonto we Sizwe: the Road to the Left, Durban: Drakensberg Press, 1966.

[8] Twala, Mwezi, and Bernard, Ed, Mbokodo Inside MK: Mwezi Twala- A Soldier's Story, Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 1994.

[9] Meli, Francis, A History of the ANC: South Africa Belongs to Us, Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1988.

[10] Pampallis, John, Foundations of the New South Africa, Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman, 1991.

[11] Mbeki, Govan, The Struggle for Liberation in South Africa: A short history, Cape Town: David Phillip, 1992; and Sunset at Midday: Latshon'ilang'emini!, Gauteng: Nolwazi Educational Publishers, 1996.

struggle from the ANC side. There are a few collections of oral testimonies by South Africans who went into exile[12], and these include a few accounts by MK soldiers. However, in their relatively unstructured format, which tends simply to print the testimonies of the interviewees, often abridging them and focusing on different aspects from each interview, it is very difficult to find continuity and similarities between people's testimonies. Other oral accounts exist in the 'Wolfie Kodesh Collection (Historical Papers & Oral History of Exile Interviews)' and the 'Hilda Bernstein collection' at the Mayibuye Centre at the University of the Western Cape, which also includes a few interviews done by other people, who are unknown.

Many academic works exist which focus on the nature of the ANC in exile, including the command structure and operations of MK, as well as speculations about the amount of influence of the Communist Party, and issues of international alliances, among others. Tom Lodge's many articles and chapters of books on MK are very helpful,[13], as well as Howard Barrell's work[14], but focus mostly on these issues. Lodge's several articles focus largely on the state of the ANC and MK in exile in particular periods, outlining the past, present, and possibilities for the future, looking

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[12] See for example; Bernstein, Hilda, The Rift: The Exile Experience of South Africans, London: Jonathan Cape, 1994; and Majodina, Zonke, Exiles and Homecomings: the Untold Stories, Johannesburg: Heinemann Publishers (Pty) Ltd, 1995.

[13] See for e.g.; Lodge, Tom, "Guerrilla Warfare and Exile Diplomacy: The African National Congress and the Pan Africanist Congress," in Lodge and Nasson, All, Here, and Now: Black Politics in South Africa in the 1980s, USA: Ford Foundation, 1991, p. 174-202; Lodge, Tom, Black Politics in South Africa Since 1945, Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1983, p. 231-260, 295-362; Lodge, Tom, "People's war or Negotiation? African National Congress Strategies in the 1980s," in South African Review, vol. 5, Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1989, p. 42-55; Lodge, Tom, "State of Exile: The African National Congress of South Africa, 1976-86," in Frankel, et.al., eds., State Resistance and Change in South Africa, Johannesburg: Southern Book Publishers, 1988, p. 229-258; Lodge, Tom, "'Mayihlome!- Let Us Go To War!': From Nkomati to Kabwe, The African National Congress, January 1984-June 1985," in South African Review, Vol. 3, Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1986 p. 226-247; Lodge, Tom, "The African National Congress in the 1990s," in South African Review, vol. 6, Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1992, p. 44-78.

[14] Barrell, Howard, MK: The ANC's Armed Struggle, London: Penguin, 1990.

primarily at the diplomatic and political sides of things. He does discuss training in his chapter of State, Resistance, and Change[15], but draws this information only from a small number of ex-MK soldiers, and generally those who were police informers or who were captured and tried by the South African government. This gives a limited view of MK and its soldiers. Barrell's short book benefits from his personal participation in the struggle and provides a good basic history of MK, but again focuses largely on the leaders, strategies, and well-known events. There are several articles that deal with mainly ideological and strategic issues,[16] analysing the party line or discussing the conditions necessary for the ANC to be successful in its endeavours, but these mostly rely on extensive theory and guesswork and tend to avoid empirical evidence. Ellis and Sechaba[17] provide us with an in-depth look at the relationship between the ANC and the South African Communist Party (SACP) in exile, dealing in large part with *Umkhonto we Sizwe*, but focus extensively on the issues of leadership and strategy of MK, leaning toward the theory that the SACP had a large degree of control over MK. Only a few of books try to provide general histories of MK itself, and even these focus mainly on leaders, campaigns, and diplomacy.[18] Howard Barrell also wrote an impressive PhD thesis about the contradiction between MK's obvious

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[15] Frankel, et.al., as above, p. 234-6.

[16] See for example; Johns, Sheridan, "Obstacles to Guerrilla Warfare- A South African Case Study," in Journal for African Studies, vol.11, no.2, 1973; Marcum, John, "The Exile Condition and Revolutionary Effectiveness: Southern African Liberation Movements," in Potholm, C.P. and Dale, R., eds., South African in Perspective: Essays in Regional Politics, New York: The Free Press, 1972; and Fatton, Robert, "The African National Congress of South Africa: The limitations of a Revolutionary Strategy," in The Canadian Journal of African Studies, vol. 18, 1984.

[17] Ellis, Stephen and Sechaba, Tsepo, Comrades Against Apartheid: The ANC and the South African Communist Party in Exile, London: James Currey, 1992.

[18] See for example; Karis, T. and Gerhart, G., From Protest to Challenge: A documentary History of African Politics in South Africa, 1882-1990, vol. 5 "Nadir and Resurgence, 1964-1979," Pretoria, Unisa Press, 1997, p. 19-61, 279-310; and Barrell, Howard, MK: The ANC's Armed Struggle, London: Penguin, 1990.

failure as a military force and its apparent success politically.[19] All of these, with the exception of Barrell's thesis, were unable to make full use of the rich wealth of information now available from and about the rank and file soldiers of *Umkhonto we Sizwe*.

Focus of the Study

The history of MK includes many aspects, most of which have been covered by other authors. A number of these are personal accounts of MK soldiers, usually those in leadership positions. Much has been published on the strategies and tactics of the armed wing, and a lot has also covered the leaders, their speeches, and official ANC documents released to the press and used as propaganda. Many articles provide status reports on the ANC and MK in exile, written at different points in their history, which usually include many allusions to the past, details about recent developments, and predictions about what the future will bring. The struggle is also often approached looking at the response of the Apartheid state to black resistance, documenting torture and repression inside South Africa, white politics, and military incursions into neighbouring countries, which became noticeable in the early to mid 1980s. There are also several "official" histories of the liberation movement, usually written by those who participated in it, as well as books written from the Apartheid state's point of view which usually demonise or dismiss the resistance movements. Current debates often focus on the character of the relationship between the ANC and the South African Communist Party (SACP) in exile, and often dealing with their relationship in MK. Much has been written about individual leaders, such as Nelson Mandela, Oliver

[19] Barrell, Howard, Conscripts to Their Age: ANC Operational Strategy 1976-1986, Unpublished thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of a PhD in Politics, Oxford, 1993.

Tambo, and others. Howard Barrell's admirable PhD thesis looked at the issue of whether or not MK was successful, and why. All of these issues and focuses are interesting and add something to the history of MK and the ANC. However, this study is not intended to be an extension of these, but rather a complement to them. For this reason, many of the commonly approached aspects of the history of MK will not be broached in this thesis. Some of them will come into play in different topics of the study, but the purpose here is not to continue these debates, but rather to offer a new aspect of this history.

While South Africa did not experience a guerrilla war on the scale of the Zimbabwean, Angolan, Namibian, or Mozambiquean liberation struggles, the armed wing of the ANC did, however, play a significant part in the conflict between anti-Apartheid forces and the National Party government. That the extent of this role is hotly debated is not relevant to this study, as MK clearly deserves a place in the history of South Africa's struggle. It is necessary to make sure that the Rankean tradition of great leaders and villains and great battles and events does not eclipse the history of the lesser known people and the everyday aspects of life in an exiled army. The "ordinary" soldier of MK deserves a place in history as well.

It is in this proposed context that this study will look at the lives of the rank-and-file soldiers of MK. In exploring the backgrounds of the soldiers, the ways in which they became acquainted with and joined MK, their experiences in the training camps, holding camps, and forward areas of the struggle, and their current place in South African society, a better understanding will emerge of their contribution to and place in the formation of a "new South Africa". Hopefully, this will move away from

an "official mythology" and towards an understanding of the "personal sacrifices" and experiences that Barnes sees lacking in current accounts of liberation struggles.[20]

As the study will focus on the "ordinary soldier" and hopes to add to current material on MK, it is intended to look primarily at the "Soweto generation" of MK recruits. Estimates indicate that only about 300-800 recruits crossing over the borders to join MK by 1965,[21] as compared to around 3000 in the two years immediately following the Soweto uprising alone[22]. With an estimate of over 11,000 recruits in the time between the Soweto uprisings and un-banning of the ANC in 1990[23], the scope of the operation clearly expanded in the mid-1970s, and MK moved from its traditionally small group of elite saboteurs towards a larger army being trained for guerrilla warfare in South Africa. Many of the activists from the Soweto generation left long after the uprisings had quietened as well, after long terms in detention or prison or further activities in South Africa, or both. Despite this massive influx of recruits in the post-Soweto period, most writings that deal with this period of MK history focus on the leadership and international relations involving the ANC, African countries, Communist countries, and Western countries. Although the uprisings in the mid-1980s in South Africa did not result in the same kind of exodus into exile since MK was trying to enlarge the struggle within the country and keep the comrades in South Africa, the soldiers who joined MK in this period also have useful contributions to make to the history of the organisation.

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[20] See opening quote by Barnes.

[21] The figure of 300 comes from Lodge, Tom, Black Politics in South Africa since 1945, p. 237, where he estimates the total from the years 1961-1964, and 800 comes from Barrell, Howard, MK: The ANC's Armed Struggle, p.19, covering the same period.

[22] Barrell, Howard, MK: The ANC's Armed Struggle, p. 33.

[23] This number is an estimate based on calculations between Howard Barrell and Ronnie Kasrils, from interview with Howard Barrell, 9 December 1998.

Sources

By the very nature of an underground and exiled organisation faced with a ruthless and unscrupulous enemy, documentation of many decisions, operations, and events is not available for study. Even that which is available, now that many documents have been released for public viewing, is very limited. Much information has been lost, and much has been limited by issues of security as well as just plain bad record keeping and misadministration. The best statistics available on the numbers of people involved in MK come from guesses made by the leadership[24]. Even these only touch on raw numbers, and no statistics are available on the areas the soldiers came from, their backgrounds, gender, race, and age breakdowns, or other issues that would be very useful. Having said this, however, there are many sources available to develop a picture of ANC and MK operations and conditions. Published personal accounts provide some information on life in MK camps as well as official policies, actions, and ideas, though many contradictory stories arise in these.[25] Also available are the ANC's submissions to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission documenting the "official" history of the movement as well as the human rights violations that its members submit to have committed during the struggle. For another side of the story of abuses in MK camps, one must look at books like Twala's, articles in Searchlight South Africa, and Amnesty International's report which emerged when Bandile Ketelo exposed the abuses publicly in 1990[26], as well as information in Ellis and Sechaba's

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[24] This is based on the interview with Howard Barrell, 9 December 1998.

[25] Two of these would be Kasrils' and Twala's books, which occasionally completely contradict each other.

[26] Such as Ketelo, Bandile, et. al., "A Miscarriage of Democracy: the ANC Security Department in the 1984 Mutiny in Umkhonto we Sizwe," Searchlight South Africa, 5 (July 1990) p. 35-65; and Amnesty

book about this topic. Additionally, many documents are available from the period in question, both from the ANC and the NP government which provide more background for the study. Particularly helpful here are the collections of the Mayibuye Centre at the University of the Western Cape and the ANC archives collection at Fort Hare University. Additional information can be found in the numerous journals that were published during the struggle, including Sechaba, Dawn, and Mayibuye (published by the ANC) and Umsebenzi and African Communist, (published by the South African Communist Party). Also available for perusal are records of some of the trials of MK soldiers, though many are unavailable to the public until 25 years after they occurred. Newspaper articles also provide information for the study.

The largest wealth of information for this project comes from oral interviews with ex-MK combatants.[27] Many of these had already been done, and can be found in the oral history collection of the Mayibuye Centre,[28] as well as a few that are in Hilda Bernstein's book, The Rift: Exile Experiences of South Africans.[29] Many others have been undertaken by the author, in an attempt to find answers to specific questions, or to provide a wider pool of interviewees. Nevertheless, several concerns surround the validity of oral history. While it is very useful in gathering information about

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Interational, "South Africa: Torture, Ill-Treatment and Executions in African National Congress Camps" (AFR 53-27-92, London, 2 December 1992).

[27] Throughout this paper, interviews are cited in the same way. An example would be an interview with Chalmers Nyombolo, done by Lynda von den Steinen. The first entry in a chapter would read, "Interview with Chalmers Nyombolo, Interviewed by Lynda von den Steinen." Subsequent entries in the same chapter would read, "Interview with Nyombolo." If both Lynda von den Steinen and Howard Barrell interviewed Nyombolo, the subsequent entries would read, "Interview with Nyombolo (HoB). LV is Lynda von den Steinen, WK is Wolfie Kodesh, HiB is Hilda Bernstein, and HoB is Howard Barrell. Interviews where the interviewer is unknown would be marked by a question mark. For dates and locations of the interviews, where available, see the bibliography.

[28] The Wolfie Kodesh Collection (Historical Papers and Oral History of Exile Interviews) and the Hilda Bernstein Collection, Mayibuye Centre, University of the Western Cape.

[29] Bernstein, Hilda, The Rift: The Exile Experience of South Africa, London: Jonathan Cape, 1994.

historical events, movements, and ways of life, it is also only as accurate as human memory and nature allow it to be. But this is also true of non-oral historical sources. However, with the use of many interviews, using a broad base of people and correlating the oral testimonies with written sources, it can provide a wealth of information and add profound depths to many historical subjects. Together, the oral histories and archival material support each other to provide a detailed and informative picture of the lives of MK soldiers.

The Nature of Oral History and Issues Arising from Interviews

Over the last few decades, oral testimony has become widely accepted as a valuable source for historians. It allows people who would generally not be included in traditional sources except as statistics to add their voices to the historical record. Oral sources can also provide information to fill gaps in official documentation and can provide in depth eye witness accounts that remain unmatched by other sources. They also provide a human side to history, allowing for the exploration of emotions, motivations, and values that take history beyond the tradition of names, dates, and events.

Using oral testimony in history, however, is problematic. The biggest problem facing historians trying to collect and utilise oral testimonies is simply the characteristics of human nature. Memory is fallible, and what people remember may or may not be correct. Even if they remember things perfectly, that does not change the fact that many people will change details or choose to remember them differently in order to protect their image or to impress their interviewer. Slim and Thompson point out that, "The process of ordering, discarding, selecting and combining means that memory is always a combination of the objective and subjective, and of facts,

interpretation and opinion."[30] Additionally, there is no way of telling if a particular testimony is really representative of the larger population group on which one is trying to gather information. It is necessary to find a way to separate these different aspects of oral testimony in order to decide what is true and what is not. In simply looking at the testimony itself, it is often impossible to do this, but when one testimony is compared with many others and is correlated with other sources, such as letters, newspaper articles, police records, and official documents, to name only a few possibilities, it becomes much easier to gain a clear picture of what has happened. By matching many different sources, it is often possible to find out which statements are true and which are fallacious. Occasionally, different stories may be irreconcilable, but the advantages of using the oral testimonies far outweigh this danger. One cannot simply discard such information because it is not perfect. If perfection were the standard, little evidence, oral or written, would survive.

Another problem of collecting oral testimonies is that it necessarily involves a process between at least two people, the interviewer and the interviewee. Their relationship will often colour the resulting product. Issues of gender, age, racial and cultural differences, as well as the feelings towards one another, can make interviews more or less successful. Jeremy Seekings, who used extensive interviews in a book on youth politics mentioned that he saw real differences in the results of interviews between people he got along with and respected and those he didn't. He noted that the interviews with the former ended up being much more useful and contained much more information than the latter.[31] Unfortunately this is something that is difficult to

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[30] Slim, Hugo and Thompson, Paul, Listening for Change: Oral Testimony and Community Development, Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1995, p. 140.

[31] Discussion with author, 3 October 1997.

avoid, but it is important to be conscious of this problem so that one can do one's best to avert it.

Another difficulty arises with the question of hindsight. When people relate things that have happened in their past, they do so through the values and ideas they have in the present. This may distort the way things actually were, as they are seen through different eyes than they were at the time in question. For example, one UCT student wrote a thesis on the changing perceptions of the experience of being imprisoned on Robben Island. She found that during different periods, people relating their stories of this experience would focus on completely different aspects, for instance, when the apartheid government was still in power, Robben Island was often described as a horrible place to be, with terrible guards, devastatingly hard labour, and very little hope, but now that the new government has taken over and Robben Island has become a monument to the struggle against Apartheid, ex-inmates focus rather on the positive aspects of their experiences there, talking of the camaraderie, educational opportunities, and the idea of Robben Island as a political university.[32] Seekings recommends one way to get around this. He suggests that rather than simply asking what happened and why, which allows for filtering through current views, it is better to focus on certain issues and events and ask the interviewees to relate them through the eyes of the past. One way to do this would be that is if an interviewer wanted to find out how the soldiers in MK saw their experiences upon joining the organisation, would be asking what conditions were like when they got to the training camp, which might elicit explanations tempered by current knowledge about the logistics, resources, and leaders that made things the way they were, to what they expected the camps to be like, what they were actually like, and then how they think it should have been. By

separating the past values and ideas from the present in this way, it is easier to arrive at something near what they thought at the time. Another suggestion by Seekings is to create "a window" to the past. Rather than just accepting that the camp commanders were corrupt or that the leadership didn't care, the interviewer should ask for specific examples of this, so that there are concrete stories to augment the generalisations.[33]

As much as hindsight can distort an event in an interview, it can also clear things up in a way that can't always be found in resources from the time in question. For example, witnesses in a trial might not tell things exactly the way they happened in order to protect themselves or someone else from the consequences of punishment. However, twenty years later, when the threat of punishment is no longer there, they may be much more candid than they were at the time. In this way, sometimes oral testimonies about past events can be more accurate than things like trial transcripts recorded at the time of an event. Trevor Lummis also notes that, "The retrospective element in oral history is important because it asks questions of the past which reflect present interests and seeks evidence which was not produced at the time. That evidence is collected within a changed culture and, therefore, is not vulnerable to the biases and pressures of the period which produced it however much it may be shaped by the biases of its own day."[34] This retrospect also allows interviewers and researchers to discover material that has not been available before. By finding gaps in existing documentation of a time or event and asking about these issues which don't exist in the available sources, the record of an event or time can be augmented by oral history.

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[32] Rioufol, Veronique, Unpublished thesis, University of Cape Town.

[33] Discussion with author, 3 October 1997.

[34] Lummis, Trevor, Listening to History, London: Hutchinson, 1987, p. 27.

In the end, the most important thing is for a person collecting oral evidence of historical events to be fully aware of the pitfalls inherent to such a project and to do his or her best to avoid it. Also, by gleaning as much information as possible from many different people involved in the event in question and from integrating the oral evidence with written sources and documents, it is possible to gain a bigger picture of historical events and to add to existing material available on some subjects, as well as to add a new, human perspective unattainable through traditional sources.

As to the interviews conducted by the author, there are many problems that arose and which have influenced this study. The first problem was that without any sort of regional, gender, age and background breakdowns of the soldiers of MK, it was simply impossible to establish a picture of what a representative group of MK soldiers would look like. In the absence of this guide, the author attempted to find a variety of different people who experienced different aspects of MK, both men and women, those who joined as students and as adults, and those who emerged satisfied with their contribution and their experiences and those who did not, as well as people of diverse races and backgrounds. Some attempt was made as well at regional distribution among the interviewees, but as the author is based in Cape Town, proportionally more interviewees either came from the Eastern or Western Cape or are now based there.

Many contacts were available, some from UCT students who returned from exile and decided to continue their studies which were interrupted by their leaving the country. Others were found through official channels and still others from acquaintances who knew ex-MK members. Even with references however, many people were reluctant to speak of their experiences. Of fourteen calls to members of parliament, even when furnished with the names of their friends and colleagues as

referrals, only two responded and agreed to be interviewed. Many other contacts were unwilling to talk about their experiences, some because they feared reprisals against them if they were frank, others because they just wanted to forget, and others because they couldn't see the importance of sharing their memories. Beyond this, restrictions due to language applied, as of eleven official languages, the author only speaks one fluently and one badly, so interviews had to be restricted to English. If someone wanted to do more research in this area and had a good grasp of many different South African languages, much more would be possible.

Many people who were interviewed or approached for interviews were distrustful of the interviewer. This largely comes from cultural and political issues, as many were not eager to talk to a young, white, American girl whose politics were unknown. Some distrusted the motives of the interviewer, or worried that their words might be twisted in ways they did not intend. Although these worries were unfounded, it is understandable that they would not immediately trust someone they did not know well, and who came from a very different background. Many articles and books have been published that address the issues from the authors' point of view rather than somewhat objectively or from the participants' point of view, which has made people wary of talking to just anyone. Nevertheless, all of the people who did agree to be interviewed were very open and friendly, and very willing to share their experiences and to look at themselves critically and delve into their deep emotions and experiences. To these the author is very grateful, and from them much was learned.

As for interviews conducted by others and available to the author, these provided more of a problem. With an already completed interview, one has to be satisfied with the questions asked at the time, and cannot explore issues which were not touched on or clarify ones that were not clear. Sometimes, the interviewer's

methods were much different than the ones used by this author, often asking closed questions in the style of, "Wasn't it like this," or "Don't you mean to say this," which limits the responses from the interviewee, and can make a difference in the answers that are received. These interviews, however, did allow for a larger regional base and for some ideas from people who might not be available to be interviewed today, due to their current positions, or on a couple of occasions, from people who are now deceased.

Overall, the interviews that were compiled for this study are very rich and informative, and the ex-soldiers as a group are very intelligent, open, and honest about their experiences and their feelings, which brings about pictures about life in MK that are very detailed and human, and which are not to be found anywhere else at this time. Perhaps in the future, more oral testimonies such as these can be captured, or even better, ex-soldiers themselves will write histories, autobiographies, and fictional accounts of their experiences, but for the time being, this study hopes to start down this path and hopefully others will follow.

Chapter 1
Politicisation

There was a girl

There was a girl

eight years old, they say

her hair in spiky braids

her innocent fist raised in imitation

Afterwards, there was a mass of red

some torn pieces of meat

and bright rags fluttering:

a girl in a print dress, once, they say.[1]

"Vacancies. Government of Azania. Majors, Lieutenants, Captains.

Duties: To train and lead 50 million Blacks.

Apply: SASO, BPC before the reach of the 4th Century of racist oppression."[2]

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[1] Brutus, Dennis, "There was a Girl," in Feinberg, Barry, ed., Poets to the People: South African Freedom Poems, London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1980, p.10.

[2] Slogan at Turfloof University, mid-1970s, cited in Hirson, Baruch, Year of Fire, Year of Ash: The Soweto Revolt: Roots of a Revolution?, London: Zed Press, 1979, p.284.

Introduction

Politicisation comes from many things. Life can politicise, events can influence, and people can be led by others towards finding their stand in politics. Certain things the people who joined Umkhonto we Sizwe have in common; at some point in their lives they came to have certain opinions about the country they lived in, the government that ruled them, and what their role was in attempting to change things. Some learned from their families and their position in society very early on that something was wrong with the way they lived. Others found themselves gradually coming to terms with their society and the things therein with which they did not agree. Many were recruited into politics by friends, neighbours, relatives, peers, or elders. Some simply found themselves caught up in the events of the times in which they lived. A few can point to a particular point in their lives when their views changed irrevocably. Many were discouraged by others as they pursued what they thought was right. But whatever the cause, their opinions and views about the society they lived in and their own roles in it guided them towards joining MK.

Background

The 1950s were years of strong protest for many people. The early fifties saw the defiance campaign against unjust laws, in which people from all walks of life offered themselves for arrest for contravening many of the apartheid laws, particularly the pass laws and the separate amenities act. The theory behind this campaign was that by filling the jails, the government would see that the laws were unjust and unfair, and change accordingly. 1955 saw the Congress of the People and the resulting Freedom Charter. Various campaigns followed this, notably the anti-pass crusade of 1960, which resulted in fierce government repression and the Sharpeville massacre. A

year later both the ANC and the PAC despaired of achieving change through peaceful means and formed and launched armed wings, Umkhonto we Sizwe and Poqo respectively. By 1963, with the arrest of many key leaders of MK and Poqo, the government largely crushed resistance. The 1960s saw a resultant wave of repression and new laws from the government and was a time of defeat, fear, and lack of opposition to the apartheid regime. This lasted until the early 1970s, which saw a wave of strikes and student protest, usually at a tertiary level, and the rise of Black Consciousness and its allied organisations. The youth of the early and mid-1970s, who were to become the fighting force in the reintroduction of strong resistance to the government, were largely born around the time of the previous wave of resistance and grew up in a period when harsh repression resulted in acquiescence on the part of the black population of South Africa. Brooks and Brickhill characterised this generation as "a generation reared in a period of defeat but which has never known defeat itself."[3] 1976 brought the Soweto uprising, details of which can readily be found elsewhere.[4] The uprising lasted until 1978, when it was finally crushed by the police. 1983 saw the formation of the United Democratic Front (UDF) and the next year saw the beginnings of township revolts that lasted until 1987. These periods of unrest, particularly the first one, were largely dominated by the youth and characterised by never before seen levels of resistance to the apartheid government. Most of the people who left the country to join Umkhonto we Sizwe left during these two periods.

Politicised by Life

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[3] Brooks and Brickhill, Whirlwind before the Storm, London: International Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa, 1980, p.67.

[4] See particularly Jane Kane-Berman's Soweto: Black Revolt, White Reaction, Brooks and Brickhill's Whirlwind Before the Storm, and Baruch Hirson's Year of Fire, Year of Ash.

The discovery of politics for these youths happened in many ways. For some, simple existence was enough to get involve them in politics. By the 1970s, most forced removals had already been undertaken, some bantustans were approaching independence, and citizenship in South Africa and the right to live in the cities was becoming more and more threatened for the majority of Africans. Contrasts between their township living arrangements and those of the whites in neighbouring suburbs were hard to miss. Many had witnessed police brutality at first hand, effecting themselves and their families. In circumstances like this, there was often little need for subsequent events or outside organisations to bring the realisation of unfairness and the despair of the lot of the Africans to the youth.

The harassment of a child's parents left an effect on many of the young people who would later enlist to fight against apartheid. No matter how old, these children were aware of their parents' fear, and often made the connection between the fear of their parents and the white run police force that induced it. Reverend Barney Ngakane, a prominent Soweto leader explained, "Every black home is a political school. The husband comes home every day and tells his wife how he has been kicked around and arrested for things like pass offences. The children are listening and they take all this in. This is why African school children have become politically aware so easily."[5] This is also acknowledged by the youth themselves. One man who became active in the Soweto uprisings traced his political awareness back to his childhood:

> One of our duties that one can recall there was brewing home brew...that was made in the back yard at that time. And it was [an] illegal affair...Now as infants we would be in some way told to go and play at the top of the sand dunes there so that when we see [the police] we would then indicate...then I mean conceal everything so that when the boer boys come there's nothing, only the smell would be remaining. Its [sic] one thing that is still very, very clear to my mind. This was

[5] Rev. Barney Ngakane, quoted in Kane-Berman, Soweto: Black Revolt, White Reaction, p.25.

> going on- this was my first contact with a white man. I then from that stage, that age, had seen them as people- when they come here they never come peacefully. When you see a white coming to your area, we'd know it means trouble[6]

Another young girl recalled the forced removal of her family, who resisted the move. She was about 5 years old, and remembered that police and their dogs used to come every day around two in the morning to harass her family to move. Her parents feared the police, and this was not lost on her.[7] Run-ins with the police when the youths were at very impressionable ages taught them at an early age what sort of society they were living in and what their family's position was within it.

Often apartheid dictated the family situation itself, with the men being forced to go to the cities for work, and families having to stay in the reserves. Sometimes even the women remaining at home had to leave to get work, and the children were left with their extended families. One man remembers,

> I've never seen my father. When my mother was staying far away from me and I grew up with...my aunt you see, who took me as [her] son. So all those things I could question, why should our people- I mean why should this thing happen you see. And I could see...[if] people [weren't] forced to work far away and so on and so on, I would be having a father and mother...So it- I could see some sort of immorality of the regime you see. Being I mean what I am- I think that I am partly the victim. Because they- it was not their choice. Even if my mother neglected me at an early stage...it was not [her] choice to do that.[8]

The basic premises of apartheid often resulted in many children having broken homes, and this influenced them greatly.

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[6] Interview with Mxolisi Petane, Interviewer unknown.

[7] Interview with Veronica (Mpho) Msimanga, Interviewed by Wolfie Kodesh.

[8] Interview with Nkosinathi Robert Mjoli (Joseph Setshesh), Interviewer unknown.

Children also noticed differences in the living conditions of blacks and whites. Many had parents who were domestic workers and were able to see the insides of the white houses, which were nothing like their own. One woman remembered,

> My mum used to take us to her work, place of employment and, you know, there was that element whereby you find that the employers were having two fridges full of food, you know... and by that time, we didn't have any fridge at home and we didn't have any electricity... they had kids not far from where they were staying, they had a playing ground and at one time I said to my mum, 'momma may I please go and play with those kids?' She said no, you can't go there because you will be arrested, its not permissible,' and I said, 'why?' She said, 'no, its only white kids who are supposed to play there'. And at my age, at eleven, I wished I was white because all those kids have these opportunities.[9]

Another noted that, "My mother was a domestic servant at Rondebosch [in Cape Town]... and life was totally [the] opposite of the life that you are used to... big houses; there's no house that is that same [with] another one. Unlike where we're staying and the carriages, every house is the same. There's electricity when we entered their kitchens. There's fridges, whatever, the life of the white man which was a contrast to what we are used to."[10] Some did not even need to go into the homes of white people with their mothers to figure this situation out. One man explained, "When we went into town and saw the relative luxury in which white people lived, this made an indelible impression on our young minds."[11] Another young man asserted,

> The economic and social conditions of the blacks in this country are such that no normal person or right thinking person could tolerate them. In Soweto where I lived, I have seen children die because of malnutrition. I have seen my people slaughter one another so as to get bread in order to survive. In my own family I have seen my brothers and uncles going endlessly to town in a fruitless search for work. I have seen my own father struggle to bring us up. In as far as housing is

[9] Interview with Caesarine Gwanamakuru, Interviewed by Hilda Bernstein.

[10] Interview with Petane.

[11] Excerpt from Mosima Gabriel Sexwale's statement to the court in the "Pretoria 12" trial, from Benson, Mary, ed., The Sun Will Rise: Statements from the Dock by Southern African Political Prisoners, London: International Aid and Defence Fund, 1981, p.66.

> concerned, one need only look at Alexandra Township, crime-ridden, foul-smelling with the long-forgotten walks being used for sanitary purposes. It hardly compares with the posh white suburb, Kew, just 300 metres away. These things have not passed unabsorbed in my mind.[12]

The huge differences in the quality of living conditions between the black and white communities made a big impression on the black children, and often gave them their first glance at how unfair life was in South Africa. These experiences often had a very negative effect on the self-esteem of the youngsters. One girl remembers, "When I was still a baby, my mother used to ask me, 'what do you want to be?' I said, 'I want to be a white man.' Because I saw a white man as *the* person."[13]

Another major politicising factor for this generation was the issue of forced removals. Many had families who were compelled by the government to leave their homes and move to new and usually worse living conditions in the 1960s. This memory had profound effects on these children. One man recalled the forced removal of the community where he grew up with his grandmother. A teacher in his school talked to the class intimately about the removals, and told them never to forget it. She asserted, "Anywhere black people have good places, good land, they are chased away just as you do with a dog. If a dog is sitting in a nice spot in the shade, one will kick him away to sit in the spot."[14] Another girl recalled being moved with her family from a nice place attached to a 'coloured' family's house to Naledi township in Johannesburg. She remembered arriving at the new place and finding the family living in a small four roomed house with another family, eight people in all, and an outside

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[12] Excerpt from Naledi Tsiki's statement to the court in the "Pretoria 12 trial," from Benson, Mary, ed., The Sun Will Rise: Statements from the Dock by Southern African Political Prisoners, London: International Aid and Defence Fund, 1981, p. 70.

[13] Interview with Joyce Stofile, Interviewed by Hilda Bernstein.

[14] Interview with Thabang Makwetla, Interviewed by Lynda von den Steinen.

toilet. They also had to cook outside, by digging a hole, making a fire, and using it as a stove. This change in her environment played a large part in her political development.[15] Another man remembered,

> We were staying at Addersvlei. It was a mixed area, we were staying... Chinese, you know people of the other races. When we were removed to Guguletu it was only us. As a young chap that didn't matter. But as you were growing up you then began to realise that it's only people of your skin that you see around. There's no longer other race... There were so many meetings around whether the families would be going or not... you'd see parents gathering at certain houses and [easily] notice that the debates were very, very tense. Because the mood from them was not as jolly as we were used to.[16]

Some didn't even have to be moved themselves to have this effect them. One woman remembered the removal of Crossroads and the KTC squatter camp in Cape Town, "People were transported in big trucks being taken all the way from Cape Town and being dumped somewhere there near the Transkei and then people had to find [their] way back. It had a serious impact on me. And the KTC squatter camps, I remember one night when we were with some friends, white friends, I mean they were shocked when they saw the situation there. The situation was terrible, it was raining and people were sitting outside without blankets."[17] The moving of people from comfortable communities to new and unknown places, which usually had worse conditions than their previous homes was a sure way to foment dissatisfaction in the children of these families.

Sometimes less consequential issues led youths towards politics. One in particular remembered the influence of sports and the sports boycott of the early 1970s that got him involved in politics. With activities such as sports playing such a

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[15] Interview with Msimanga.

[16] Interview with Petane.

[17] Interview with Thumdezwa Booi, Interviewer unknown.

significant role in the lives of the youth, it is not surprising that this issue became his training ground. He recalled the issue of non-racial sport being in vogue at the time, and noted, "So that came with a lot of politics in fact, because we began now to see in a practical way, defiance of all these...measures and acts of the apartheid acts and all...We had a very good slogan, which was saying..., 'No normal sport in an abnormal society.'"[18] In these ways, some basic issues surrounding the lives of the youth found expression later on a larger scale in the politics of the country itself.

Another hotbed of politicisation was the school. Many students who didn't know of politics before getting to school began to explore and learn about the situation in which they found themselves. Some who had attended more progressive schools found their circumstances different from the norm. One woman recalled that she went to a multi-racial boarding school, and then transferred to a township school. She noted, "Well things were quite different then at that school because we were used to mixing with all the races...We also had quite a hard time there because of this problem of ours that we are used to mixing really with everybody and all of a sudden we find ourselves exposed to all kinds of laws and things...well it was not easy to adjust."[19] This change in circumstances helped her realise that there were different ways of doing things than those that were done in the townships. Others discovered politics through their teachers, particularly history teachers. One man remembers two dynamic history teachers who influenced his ideas.

> The man who was teaching us history then was a very articulate and a dramatic person. He would start a battle to your mind and dramatise the whole scene...At the end of the day the British, because our fighting...was not with the Boer boy it was the British themselves that

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[18] Interview with Lerumo Kalako, Interviewed by Lynda von den Steinen.

[19] Interview with Gloria Meek, Interviewed by Hilda Bernstein.

> we were fighting. Superior... arms, military formations, military science, they were quite superior but we were putting our resistance there, fighting very fierce and hard. And after each battle, they would gain ground, they would capture certain lands. You know we fight back, we try to recapture those, they would again defeat us in battle, gain some more. So one's knowledge then was a little bit advanced by knowing that well, we are living the way we are living because we had been defeated in this battles...I was [a] history student at high school taught by...another dramatic teacher. When we were learning about the French Revolution, it had then you know came with many answers and to that information that we were having that it is possible for people [to] mobilise, organise and rise against whatever system that they are sick and tired of... As small groups we were beginning to study these things very, very serious. Try and see whether there couldn't be any solutions to our problems as the French had done.[20]

Others also remembered their history teachers. One girl recalled that they learned history from a good teacher, who would explain things to them in details. Then in and out of this history class, they would read banned books and pass them around, and this inspired them.[21] Some had more negative experiences with their teachers, but found politics through the experiences nonetheless. One woman remembered,

> When I went to high school, I went to Vlakfontein Technical High where two-thirds of the teaching staff was white and most of them were Afrikaner, only a few were English-speaking, so they were from the SADF, they had this mentality in them that they will deal with us and all that. And looking at the South African situation, for a white person, an Afrikaner for that matter, a real Afrikaner, to come and teach at the black school, it shows that they are the rejects because if they were good, they wouldn't have come to our school...You are in this situation where apartheid is seriously practised right inside the school yard. For instance they had a white staff room, catered for by the school and there was an old black man cleaning it, it was very clean and there was a black staff room which looked like a toilet, you know. And that thing affected us.[22]

Other young students found themselves frustrated by their future prospects. One man related,

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[20] Interview with Petane.

[21] Interview with Tsidi Mhlambo, Interviewed by Lynda von den Steinen.

[22] Interview with Gwanamakuru.

> As a young man, I would have liked to advance myself so that I could secure myself a desirable future. But the question I had to ask myself was what were the prospects? This is the question that brings about frustration bordering on desperation to a great majority of young blacks. I knew that I could not be what I really wanted to be if in the opinion of the powers that be, such an occupation was unfit for blacks. That is to say if I wanted to be a pilot, having the necessary intelligence and ability, I still needed a further feature before I could qualify. That is, in order to be a pilot I would have to be a white man.[23]

Government restrictions on young black people usually won the government more frustrated adversaries than complacent citizens.

Some of the youth from this generation also found politics through their family connections. Many had parents, grandparents, or extended family who had been involved in resistance in earlier years. One boy who grew up in Athlone, Cape Town, had a family in the UNITY movement. Occasionally his home served as a safe house for family members hiding from the police. As a young child, he knew not to say a word regarding the fugitives living with them. He would listen to the news and notice that the way life was did not conform to the morals of his family. By the time he was 11, he wrote a letter to UNESCO asking them to, "take me out of this place to somewhere without the racist terror of South Africa."[24] Others had family members who had spent time in prison for their activities in the early 1960s. One recalled, "My father was politically involved. He belongs to that detachment of the 50s and he was arrested during the 1960, early 1960s and he spent some time on Robben Island, about 3 years and he came out round about 1968...I was six years old then. So throughout my upbringing he used to not hide his political beliefs and the way he...his world

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[23] Excerpt from Naledi Tsiki's statement to the court, from Benson, ed., p. 70.

[24] Interview with Chalmers Nyombolo, Interviewed by Lynda von den Steinen.

outlook."[25] Another related, "I lived with my grandparents and my grandfather had a big influence on my political development. During his time he was the president of the ANC in the Western Cape as well as a member of the SACP and SACTU."[26] Another man cannot remember when he first became involved in politics: "There's no particular period where I can say I began to get particularly active. I come from an ANC family, both my mother and my father."[27] In this way, family influence often played a part in the politicisation of these young people.

The early 1970s

For those who did not discover politics at this early age, as well as for those who did, the early 1970s were a period of great change and burgeoning resistance to the apartheid government. The first half of this decade led many less aware young people to become newly politicised and saw those who already had political leanings develop their ideas further. A wave of strikes across the country, the rise of Black Consciousness and its related organisations, and student protests at many universities brought the realities of the situation in South Africa and the possibilities of challenging it to the forefront of many young minds. The independence of Angola and Mozambique in 1974 further brought the possibility of successful resistance to the attention of the youth. Long before the Soweto uprisings, many young South Africans were beginning to become involved in politics in earnest.

The workers' strikes in the early 1970s were not mentioned by many ex-MK soldiers as a direct influence on their political awareness, but they definitely provided

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[25] Interview with Zola Tyikwe (Vincent Madlala), Interviewer unknown.

[26] Interview with Thamsanqa (Thami) Ngwevela, Interviewer unknown.

[27] Interview with Mongezi Stofile, Interviewed by Hilda Bernstein.

an important component of the re-emergence of resistance to the government. With strikes hitting every big city in South Africa, most saw their results in the adults staying at home, and noticed that this was a new element in the recent political trends in the country. Baruch Hirson notes in his book, Year of Fire, Year of Ash, that the long period of industrial peace in the 1960s gave way to large scale strikes in many industries, starting in Durban in 1969 and continuing until the outbreak of the Soweto uprising in June of 1976. Many of the strikes gained concessions from both their employers and the government, but as the wave gained momentum, they were more often met with fierce repression on the part of the police and the government. Some of the student organisations were involved in the strikes, providing support for the workers, and black consciousness did win some workers into its folds.[28] If nothing else came to the youth from the strikes, they would have seen that it was possible to win on some issues, but for those that didn't have clear memories of the Sharpeville massacre in 1960, it also brought home the point that the police were ready and willing to suppress resistance with brute force.

The Black Consciousness movement was a powerful ideological force during this period, particularly among students. While it achieved little as far as political activism is concerned, and largely disintegrated in the face of the Soweto uprisings, the ideas embraced by the movement found their way into the consciousness of the majority of the youth who came of age in this period. Largely supported by university and school students, the movement and its principles did not find much support from other parts of the community, except from those who were touched by its outreach programs, although it did attract some of the more intellectually inclined black

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[28] Hirson, Baruch, Year of Fire, Year of Ash- The Soweto Revolt: Roots of a Revolution?, London: Zed press, 1979, chapters 7 and 8.

professionals. John Kane-Berman identified three main thrusts of the Black Consciousness philosophy, namely 'psychological liberation', 'the weaning of blacks away from dependence on whites', and the unity of 'all black people in South Africa, including Indians and Coloured people.'[29] The first principle was a reaction to the fact that through long term oppression of the black population, they began to see themselves as inferior to the whites. As mentioned above, some black children would wish to be white, as the white people were the ones they admired for their status in society. The same woman who once told her mother she wanted to be a white man when she grew up (see above) was just entering her teen years at this time and she remembered, "Everyone was becoming aware, Black Consciousness was spreading. I like it because it made you to be proud of your colour." She also noted that it made people react against things like skin lightening cream and made them come to believe that "black is beautiful."[30] The second principle of moving away from dependence on whites was largely focused on providing black leadership rather than white, as is best illustrated in the creation of a black student organisation, the South African Students' Organisation (SASO) rather than remaining a part of the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS), a largely white-led organisation. One student active in this period noted,

> You know during that period black consciousness was popular in the township and of course it was sort of to try and conscientise especially students to try and understand what role they're going to play in society. We shall not be submissive especially to whites as it is known as blacks we've been oppressed and segregated by the apartheid regime... It was during that period especially during the 70s when most of us started to realise what is important is to try and help in black

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[29] Kane-Berman, John, Soweto: Black Revolt, White Reaction, Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1978, p.103-4.

[30] Interview with Msimanga.

> organisations like for instance trying to form civic associations where we can try to conscientise our people about their plight.[31]

Some of the students got involved with Black Consciousness oriented community outreach programs, some of which focused on cultural activities and sports, while others worked to bring services to the communities themselves, such as health clinics and legal advising. One young medical student remembers being involved in clinics in the townships during this period.[32] The final objective of uniting people under a common label of 'black' didn't really see results until the uprisings themselves, particularly in Cape Town, but laid the basis for co-operation between the African, Coloured, and Indian communities that would become more noticeable particularly during the township revolts of the mid-1980s.

Many black student organisations came into being during this period. One of the most popular was the South African Students' Organisation (SASO) which was created in 1969 as something of 'an amalgam of already existing elements'.[33] This organisation was one of the main initiators of the community outreach programs mentioned above. The South African Students' Movement (SASM), originally based in the Transvaal but eventually gaining support in other parts of the country, was also a widespread and well-supported organisation in this period. SASM particularly focused on providing discussion forums for the youth. Many ex-MK soldiers went through discussion groups connected to SASM which led to their further exploration and understanding of political issues. Both of these organisations were mentioned by many people who spent these years in universities and schools and had been involved

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[31] Interview with Naphtal Manana, Interviewer unknown.

[32] Interview with Ayanda Ntsaluba, Interviewed by Wolfie Kodesh.

[33] Brooks and Brickhill, p. 73.

in them and politicised by them. Other student organisations were also present, such as the National Youth Organisation (NAYO) and its regional branches, which was also remembered by some of the youth from this period.

Two particular campaigns launched by SASO made a large effect on some of the students at this time. The first is referred to as the "May Revolt" which took place at the Turfloop University in 1972. Confrontations between students and authorities had been occurring at the beginning of the year, and sparks flew in April when Onkgopotse Tamothibi (Abraham) Tiro gave a graduation speech there. He openly criticised the black education system and the government and challenged the graduates actively to work against the system rather than working within it. One youth from this period recalled attending the graduation as his sister was one of the graduates, and points to this speech as one of the first moments he became aware of politics. He recalled that all the way home for three hours, the adults discussed the speech, thought it would put everybody in trouble, and anticipated an outburst of unrest. He had trouble understanding why they were all so negative about the speech when it had been hugely popular and got more applause than any other.[34] The adults were right about one thing: it did lead to unrest. Tiro was expelled, and a group of 1,146 students who protested his expulsion was also expelled. This led to a boycott of lectures at several other schools in the country. Hirson explained the ramifications of the boycotts: "As a result of the wave of boycotts, students were suspended, staff members resigned, bursaries were suspended, and hundreds of students just left the universities."[35] Many of the students who belonged to SASO or the Student Representative Committees were told not to come back to the universities.

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[34] Interview with Makwetla.

[35] Hirson, p. 87.

The other key campaign involving SASO showed the great influence of international events on the students inside South Africa. In 1974, the organisation called for rallies to celebrate the liberation of Mozambique, which came about, with the liberation of Angola, when a coup in Portugal toppled the government in power. This coup is largely attributed to the huge expenses the Portuguese government accrued due to the guerrilla warfare waged by the liberation movements in the two countries. SASO called for "Viva FRELIMO" (FRELIMO being the Mozambiquean liberation movement) rallies to celebrate the independence of Mozambique. This was an exciting moment, as this was the first neighbouring country to achieve independence through a liberation struggle and guerrilla war. Meetings for this organisation were banned for the crucial week, but at Turfloop university the students gathered under the auspices of the Student Representative Council (SRC) and held their rally. Hirson explained,

> Twelve hundred students gathered for the meeting, but were ordered to disperse by a force of 82 policemen, equipped with guns, gas pistols and police dogs. Assaults by the police and stone throwing by students, attacks on two white members of staff and two white technicians, and the arrest of two students ended the day... The action lasted for over a week, but was ended just before the college authorities could issue an ultimatum. Students returned to preparations for the examinations which they were not prepared to forego, and their arrested comrades remained in police custody.[36]

Large scale arrests and detentions of SASO and Black Consciousness leaders at this time led to a weakening of the movements which never regained their strength, but their influence continued to be felt and those touched by their ideas did not turn back from the political road they had undertaken. John Kane-Berman notes,

> The liberation of Mozambique and Angola and the guerrilla wars being waged in Namibia and Rhodesia are likely to have had an impact on a

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[36] Hirson, p. 90.

> fairly wide cross-section of blacks, firing them with the expectations of major change... Moreover, to the extent that black South Africans saw the withdrawal of South African military forces from Angola as a sign that white power was not invincible, this too would have had an important psychological impact.[37]

The state of regional political affairs made this generation ripe for action and, in some ways, positive that their efforts could make a difference, while still having little doubt of the might of the South African regime and the repression with which their efforts would be met.

The Soweto Uprisings

16 June 1976 saw the beginning of a two year long uprising that would become a turning point in South African history. On this day, unarmed African students marched through Soweto to protest the imposition of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in their schools and were met by police, who proceeded to cut them down with bullets. This was followed by a long drawn out spate of fights, protests, boycotts, stay-aways, and general unrest throughout South Africa. The government's response to the resistance was not a total surprise, as they were known to put down protest with great force and little mercy, but the nature of the event was made more shocking by the fact that the people being shot this time were only school children. The youths' response to the repression was unprecedented, violent, and often fearless.

The uprising was not an entirely spontaneous event. As we have seen, there were many influences in the years prior to the uprising. In 1976, there was a series of school boycotts and student meetings protesting this same issue. The government had decreed that all African students at a certain level in their schooling would have to learn mathematics, social studies, geography and history in Afrikaans. Many students

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[37] Kane-Berman, p. 106.

didn't speak the language, and many teachers had the same problem. One girl who was active in school politics at the time explained, ""Just imagine trying to learn maths or history in Afrikaans, it was just like learning it in Greek or something."[38] Furthermore, Afrikaans was seen by the students as the language of oppression, being imposed on them by the oppressors themselves. Another girl noted, "They wanted us to learn history in Afrikaans, can you imagine trying to say a year in Afrikaans? Trying to say 1966 in Afrikaans? And the history they taught us was distorted. They would teach you about Shaka, they made me hate him. They make you hate your own history and heroes and not to like yourself or the next person who's black." Whatever the reasoning, this issue made the school children come out in force to reject this government imposition of the language on their studies. They finally decided to organise a huge march to protest, and met their fate at the hands of the police.

When the police opened fire on the students, they were not met by the terrified fleeing of the past generations. The students grabbed anything at hand and hurled it at the police. They then went on a rampage against anything in the township that belonged to the government. Schools were torched, beerhalls burnt down, administration buildings destroyed, vehicles and shops attacked, and police stoned. Kane-Berman reported that in the first month or so of the uprising,

> Country-wide it was reported that more than 100 buildings belonging to the Boards were damaged or destroyed, along with 250 bottle stores and beerhalls, 170 shops, 25 clinics, eight banks, about a dozen libraries, and a score of post-offices, as well as smaller numbers of hotels, cinemas, clinics, churches, community halls, magistrates' courts, and petrol filling stations. The number of police and other vehicles burnt ran to several hundred, which the Public Utility Transport Corporation (Putco) which operates township bus services, also suffered heavy losses. One-third of its Reef fleet of 926 vehicles was attacked...Commercial vehicles belonging to white businesses

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[38] Interview with Msimanga.

> were another target of attack...Numbers of black-owned shops in the township were also attacked although the proportion was small...Schools were one of the main targets of attack.[39]

One girl who was involved in the uprisings explained when they attacked non-government establishments, such as people's shops and homes, they only targeted people who were not sympathetic to the students.[40] The school boycott continued off and on until 1978, and many students never returned to school at all. As news of the police action in Soweto reached other parts of the country, the uprisings spread. Throughout the next two years, unrest continued intermittently in most of the major cities of the country, except Durban, which experienced very little unrest. Some of the rural areas and smaller towns also joined in the uprisings.

The uprisings were characterised by many new elements when compared to periods of unrest from the past. The first and foremost was the age of the participants. In the past, protest and resistance rested largely in the hands of adults, but this period belonged to the youth. Determining the exact ages of participants is very difficult, but John Kane-Berman comes up with some suggestions,

> As far as the ages of participants in demonstrations are concerned, it is possible to get only a rough picture, based on press reports giving age breakdowns of people killed, admitted to hospital, or brought before the courts. Of 1200 people in both urban and rural areas whose ages were obtained in this way in 1976, it emerges that 44 percent were 13-16 years old, 49 per cent were 17-23 years old, and seven per cent older than 24....In the Cape Peninsula, half of the 97 people killed (92 of them by the police) were aged between 11 and 20...Many very young children took part in demonstrations, and several were shot dead. The [South African] Institute [of Race Relations] identified twelve children below the age of eleven who died.[41]

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[39] Kane-Berman, p. 19-21.

[40] Interview Mhlambo.

[41] Kane-Berman, p. 7.

The ferocity and violence of the uprising were also unseen before this time. The youth were not cowed as their predecessors were by the might of the police force. An article in the *Financial Mail* from the time wrote, "A new generation has now grown up. Unlike many of their parents, who have developed an attitude of fatalistic resignation to second-class citizenship, these younger men and women are impatient, radical, militant, brave and proud."[42] As time went on, they adapted to the conditions by bringing water and wet rags to the demonstrations to fight the tear gas of the police, and by using dust bin lids as shields from the police bullets. They innovated weapons from everyday materials, using petrol bombs, stones, and some brand new inventions like tennis ball bombs, "produced by injecting petrol under pressure into a tennis ball using a syringe, then dipping the tennis ball into petrol and balancing it on a ledge or on the floor of the building to be burnt and lighting it. The pressure inside the ball as it burnt sent their bomb rocketing around bouncing off the walls, and despite the small size often produced better results, according to one of our informants, than the usual bottle-encased petrol bomb."[43] Tires were also filled with petrol, set alight, and rolled down hill towards the police.[44] Anyway one looked at it, the uprisings marked a dramatic change in the political situation in South Africa.

The fearlessness and militancy of the youth in the face of such brutal repression had many reasons. It could be put down to the excitement of youth or the horrible conditions of the townships among other things. However, one of the main reasons was the fact that so many of these young people had grown up in a time of defeat. Their parents and leaders had been jailed or terrorised into acquiescence, and

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[42] Quoted in Kane-Berman, p. 106.

[43] Brooks and Brickhill, p. 153.

[44] Brooks and Brickhill, p. 153.

in their memories, their elders seemed to have given up, sold out, and fallen into acceptance of their lots as black people in South Africa. Many of them looked on their elders scornfully, and had sworn that they would not give up as easily as their parents had. A newspaper report from the day before the shooting relates, "Many children have lost respect for their elders. They see us as people whose dignity and pride has been hurt and who have seemingly lost the will to resist injustice."[45] This observation was an astute one. One girl later explained,

> Our parents are prepared to suffer under the white man's rule. They have been living for years under these laws and they have become immune to them. They agree to them whether they are right or wrong. They refuse to co-operate with the new generation when they plead with them for co-operation... Our parents lack unity and believe in the ethnic group laws that the white man in imposing on us. They despise each other and call one another names that are degrading. The future generation has no more confidence in them any more because they have not objected to the unfavourable laws, thus the yoke automatically falls on the future generation.[46]

Bricks and Brookhill defended the parents' attitude, "The imposition of Bantu Education was bitterly resisted. But this resistance was largely unknown to the school children of 1976, many of whom believed that their parents had quietly capitulated to the government's will. Yet the parents would not have responded so readily and positively as, in the main, they did to the school students' struggles in 1976 if they had not lived through similar battles in their own day."[47] In their own way, many of the youth recognised that the elders were not all against them. The same authors note,

> The rejection by black youth of the moral authority of the older generations... does not extend to a political repudiation of previous generations. On the contrary, with the exception of a few pretentious

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[45] *The World*, 15 June 1976, "Need for cool heads over language row," from Ndlovu, Sifiso Mxolisi, The Soweto Uprisings: Counter-memories of June 1976, Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1998, p.33.

[46] Kane-Berman, p.125-6.

[47] Brooks and Brickhill, p. 34.

> remarks, the spokesmen of the school student movement have by and large referred to the imprisoned leaders on Robben Island and others in exile with respect, and have indicated that they felt they owned much to their predecessors in the struggle.[48]

Whatever their opinions on the subject, the generation gap was real, and caused many tensions between the older adults and students in the townships.

Some were discouraged by their elders from participating in politics. This was not just their parents' own fear, but their fear for their young children and knowledge that participation could find themselves childless. One man remembers his family's attitude towards politics. His father had been arrested and send to Robben Island, and they used to tell him, "You see, you'll end up in prison. You'll follow your father, that's what you're going to do."[49] Another recalls his mother getting upset if he sang 'Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika' [the African national anthem, often used as a protest song], as his mother said it would get him in trouble.[50] But for all the discouragement offered to them, the students refused to be swayed. One girl remembered that her father died on June 16, and she was expected to stay at home for the funeral and for mourning. She however, was caught up in the events and refused to. She remembers arriving home around 12:30 at night, and being confronted by her mother,

> I was so dirty, I was filthy, my white shirt was black. And my mom asked, called me in the bedroom, and she says to me, 'my child, can you stop what you're doing for a minute? Especially for now until we bury your father? From there you can continue.' And I said, 'Okay mom, I do understand what you're saying, but can't you allow me to continue now? Because I think my dad knows exactly, he died knowing what was happening already, that children cannot stand it. If you parents could not take it up any longer, or you couldn't finish your business, we are going to finish this business for you.' And my mom started looking at me, and says to me, "But you'll die.' And I say,

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[48] Brooks and Brickhill, p. 104.

[49] Interview with M. Stofile.

[50] Interview with Binda.

> "Okay if I die, the military will have died already. Can you see how do I look? Then the military will have died. They won't be the only one and I won't be the only one who's died, so many, and they're still going to kill us.' And my mom was looking at me, she never cried, she never said anything.[51]

As the uprisings went on, and as the students began to organise larger scale protests, stay-aways, and boycotts, it became almost common that the children would find themselves instructing their parents. Kane-Berman wrote that, "One story had it that during one of the stay-aways a child had said to her father: 'Daddy, we are going to burn the beerhalls because we want you to stay quietly at home today. You mustn't go and get drunk.'"[52] Throughout this period, the traditional roles of parents and children were often reversed, as the youth took the initiative to further the struggle and the parents often found themselves lagging behind. The generation that emerged from these events were more assertive, independent, and self-motivated than any that had come before. They would provide a rich pool for MK to draw from.

Being a part of all of this caused many people to find politics. One man, who was 14 at the time of the uprisings recalled,

> Like any 14-year old, we were naïve but the situation forced us to mature much faster than we would have, facing bullets everyday of your life, teargas about all the time. I remember we use[d] to joke that if we have not smelled or seen teargas for a week, something was wrong- breathing clean air for two days. Things like that made one mature very quickly. We started reading books, we got politicised almost overnight and I think because of that, students played an invaluable role.[53]

Police actions against the students also played a large role in politicising the youth. Hirson relates one instance in which, "Pupils of a school that had been undecided

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[51] Interview with Msimanga.

[52] Kane-Berman, p. 19.

[53] Verbatim Statement of Njabulo Nkonyane- December 1995, in Ndlovu, p.44.

joined the demonstrators after they witnessed the police in action."[54] Many of the young people who would go on to join MK pointed to the uprisings as the point at which they became involved in politics.

It wasn't only Soweto's school children who were affected by the situation. Some others found politics from the uprisings as well. One young woman, who was a university student at the University of Fort Hare at the time, returned home for the June holidays and became emotionally involved in the events. She found that people she knew had been shot, and some of them had died. Through she hadn't been involved in politics before this, that was enough to involve her deeply.[55] Another man who was working at the time recalled seeing the cowardice of the police attacking the students, and seeing a student he knew shot in the back by the police. He notes that this is what got him involved in politics.[56] Another man, in his statement to the court when being tried for terrorism explained how he had taken no interest in politics until the uprisings,

> As I saw the situation with my own eyes, the police attacked, shot, killed, wounded and seriously injured many scores of young black people, mainly school children who were involved in nothing more than peaceful protests...After the children were dealt with by the police in this brutal fashion, there was a wave of bitterness and hatred with spread through Soweto like wildfire...I became more and more depressed and I decided that the best way out was to ask for a transfer to a place outside Johannesburg...I tried to take the easy way out, that was to get a transfer but it did not work...In Soweto it was like living in a prison which was a battleground. It was relief to get away from it during the day, to go to work, and it was hell to go back there at night. The last straw happened on 24 October 1976. I attended a mass funeral for a young black man who had died whilst in detention by the security police. His name was Jacob Mashobane. Hundreds had gathered around the graveside where his coffin had been laid and even as the soil

[54] Hirson, p. 228.

[55] Interview with Jumaimah Modiakgotla, Interviewed by Wolfie Kodesh.

[56] Interview with Mziwonke Qhabumfana, Interviewed by Wolfie Kodesh.

> was filling it up, amidst the singing of a hymn, several cars drove up, the vigilantes of 'law and order' again, I have no doubt acting under instructions from their 'bosses', alighted from these cars and triggers were pulled. People scattered, running for dear life whilst others were brought down lifeless, some dead, some wounded. Those who managed to scale the cemetery fence were gunned down by a contingent that had stationed itself outside the cemetery. When the crowd had scattered, myself and a few remaining ones were forced at gunpoint to carry the dead and injured into carts and vans nearby... After this funeral I went to work on the Monday. I left work that morning and never returned. I decided to commit myself fully to the cause of the black people.[57]

However they came across it, whether they were a part of the original demonstration in Soweto, joined in later in another place, or simply witnessed the events, the uprisings led many people into the political arena, and many later found themselves joining MK to continue the struggle that had escalated from that day in June 1976.

The Generation of the 1980s

The people who found their way into MK in the 1980s were largely influenced by the same things as the Soweto generation. Their lives often led them to similar conclusions as their predecessors. Many of those who left in the 80s were of the same generation and had been jailed for their activities, then upon their releases, simply picked up where they had left off, jumping back into the liberation struggle. However, there were a few differences in those who were coming of age in the 1980s, and their political development also differed. The early 1980s saw a great proliferation of community organisations, and the rise of the United Democratic Front (UDF), which pulled these together to unite them in the fight against the system. 1984 saw another spate of unrest that encompassed the whole country and brought new elements into the fight. While the Soweto uprisings were comprised mostly of students and young

[57] Issac Dontry Seko, from Benson, ed., p.75-6.

radicals, the township revolts of the 1980s encompassed an extensive cross section of society. The locally based concerns such as rent increases and corrupt local officials brought in people of all ages and both genders to the struggle. While in the past, the state could get away with blaming violence and resistance on a small group of radicals, agitators, and activists, it became clear this time that the majority of the population was participating in the struggle. The local issues that brought such diverse people to the struggle soon gave way to more political demands, as people came to believe that there would never be solutions to the local problems without a change in government to majority rule and universal suffrage. Youth and student organisations were joined in the fight by women's groups, sports clubs, community and civic groups, labour unions, and church associations.

Additionally, the creation of the UDF, which united organisations from all over the country, served as a co-ordinator and information service to unite local groups into a larger force. Originally created to fight against the introduction of the Tricameral Parliament, the UDF successfully campaigned to get people to boycott the elections, which had a minimal voter turnout which indicated very little support for the parliament that was elected. The UDF was unique in that it united anti-apartheid groups from all regions, backgrounds, and ideologies to work towards a common goal, blurring differences to create a "United Front" against Apartheid. As it was constructed of many different organisations, it was by nature difficult for the government effectively to ban the UDF as a whole. Even when the renewed state of emergency led to the banning and detention of most of the UDF leadership, it had by that time organised the townships down to street committees, which allowed them to operate with a minimum of formal leadership and supplied many lesser known leaders to work in their places. While the degree of organisation varied amongst different

areas, there were some, such as the Karoo, which were organised to such a degree that the Cradock Residents' Association (CRADORA) was able to claim, "If they decided at four in the afternoon to call a meeting for six that evening, by five everyone had heard about it through street committees, and by six the entire population of the township was assembled."[58] This impressive degree of organisation distinguished these revolts from struggles following the Sharpeville massacre in 1960 and the Soweto massacre of 1976. At the launch of the UDF, the Reverend Allan Boesak talked of the idea of all, here, and now, "three little words, words that express so eloquently our seriousness in this struggle...We want all our rights, we want them here, and we want them now."[59] With the unification of so many diverse groups in the fight against Apartheid, it became possible to co-ordinate efforts in a manner that could make a massive impact on the state. With the co-operation of trade unions, women's organisations, student groups, and churches, potentially isolated incidents grew into huge events. Paulus Zulu explains in Resistance in the Townships, "What starts as localised responses such as a protest against an increase in transport fares may develop into a labour strike, and, finally, incorporate a school or consumer boycott."[60] (Meer, 13) By bringing together people across race, class, age and gender lines, a mass movement was created unlike any ever seen in South Africa.

Many of the people who joined MK in this period came from these diverse organisations. One woman remembers, "I [was] most inspired by [the] women's movement. Like that time it was Women's Front and the UWO. They had a serious

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[58] Lodge, Tom & Nasson, Bill, All, Here, and Now: Black Politics in South Africa in the 1980s, South Africa: Ford Foundation, 1991, p.74

[59] Lodge, Tom & Nasson Bill, All, Here, and Now: Black Politics in South Africa in the 1980s,South Africa: Ford Foundation, 1991, p.51.

[60] Meer, Fatima (Ed.) Resistance in the Townships, Durban: Madiba Publications, 1989, p. 13.

impact on me because I used to admire the women and see that they're doing a good job...They're the ones who made me politically aware more than my family's problems."[61] Another man noted, "I was still at High School, Fiseka High School. I was involved with COSAS [Congress of South African Students]. And it was immediately after the formation of the Cape Youth Congress, CAYCO."[62] And a third woman was involved in several organisations at the time, "And after I've been active around '83, when we started to form the youth, Mamelodi organisation, I was in the ad-hoc committee of Mamelodi Youth and I was in the executive when it was launched.. But I felt that there's something lacking. Youth can't go alone...We discussed upon the forming of a women's organisation and I met with other leaders...And they said its necessary and then we formed [a] women's group in my area and I was very active."[63] Many others were involved in discussion groups that found popularity in this period, providing banned materials and exchanging ideas about them. These organisations brought the problems of the country down to the size of local and immediate problems, which attracted many members. They then focused their local resistance on a more national level. Many came to understand more about the state of the country, and were politicised in this way. This generation also came to politics in the post-Soweto uprisings period, and the shadow of that time followed them in whatever they did. Though some had not lived through this period, they still found strength and inspiration from those who had, and by learning of it, learned of the struggle to change the country.

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[61] Interview with Booi.

[62] Interview with Andeci Nguneni, Interviewer unknown.

[63] Interview with Gwanamakuru.

The Role of the ANC

Throughout this period from the Soweto uprisings to the township revolts of the mid-80s, to the eventual unbanning of the liberation movements and move towards negotiations in 1990, the ANC was present inside the country in different degrees. At some points they were able to guide resistance inside the country, while at others they were left mainly to release pamphlets and statements supporting those working inside. Their role inside the country during this period is difficult to characterise accurately. At some points they were little known and had little effect, while at others, flags, t-shirts, and posters supporting the ANC could be found in many townships. ANC members often worked through other organisations as well, which makes it very difficult to quantify their efforts within South Africa. Operations in the country by MK units will be dealt with in a later chapter, but this section will explore the degree to which the youth who would go on to join MK had prior contact or knowledge of the ANC, and how some of them were influenced by the ANC and its members.

With the devastating setback to the ANC's underground organisation with South Africa in the early 1960s, and the brutal repression that followed, by the 1970s the ANC was largely unseen within the country. The early 1970s did see some resurrection of the liberation movement inside South Africa, and some people joined and did some activities, largely in the field of propaganda and recruitment. But by and large, the youth involved in the uprisings had far more knowledge of the Black Consciousness organisations than of the national liberation movements. Many had no contact or knowledge of the ANC, or simply knew that it existed while not knowing what it stood for or its history. One man who left the country in 1975 knew of the ANC, but didn't know where to find them. "Because I had seen in Drum [magazine]

of that year, Oliver Tambo together with Samora Machel and then I concluded that the ANC should be in Mozambique." He asked the Swazi authorities to put him in touch with FRELIMO, who then passed him on to the ANC authorities in Swaziland.[64] Another youth who was 17 at the time of the uprisings explained,

> We did not know then what the liberation movements were standing for. We only knew that there was an organisation called the PAC, and there was also an organisation called the ANC. The president's house in Orlando West was just near to our school; we knew that the house belonged to Mr. Mandela. We had not seen him in the newspapers or anywhere, we only knew that he was arrested and tried for treason and stuff like that. We did not exactly know the history of the ANC or the PAC, we just knew that these organisations were somewhere in Zambia and we did not know what they were doing there.[65]

Another man remembered that his idea of the ANC at this time was very faint. He would sometimes listen to 'Radio Freedom', the ANC's radio station, but since the authorities often interfered with the signals, he only caught bits and pieces of the broadcasts. He knew that there was a call to arms from the ANC, but that's about all.[66] Because of this lack of knowledge, many of the students who would go on to leave the country, only learned about and got in contact with the ANC when they found themselves in exile.

Others already had ANC contacts inside the country. Some of the activists who had been arrested in the early 1960s were released in the early and mid-1970s, and though they usually found themselves banned, they often passed on their political ideas to the new generation. One young man remembered that during his holidays at

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[64] Interview with William Mbalosi, Interviewed by Hilda Bernstein.

[65] Verbatim statement of Paul Ndaba- December 1995, in Ndlovu, p. 19.

[66] Interview with Makwetla.

home in Cala, in the Eastern Cape, a leader in the ANC, a man named Ezra, got him involved in the organisation.[67] Another traces his politicisation to,

> My contact, accidentally of course, with a old, one old man who was an ANC member, he, he had already served his 12 years in Robben Island in the sixties and also he, his banning order and house arrest. But he was selling veg and fruits, you know, fruit and vegetables so I happened to meet him at his stand when I go to school, to talk to him, talk to me, he, he will read the paper, the English paper to me, about Zimbabwe, what was happening all those time. So those were my formative years of, you know, political consciousness in a really...direct...way.[68]

Another recalls living next door to a family with two brothers in exile.

> One was with the PAC. I think he died somewhere in exile some time ago. The other one was in the ANC...This was then obviously a political family...I became very close to the children by the way. And through their father's connections and their uncle's connections one then had an opportunity of getting a chance of reading banned literature. We would sometimes get [an] elementary kind of political education from the uncle himself.[69]

In these ways, many young people were guided in their discovery of politics by the older generation.

Some of the youth from this period also found themselves recruited into the ANC underground. One was approached by a stranger with whom he organised a meeting,

> He said to me, 'look, I've, look I've just a few instructions for you, I've been sent to you, your name...' told me my name, where do I live, what I'm doing, you know, that I'm in the SRC, I tried to ask him, 'how did you know?' He said, 'Look man, I have to tell you so that you'll believe me, well, I...' There are students who left earlier who are in, they were at university, these ones in Swaziland, joined the ANC, done their trainings, were sent back, so it's them who recommended me and then who gave them all the details. Well he said, 'no, what you'll have to do, you'll have to open up a cell of the ANC, and in that cell there's going to be also a, an MK cell that will be only solely dealing with

[67] Interview with Ntsaluba

[68] Interview with Kalako (LV)

[69] Interview with Ngqungwana.

> military matters. Your duty and your task will be to recruit, especially focusing on youth and students, eh, people for military training.' So one agreed, one was excited, meeting the ANC, all those things.[70]

Another recalled his recruitment, by an older man in the ANC, and he was told to form a core of ANC people within his medical school. They would deal with propaganda, distributing pamphlets and such, and also provided some back up for MK units inside the country.[71] In this way, many were recruited for and working with the ANC long before they went into exile.

In the 1980s, the mood changed. As the UDF became more prominent, the message and political views of the ANC spread. Although it's difficult to estimate the interaction between the two, it is clear that many of the main principles were the same. Funerals, rallies, and other events saw ANC flags flying high and people were generally more aware of the organisation and what it stood for. Many more of those who left in the 1980s had been involved in the underground before leaving the country than their Soweto generation counterparts. Some had been involved in the 1970s, served prison terms, and upon their release, continued their activities. Many were involved in study groups reading banned literature or listening to the Radio Freedom broadcasts. One recalled, "What I can say is that my early consciousness started in 1983- in 83 I mean...high school. I was doing Standard 8 at the time is when I was first exposed to some books, I mean history, I was doing history. So for the first time I came across the word ANC and I used to hear about the ANC on the radio and in the news see such things."[72] Another explained,

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[70] Interview with Kalako (LV)

[71] Interview with Ntsaluba.

[72] Interview with Mjoli.

> [It was early 1981] that I developed more interest in the ANC politics. When I got the banned literature like *Sechaba* and the *African Communist*. So I started to read widely about the ANC politics, its policies and its strategies and what the Freedom Charter and we used to get- I remember receiving a cassette from my friends- the January 8th statement of President Oliver Tambo which inspired me a lot. I should think that is basically some of those things that gave me an insight into what the politics of the ANC were all about.[73]

Also at the time of the township revolts in the mid-1980s, MK attacks had multiplied greatly, moving from a high of 56 in a year before 1985 up to 136 in 1985 and rising as high as 281 in 1989.[74] These attacks also inspired the youth and led them towards the ANC. In whatever way they found politics, eventually many of the youth from these periods found themselves motivated to go into exile and join the ANC there, to get military training with MK.

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[73] Interview with Tyikwe.

[74] Lodge, Tom, "Guerrilla Warfare and Exile Diplomacy: The African National Congress and the Pan Africanist Congress," in Lodge and Nasson, All, Here, and Now: Black Politics in South Africa in the 1980s Cape Town: David Philip, 1991, p.178.

Chapter 2
Leaving South Africa

Please put a gun
In this itching hand
For I almost tasted victory
When the enemy dazed...
But wordspears and stones
Cannot pierce
The heart of our pain

Somebody please place weapons
In these palms that just toyed with rattles
While lullabyes were hummed
For I too have heard songs
Rise from Angolan wars won
But their refrain
Will not drown
Some echoes from the homefront battle-field

With gun in hand
I could feel the fire of joy
For I would be one with many
Whose tears I must drain
Those tearing screams
From disenbowelled bodies
Must be hushed forever

Please let me bear its weight
On my growing shoulders
For although I'm only a cub
I have worn the armour of man
Knowing the deeds of years
That were planted
Have fertilized our land

With new dawn's energy
I must strengthen my sinews
For I have seen creatures stampede
And build icebergs on Liberty's path
But volcanic tides will charge
Making love to our own ploughs
Which must furrow for life[1]

[1] Mabuza, Lindiwe, "Soweto Wishes," in ed. Molefe, Sono, Malibongwe- ANC Women: Poetry is also their weapon, ANC, p. 42.

Introduction

The decision to leave South Africa and go into exile was difficult for those who made it. Choosing to leave behind everything and everyone they knew and go into unfamiliar places, uncertain circumstances, and be surrounded by unknown people was by no means easy. They left behind fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents, even spouses and children, as well as close friends. Some left school before finishing, and others left behind jobs that they and their families needed for survival. Many had never left their city or even their neighbourhood before, and would find themselves travelling all over the world. Their destinations were unknown. Their expectations rested on rumours or guesswork. And above all, they didn't know when or if they would ever return. Despite all of this, many chose to leave, and carried out their decisions with excitement, anticipation, and courage. A few would regret the decision they had made, while most wouldn't change their path if they had it to do all over again. This chapter looks at the reasons that led people to go into exile, the feelings they had about leaving South Africa, the paths they took out of the country, and the reception they received upon arriving in exile.

Reasons for Leaving

Every person's situation was different from every other's. However, many had similar experiences simply from living in the same places and going through the same set of events. The choice to leave the country always involved a myriad of factors, but most of those who left were able to point to one or two issues that pushed them towards the decision that they made.

One of the most common reasons for going into exile was that of problems with the police within South Africa. During the Soweto uprisings, police would often

round up the leaders of key students organisations, or even just those who were members of the organisations. Anyone in a demonstration could be taken to detention, and it was not unusual for innocent bystanders to find themselves pulled into the police stations as well. Once the police had people in custody, their main goal was to find out who else was involved, often through both psychological and physical torture. Many of the young people who were involved in the uprisings and eventually left the country spent some period of time in police cells under arrest or detention. One woman recalled this happening even before the uprisings began,

> We were continuously harassed, myself and my brother by the police, picked up, detained time and again, released, picked up, detained without being charged and then I only managed to go up to my second year at school because its supposed to be for three years, but I only managed to do my second year when I was detained again for my students activities and I was detained for six months in solitary confinement, that was in 1975.

During this period she suffered a miscarriage and has health problems to this day due to the treatment she received at the hands of the security police.[2] Once the uprisings took off, this tendency of the police simply became more common. Another youth recalls the situation at the time, "We were being shot at, students were dying, others in prison unnecessarily."[3] For those who had been through periods of detention or prison, there were no illusions about what their fate would be if they were caught again, and many were far happier to leave South Africa than to remain and find themselves back in police custody.

Those who were not actually detained suffered the constant threat of being caught. Many could not even sleep at home, and whenever their friends were picked

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[2] Interview with Gloria Meek, Interviewed by Hilda Bernstein.

[3] Interview with Caesarine Gwanamakuru, Interviewed by Hilda Bernstein

up, they held their breath, waiting for their names to come up under the harsh interrogations. One youth explains,

> Already before I left I had spent five months, just sleeping anywhere, including in cars in the street. Never going home. And the police were...maybe its OK to say they were very efficient because they were raiding not only my home, but my other relatives... And my mother was taken in for about 12 hours and I thought of all the horrible things that have been happening in prison, so when she was released I decided no, I should go.[4]

Another adds, "Those who have been arrested, they were used to show the police houses, where we live and so on and it is out of that that a month later, after spending some days not sleeping at home, sleeping with relatives or there and there that way, we finally decided that we should go out."[5] Many other people coming from this time period have similar memories of police harassment of themselves and their families and they often faced the choice of leaving or ending up in detention or prison. One explained, "I didn't want to become a [system] vegetable, what we used to call some of these people who are detained and tortured all the time, up to a point when you are totally useless."[6]

Above and beyond those who were scared of getting pulled in for activities they may or may not have been involved in was the situation of those who had been arrested and charged for activities. Some had been arrested for activities during the uprisings, and others had already been involved with the underground organisations inside and were caught for more serious offences. One man named Ayanda Ntsaluba was working for the underground at the time, and some of the people he worked with began to be pulled in by the police. He remembered that they brought one old man

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[4] Interview with Ribbon Mosholi, Interviewed by Hilda Bernstein.

[5] Interview with Michael Meli, Interviewed by Hilda Bernstein.

[6] Interview with Meek.

who had been working with him to identify him. He was very old, a peasant, and had never been to school. It was obvious that he had been beaten severely. The police took the old man to identify Ntsaluba, and the old man looked at him for about five minutes. The police thought they had him. Then the old man said, 'No, even in my wildest dream I've never seen this man.' Ntsaluba knew that the old man would be really punished when he got back to the police station, and in remembering this, knew that if he were to break, he would betray the old man's bravery, so he had to get out and continue this struggle. He ended up going out, and told the people who were remaining behind to give him enough time to get away, and then blame everything on him. As a result, many of the people who were being held by the security police were released.[7] Many people left the country while on bail, as they knew the consequences of staying would involve long sentences in prison, or a forced vacation on Robben Island. One noted, "It was only when they arrested me [for student activities] that they became aware that I'm working for the underground structure... And then we got a R1500 bail with all the restrictions of reporting daily to the police stations and all those sorts of things. But fortunately when we were out of prison we arranged to leave the country."[8] Others who were working in the underground saw their comrades get arrested, and managed to escape the net. In the eighties, things became even more dangerous for those involved. With occasional "disappearances" of activists, often due to kidnappings or assassinations, some faced the choice of leaving or being killed. One woman remembers, "I was told by some reliable sources that there's a plot to hijack me or to kidnap me... to kidnap me and assassinate me and that one was highly

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[7] Interview with Ayanda Ntsaluba, Interviewed by Wolfie Kodesh.

[8] Interview with Zola Tyikwe, Interviewed by Hilda Bernstein.

possible. One, is that I was really problematic in prison, I used to give them hell, and two, I was very active in the township."[9] For people in this situation, as painful as the choice to leave could be, the choice to stay could easily see them stuck in prison indefinitely or even dead.

Others who were involved did not have such strong outside forces pushing them to leave the country. However, they decided to do so all the same. Many were simply fed up with the situation inside the country. One man explained that his neighbour and a man at work had been shot by the police in separate incidents, and that at a certain point in the uprisings, the police would just drive around and shoot people. Bit by bit he started to feel that the situation was a mess, that there was no hope, and he couldn't find a reason to stay in South Africa.[10] Others had situations that pushed them over the edge. One girl's brother was shot and paralysed, which really was the last straw for her. She explained, "This anger was building up, not because of my brother, but by going to funerals, attending all these funerals. Ja. But what really made me go out was because of my brother and that's when I started telling myself that I must go and train and come back."[11] The pain of staying at home and watching friends, neighbours, and relatives being shot and sometimes killed, or thrown into detention or prison, was often too much for some people. These things gave them the motivation to leave the country, partly to escape the situation and partly to do something to change it.

Others, particularly those involved in the Soweto uprisings, just wanted to leave the country to obtain military training. One man explained that it was very

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[9] Interview with Gwanamakuru.

[10] Interview with Meshack Mochele, Interviewed by Wolfie Kodesh.

[11] Interview with Joyce Stofile, Interviewed by Hilda Bernstein.

fashionable to leave in the immediate aftermath of the uprisings. It was very exciting for him to think about leaving to become a terrorist. He didn't even want to become a guerrilla soldier, just a "terrorist."[12] Another had a slightly more developed idea of his intentions and motivations:

> The point of my departure was basically on the fact that for long years, our people were struggling through peaceful forms of struggle and this did not bring about the change which our people needed, which is freedom. And our people were daily killed, they were not defended. So I wanted to be also a member who will defend our people, arms in hand for the attainment of freedom. So I wanted to go and join the people's army and fight for our people's freedom. If need be I can lay my life for the freedom of our people.[13]

Whatever the political understanding, the desire to leave the country, learn to shoot, and come back to liberate the people was a strong one, and caused many youths to make their way to exile.

In the 1980s, the politics around leaving changed. People often found themselves discussing whether or not to leave the country, and whether the struggle belonged outside in exile, or inside the country. One woman recalled, "There had been a lot of discussion about the question of leaving the country. There was a hot debate as to how was it for the comrades to leave the country. Well some comrades felt that its not necessary to leave the country because the site of the struggle is here inside the country. If one leaves the country one is looked at as deserting or running away from the actual struggle which was inside the country."[14] Another man recalled a meeting where one person was arguing strongly against leaving the country, "I think his argument then was that the cornerstone of the struggle is inside the country and

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[12] Interview with Sipho Binda, Interviewed by Wolfie Kodesh.

[13] Interview with Zebulon Xulu, Interviewed by Hilda Bernstein.

[14] Interview with Mtombeli Tengimfene, Interviewer unknown.

[there is] no reason in fact for leaving the country. But then of course that was interpreted by some of us then as cowardice on the part of those who were saying they were not keen to leave etc., etc., and [we] went our separate ways there."[15] During this period, the general guideline was that once a person got to the point where he had no room to move inside the country, usually due to police pressure, then it was okay to go outside to train, as he couldn't contribute anything by staying inside.

Leaving the country was also seen as a way to motivate others to take up the struggle, particularly if the person leaving was a leader in the community. With the uprisings in the mid-1980s bringing so much more of the community into the struggle, rather than simply relying on the youth, older people started to change their minds about their roles in the fight. One woman explains,

> You know what really inspired me in the question of MK is that women inside the country were so angry about... or tired... sick and tired of the soldiers in the township, occupying the township, that they used to say, 'Caesarine, you know some of our brothers and kids went away in 76, they are not coming back. We are expecting them to come and kill these people, just have a look they are occupying the township. Now we want to go'... and I'm talking about grownups in [their] fifties, in [their] sixties, now want to go and join this MK. To go and fetch arms and fire these people as their mothers because it seems to me that they are not really serious, they are not prepared to come back and as their leader inside the country, you know that thing is sort, you must be exemplary, that's why I decided... I find that its necessary to be exemplary to people who are having confidence in you inside the country and all that, to go for MK and if its needs be, if the leadership feels that you can go back inside the country, go back and be exemplary, you know. Because mothers really are prepared to go for MK and come back and fight because they couldn't stand how kids were harassed, tortured and all that in front of them by this SADF in the townships.[16]

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[15] Interview with Lizo Ngqungwana, Interviewer unknown.

[16] Interview with Gwanamakuru.

Taking Leave of Home

Whatever the reasons for leaving home, the act itself was not an easy one. Most of the people who left home didn't tell anyone they were going. This was for many reasons, one being the fact that one's family could possibly talk him out of his resolve, and the act of going through goodbyes could also have this effect. One woman explained her choice of remaining silent, "I knew that if I tell...especially my mother, her tears would make me not to proceed with my decision, you see, so I just had to make that straight, just to go without telling them"[17] A more important reason was the security risk of telling people they were leaving, which could lead to their capture and arrest by the police, as well as the harassment of those who were left behind by the security police. It was generally better to have them be able to say, "I don't know anything," and mean it, than to leave them with important information about routes out of the country. Those who went through pipelines organised by the underground movements inside the country were particularly warned not to mention their flight to a soul.

Regardless of the reasoning, the majority of those who left did so without telling their families. One woman remembered the thought process she went through before deciding to leave,

> Well, I'm from a big family and not only a big family but a closely knit family which had never before experienced any disappearances or any loss [of] any member...of the family. So I was the first to leave. So that in itself was quite a problem. And there were lots of things that one thought about: whether I would be in a position to make it on my own without the support of my family, how will my family feel, how would my mother feel , due to my absence, how much will this influence...any sort of disintegration of the family?[18]

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[17] Interview with Elizabeth Matsemba, Interviewed by Hilda Bernstein.

[18] Interview with Tengimfene.

Another man who left during this period eloquently how it felt to leave. He explained that it was the most painful thing ever to have happened in his life. He had a strong emotional attachment to his family. Leaving was like going through death and being aware of it, choosing to do it. He couldn't tell them that he was leaving, but knew he'd never see them again, and was not sure if he'd come back alive. Even upon his return, he could never regain the attachment to his family. For instance, when someone dies, he doesn't react like he should, since he's already resigned himself to leaving them forever so many years before.[19] These emotional issues surrounding leaving home tortured many of the youth deciding whether to leave.

A few were actually happy to leave their families and homes behind, particularly when their family situation was not a happy one. One young woman, who had a different father than her other siblings and was treated badly as a result of this explained her feelings upon deciding to leave:

> So for my age I just told myself, no man, if I go its fine. Because its better... than to be at home. Because there are many stories, I must be beaten, I've done this, I've done that, nothing that is right I'm always doing. So I told myself that nobody needs me in my family. So even if I'm gone, who cares? It was my assumption then. So I just wrote a letter to tell them that, 'well I'm leaving, here are your clothes, here is your everything. I didn't leave with anything that belongs to you. I just leave with myself, which I think that its not important to anybody, because you don't like me, I'm not part of you, so it's fine. Maybe where I'm going, people will like me.' And if they don't, it's okay.'[20]

A very few were lucky enough to be able to say their goodbyes before leaving. One of these noted, "I'm one of those few people who were fortunate that I was very close to my mother. I could confide in her a lot so I asked permission in fact first from her... [I asked] whether she would like to see me as a mental wreck from John Vorster

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[19] Interview with Thabang Makwetla, Interviewed by Lynda von den Steinen.

[20] Interview with Weziwe Ncame, Interviewed by Lynda von den Steinen.

Square or should I go into exile and continue where Nelson Mandela and others left off, and she said, farewell, go well my son."[21] Even with permission and closure, it was still a horrible thing for most to have to leave behind everyone and everything they knew.

Taking leave of home without saying goodbye was often harder on those who were left behind than on those who left. Particularly during periods of action in the townships, such as during the Soweto uprisings, and again during the township revolts of the mid-1980s, disappearances were common. When a child disappeared, there was a horrible process of going from hospital to hospital, police station to police station, looking for them and hoping to find them alive. If a child were never found, many parents believed that he had been killed in the fighting between the township people and the police. Many didn't know their children were alive until as much as fifteen years later, and some who died while their children were still in exile never knew at all. One woman said, "My mother was so worried, she had been preparing for a funeral for a cousin, and when she came home at night, she was expecting me to open the door, but instead found herself knocking and knocking because all the kids were asleep. Those days it was terrible because if you don't see your child, you suspect that he might be killed, particularly because I was involved with the uprising."[22] A few managed to drop a message to their families soon after they left just so they wouldn't worry them, leaving a note with a sister or brother, dropping a letter in the post the day they left, or sending a letter from exile when first arriving there. However, once a part of MK, contact with families was not allowed, as it could cause serious security problems, as well as putting the people at home at risk from the security forces.

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[21] Interview with William Mbalosi, Interviewed by Hilda Bernstein.

[22] Interview with Thoko Thedorah Mavuso (Zukiswa Mindala), Interviewed by Wolfie Kodesh.

Leaving

The process of leaving differed according to many situations. Some people left legally or semi-legally, crossing through the border posts into other countries. Others utilised the so-called "Green border", when they climbed over border fences and swam rivers, to entering neighbouring countries illegally. Some went with the help of underground organisations or people who knew routes out, and others went on their own initiative, and found their own ways. Most went through Lesotho, Botswana, or Swaziland, though a few went through Namibia, and some travelled on aeroplanes to countries further abroad.

Those who left through recognised border posts did so in a number of ways. Some had travel documents through their work that allowed them to go into other countries. One explains what he did: "At that time I was working for Anglo- American Corporation as a switchboard operator and I used their offices to get the travel document and also get permission now and then to go to Swaziland for a week and so I had the pass."[23] Instead of returning when his week was up, he simply went into exile. Others had passports from the independent homelands, which allowed them to travel. Many of these had problems at the border, but made up stories to get them through. One woman who was jumping bail, having been caught at the same border with banned materials explained how she got through,

> So when I left South Africa, at the border the guy...the policeman at the border, its one of the people that had arrested me, and I recognised him, he recognised me. So he took my passport, went to an office and started making phone calls and he came back and asked me, when am I coming back? It was around Easter time, so I said, well I'm just going for the Easter holidays and I'll be back. So I had...I only had a small,

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[23] Interview with Mbalosi.

> sort of an overnight bag, so that's all I could carry, not to arouse any suspicions.[24]

Another man, who was travelling on a Transkei passport straight to Lusaka, Zambia (the independence of the bantustans made this possible) also provided a cover story,

> You had to state the reason why I mean what are you going to do there you see. And I mean the situation of Lusaka, I mean everybody knew then that when you go to Lusaka, maybe you're going to the ANC. No we had to lie, to say no, I'm a member of... I'm going to the meeting of the International Labour Organisation... I had some files with me to carry I mean... for the security to see that no this person is going on business of some sort. And they asked me when you are going to be back and I said 3 days you see. And I took a return ticket.[25]

In fact, the independence of the homelands or bantustans, which was one of the achievements the apartheid government were most proud of, provided the black South African with good opportunities to get official documentation through illegal channels, giving false names, dates of birth, and the like. This was good for getting people out of the country as well as for bringing them back in later. Particularly in the mid- to late- eighties, people remember getting Transkei passports to leave the country, often through Lesotho, a close neighbour. One woman explained the process:

> We have to organise some passports to Lesotho, and the only way that we can organise passport in Transkei is, is to try to stay there for some days and learn the language because what is happening, all of us are speaking Xhosa, but it's not the same, because you are coming from urban areas where the language is not the same. So we have to learn the language of Transkei and all that, which is not so much different, but its... a dialect more than a language. And also when you are going to take your passports, during the processes, there are some procedures that you must know who your chief, where do you stay and all those things, so we have to learn those things. And the only thing that we find, it was, those people were corrupt. And since we're female, so it was easy to get those passports, if we can just try and manoeuvre our way out. We've done that and then we got the passports after a month, staying there.[26]

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[24] Interview with Katleho Maloi, Interviewed by Hilda Bernstein.

[25] Interview with Nkosinathi Robert Mjoli, Interviewer unknown.

[26] Interview with Ncame.

These were some of the main ways of escaping South Africa through the legitimate borders.

Many others crossed into neighbouring countries illegally, generally finding their way to within a short distance of the border and then climbing the fence or crossing a river a couple of kilometres away from the border post, via the 'Green Border' crossing. Some trips were organised by the underground movements. One man who was involved in the ANC underground and was recruiting people to leave South Africa for military training and organising their passage out from the Eastern Cape in 1976 and 1977 explained the process:

> We had our sister cell then in Jo'burg. So what we were doing, we'd recruit people, prepare them, take them from here through train to Jo'burg, eh, because we used mostly trains, not cars, at that time...avoiding roadblocks. So when they arrived at Park Station in Jo'burg, the courier that side would be waiting for them, we'll just give them the Eastern Province Herald, and they will meet there on the other side, somebody will be standing, we won't describe what he's wearing...just whether one has a cap, this colour...you'll see him...with a Star newspaper...and the person will see them when they got out, they will go out and for instance and gather in a certain platform number, platform number so and so, with their newspapers and then he will come, he will see them, because eh, also he will be briefed that side, and pick them up. Then from Jo'burg to Swaziland."[27]

He estimates, "We used to send more than three or four trips a week; trips of ten, fifteen, five, three, to Johannesburg."[28] When asked about recruiting, he explained, "It was easy, you know, at that time because there were all these, the youth was very militant and students and most of the students and youth were running away from police, police harassing them. So people, everybody was looking for that, where do

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[27] Interview with Lerumo Kalako, Interviewed by Lynda von den Steinen.

[28] Interview with Lerumo Kalako, Interviewer unknown.

you join the ANC and what."[29] One man who was trying to find passage out at that time remembered, "Now I left PE [Port Elizabeth] at a time when an underground structure of the ANC was basically taking people out of the country... and there was a long queue in fact because there was quite an effective underground."[30] Many people travelled through this underground, the cell in Johannesburg, or other organised methods. Some recruits who couldn't find the ANC underground to go out found themselves travelling with PAC groups, intending to find the ANC once they had arrived outside of South Africa. One man explained, "When we got our final briefing, that I mean this is a PAC journey, by then, I said no, I'm pulling out. I wasn't aware that this was a PAC journey. Maybe there were better minds in fact that had convinced me that look, we are going with this trip, but when we reached Swaziland because this was the place that we had aimed for, when we reach Swaziland we then look for the ANC there."[31]

On these trips, generally transport would be arranged from whichever city they were in to the border of a neighbouring country. Then upon arrival within a short distance of the border, they would get out, go through the bush, jump the fence between the borders a good distance away from the border post, and arrive in the neighbouring country. Generally the person who had taken them to the border would drive through the border post on their own, and then pick the group up on the other side and take them to the place they were to stay. These trips were done at night, often leaving late at night and arriving in the next country very early in the morning. One girl who went out with the underground recalled some of the details:

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[29] Interview with Kalako (LV)

[30] Interview Lizo Ngqungwana.

[31] Interview with Mxolisi Petane, Interviewer Unknown.

> We left from Fort Beaufort to Queenstown. We left with a man that we don't know, I don't know even today, I'm still asking myself I wonder where is he and who was he. Because we didn't talk with him, the only thing that they said, they said we must take a bus from Fort Beaufort to Queenstown, and then when we arrive in Queenstown we're going to meet a man near, near the buses to Transkei, so we must not talk with this man, the only thing we can ask, 'How much is a bus to Transkei?' Then we just get in the bus, and then, when the, the bus driver will ask us about the, the fees for the bus, we tell him that we are waiting for somebody. And then he will know that its us because he was just moving up and down the bus to check for us and then that's the only thing that he'll know and then he's going to pay for us... When we arrived in Transkei, I think we arrived late round about one o'clock. And then he just took us in another house, talked with the people of the house and then he left. So we didn't even see him and we don't know who is he.[32]

They then obtained Transkei passports and were driven straight to Lesotho. Another woman remembered her trip into exile:

> The arrangement was that the combi will come at 11, 12 at night when people were sleeping. We weren't to tell anyone, bring very little, maybe a change of clothes, but no suitcases. Some didn't even get to bring that. I prepared the whole day, hid my things outside all day, so when the time comes, I can sneak out, take what I hid and go to the combi. They came at 12 midnight... I got in the combi, and knew some of the people there from the youth club. They drove us next to the Swazi border, and then we skipped, crossed the fence illegally. The driver had a passport, he was going to pass legally. He dropped us in the woods. We walked about 20 kilometres. And then we crossed, and were supposed to meet him on the other side. We delayed because of police patrols, and they must have seen us because they shot a warning, but we were determined to go forward, not backwards. Then the second shot was not a warning, so we crawled towards the border, determined not to go back. There were fourteen of us, two girls and the rest were boys. We managed but it took us long.[33]

Swaziland and Botswana were the most popular destinations for most of the people from the Johannesburg areas, with Lesotho being more popular with those from the

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[32] Interview with Ncame.

[33] Interview with Mpho Msimanga, Interviewed by Wolfie Kodesh.

Eastern Cape, Durban area, and Cape Town, but many crossed according to the plans they could make, rather than by which was the closest border.

Those who went through Swaziland had a double crossing to make due to agreements between the government of Mozambique and Swaziland, which forced the recruits to cross illegally into Swaziland, travel to the Mozambiquean border, and then cross illegally there again. The same woman who told of her crossing above continued her story,

> After a month, we moved from Swaziland to Maputo. It was the same procedure of crossing illegally. Duma took us across, he was so strict...I was so scared of walking in the dark at night, and I fell over, the fear of walking at night, and there were small rocks, you know, when you don't know the route, and you're just going behind, you know, and I fell over, and when I fell over I started laughing. He came back, shouting at me. 'Do you know that you're not supposed to laugh? Ntombi [Zulu for girl]? Hmmm?' He had a very deep Zulu accent, 'Hmm? You're not supposed to laugh. You know? You know that if you laugh, you're going to expose ourselves. Hmm? You must keep quiet. Quiet, quiet, keep quiet, do you understand?' I said yes. And it's dark, and we're walking, walking, and the way we're walking, it's like we're tip-toeing. And it's struggling, you know, it's a long journey, and we're tip toeing.[34]

The trips between the cities and the borders were often a very dangerous part of the journeys, particularly when police roadblocks were up on the main roads. One girl who left with a group of other girls recalled that they dressed up in head-scarves and jackets, so that if they were stopped, they would all look like old ladies and say they were going to a funeral.[35] Another group of girls dressed up as Zionist church women to avoid the police.[36] A group of boys who crossed into Botswana left their 'fancy township clothes' behind and dressed in old clothing in order to escape people's

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[34] Interview with Msimanga.

[35] Interview with Jumaimah Modiakgotla, Interviewed by Wolfie Kodesh.

[36] Interview with Tsidi Mhlambo, Interviewed by Lynda von den Steinen.

attention.[37] There were as many methods of crossing as there were groups that went across.

Many people did not have the assistance of the underground movements to help them plan their journeys and get across the border. They often left with very little information and following very general tips. One woman went with a few friends jumping the fence into Botswana at night,

> Of course it was frightening because there were some searchlights and the cars which were moving. But we managed to do it...[after we crossed], it was a long way. We were given the direction that if we go straight, we will come across Gaborone, but that was...it was not as they said. So we walked a long way until we came across the farm houses, you know the houses near the border. And then we got there and we talked to the people, we told them that we are South Africans. Then we lied, we told them that we came to Botswana to attend school there...Then we had to report to the local chief. After that we proceeded to the police station until they made contact for us with the ANC people.[38]

Another woman went all by herself,

> A friend of mine drove me to Mafikeng and I spent the night in Mafikeng and [at] four o'clock in the morning I crossed through Pietsane. You know the border is very wide and that time, they didn't have the manpower to man every inch of the way and where I crossed, the border is very liberal because you find the Botswana people were crossing, you know people were crossing back and forth, they did their shopping on our side and went back. So that's where I crossed. The river was not very deep, although it had rained the night before and the current was a bit strong. I was very scared. I was by myself...I didn't know where I was going. I was very frightened. And when I got to the other side, I wasn't even sure that I was already on the other side. But then after walking for something like five hours, I saw a building with the Botswana flag and that was a relief.[39]

In one way or another, the young recruits managed to get out of South Africa and found themselves in exile.

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[37] Interview with Michael Meli, Interviewed by Hilda Bernstein.

[38] Interview with Elizabeth Matsemba, Interviewed by Hilda Bernstein.

[39] Interview with Ribbon Mosholi, Interviewed by Hilda Bernstein.

Arrival in exile

Arriving in exile was an exciting time for all who had left. Many were hit by a wave of relief just finally to be outside of South Africa, where they had endured so much for so long. Indres Naidoo recalls arriving in Mozambique early one morning: "It was like for the first time in my life I was breathing. I'm free, I'm free, I'm free."[40] One woman found herself staying in an ANC safe house, and said, "Well, it was a sense of relief that now for the first time we could talk openly about the ANC we worshipped so much."[41] Another man had a bit more reserved reaction at his reception by the Basotho people, "It was very difficult. I felt both happy and helpless in the sense of being in hands of people I've never known, and my life depends on them, but also hopeful in the sense that there is support for what you are doing, they are not even South African, but are helping the struggle anyway."[42] Overall, the recruits who found themselves in ANC hands upon arrival in exile found a good atmosphere. One noted, "The manner in which we were received made one to feel good, it was a warm reception in a comradely manner. The older generation receiving us were excited about the young generation coming to help in the struggle."[43]

Not everyone was so happy to be outside though. One woman recalls, "I'm now in exile, the guys are telling us, now you're in exile, you can't go back because you know what will happen. I was beginning to regret leaving my mother."[44] Another

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[40] Interview with Indres Naidoo, Interviewed by Hilda Bernstein.

[41] Interview with Tengimfene.

[42] Interview with Binda.

[43] Interview with Solly Zacharia Shoke, Interviewed by Wolfie Kodesh.

[44] Interview with Modiakgotla.

recruit remembers that it was a very traumatic period of his life, being wanted by the police, his friends had been arrested, leaving South Africa, he was very emotional, but managed to keep the emotions in check. Only at night would he toss and turn with nightmares and wake up a lot.[45] One young girl of 16 was happy to be out, but desperately missed home. This was the same woman who was so happy to get out of a bad family situation explained above. She related,

> When I was in Lesotho I used to phone home and the only thing that I will say is 'hello'. And that is all. And I would just enjoy listening, different voices of people who are asking, 'Who is this person who is always phoning here and not...she's done it again, just put that phone...' And everybody is, you know, mumbling and talking and then I'll put it down and then the following day I'll do, I think I've done, I stayed in Lesotho for three months and that I've done that for three months. And they couldn't discover, sometimes I couldn't even say hello, just wait for another person to say, 'hello' then I just keep quiet and hold the phone, 'HELLO, who are you? Why are you doing this?' and then the other one they'd ask from the kitchen, 'Who is that one?' Then they'll say, 'No, we don't know,' I used to enjoy that. Because I would just think, if I could tell them, maybe they can come and fetch me and I don't want that, because I've taken my own decision, I don't want to go home.[46]

Everyone had different reactions upon arriving in exile, but overall was the excitement of seeing what would come next.

The Process

Upon arrival in the neighbouring country, there was generally a defined process for the recruits to go through. Some went completely through the underground and skipped this process, but this was the exception rather than the rule. Upon reaching the neighbouring country, whether Lesotho, Swaziland, or Botswana,

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[45] Interview with Lt. M.S. Mrubata, Interviewed by Lynda von den Steinen.

[46] Interview with Ncame.

one generally would go to the police station, or perhaps a government department, and tell them who he was, where he had come from, and that he wanted political asylum. Many who were wanted at home gave false names due to the high level of co-operation between some police forces and the security police in South Africa, particularly with the Swazi police. Others would apply straight to the United Nations for refugee status. Once one had applied to get asylum as a refugee, he was asked if he wanted to be put in contact with the ANC or the PAC. He would choose which one, and then be put into their hands and would leave to go to Zambia or Tanzania, or occasionally straight to Angola. One recruit recalls the routine she went through in Botswana: "I went [to the] police station and I went through the process. You know, you have to fill in forms, then declare yourself a refugee and they were very nice. Then they showed me where to get the bus to go to Lobatse. And in Lobatse I got a bus to Gaborone, and Gaborone, well, there were many South Africans there and some of my friends too were there."[47] Others had to spend time in the police stations. Another recruit who went through Botswana recalled that he was taken to the police station with his group and locked up. The floors were shining, very smooth and clean. It was very boring, and the food was bad. They didn't treat them like criminals, though, they let them go to the shop and get what they needed, but they slept in the prison, there was no point in running away. Some PAC and AZAPO people came around, but since they knew they wanted to join the ANC, they just stayed until the ANC representative came and organised for them to leave to Zambia.[48] Another man remembered going through Swaziland.

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[47] Interview with Ribbon Mosholi, Interviewed by Hilda Bernstein.

[48] Interview with Meshack Mochele, Interviewed by Wolfie Kodesh.

> I stayed almost ten months in Swaziland, But first we contacted the police...So we stayed in a police station, they went through our stories, our personal stories, background and what we wanted in Swaziland. Well, they even told us there are two political movements, which one are you to join? Well, me and my friends...well we cannot just come and say we want the ANC or PAC, we don't know about these things. But first what we want, we want refugee status then later we want to pursue our studies...In the end I went to a camp, a refugee camp...we met all sorts of South Africans...There were those who were for the PAC, those who were for ANC, so in the process we sat and listened and started finding out what is going on outside. Well ultimately I came to be more attracted to the ANC.[49]

The process in Lesotho was similar to that in Swaziland and Botswana. One woman and her friend went to the police station and declared themselves as refugees under false names. They noticed, "The first thing that struck us, the police, the manner of the police there was not so different from the police that we were used to here in South Africa. The way they were harassing us, pushing us around, asking a lot of funny and stupid questions...That was a great disappointment to us because we thought that in Lesotho, having been free for such a long time [they were] sure to be observing some standards that we were not used to here in South Africa."[50] They later found themselves taken to a refugee camp outside of Maseru. Eventually, through whatever route, the recruits would find themselves in the hands of the ANC.

⁂ Once with the ANC, there was also a process to go through. Generally this consisted of writing an autobiography and choosing whether one wanted to go to school or join MK. The ANC described the process to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission,

> On arrival, the recruits were welcomed by the official in charge and advised of the rules that would govern their stay in the reception area or centre by the person in charge...Recruits had to supply detailed information on their family and educational history, their reasons for

[49] Interview with Meli.

[50] Interview with Tengimfene.

> wanting to join the Movement, and details on the political activities in which s/he had been involved. Biographies also served as skills audits, and as a means of gathering valuable information of various kinds.[51]

These biographies were used to get an idea of each new recruit, as well as to weed out security agents sent by the South Africa Police to infiltrate the ANC. They also served as a method of obtaining information about the situation inside and about people there who were suspected to be informers. One recruit recalls that he had to go through these basic interviews, to give them his life story, and to tell them who he thought were informers at home.[52] A comrade who was working for the security department in Mozambique explained,

> It was my basic task to interview people who were coming from home and ...to interview them, to go through their biographies, to assist them in first and foremost in writing out their biographies and secondly to determine as their credibility...working very hard too to try and sift from that group... the people whose stories were not credible with a lot of loopholes and stories that were clear that they were actually made false stories so that we can be infiltrated by the enemy.[53]

Most recruits passed through this with no problems.

The other main question they were asked was whether they wanted to go to school or join the military. Many did choose the school option and were sent to study all over the world. Others had their hearts set on the military. Sometimes the people asking the questions would try to influence the recruits in their decisions. When they saw people who were very young, or well educated, or often if they were young girls, they would encourage them to go to school. One recruit remembered, "After three weeks under the ANC wing we were given a choice of education or military training.

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[51] ANC, "Further Submissions and Responses by the African National Congress to Questions Raised by the Commission for Truth and Reconciliation," 12 May 1997, p.111.

[52] Interview with Mrubata.

[53] Interview with Peter Motaung, Interviewed by Hilda Bernstein.

In spite of many attempts to dissuade me from taking the [former] option, I went to the camps because I had a lot of anger in me and I wanted to do military training."[54] Another recruit recalled her interview in Mozambique, where she was asked the school or MK question, "We said we wanted to go to MK. He said you are too young to go fight and we became very hysterical because that's what we came for. If we wanted to study we could do that in South Africa. We discussed, and the next day they asked us again and we said no we want to go to MK." [55] Indres Naidoo indicated why they sometimes discouraged people from joining MK with a story,

> I'll give you the case of point of three young 'so-called coloured' boys that came from the Cape. They were very, very young. And in fact it was heart breaking to see them going into military when they should really be in school. And I spoke to them. And I said to them, 'Listen chaps, you chaps should rather go to school than going into the military.' And they said, 'No, we have come here to get necessary training and to go back into the country.'... And of course all three went into training and the three returned into the country and two [were] killed and... one was captured.[56]

All were not so keen to go straight to the military. One woman remembered the peer pressure that put her in that position: "We were asked whether we still intend to go for military training or to go to school. I was almost the last one they interviewed and the group said we're still going for military training, and I felt that if I said I wanted to go to school then, it would be a betrayal."[57] Not all were encouraged to go to school, either. One recruit remembered that he wanted to go to school, but due to the fact that he had done some work in the early 1960s for the ANC, working with sabotage, they thought he should really use his experience to join the military. Eventually he

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[54] Interview with Thamsanqa (Thami) Ngwevela, Interviewer unknown.

[55] Interview with Mavuso.

[56] Interview with Indres Naidoo, Interviewed by Wolfie Kodesh.

[57] Interview with Modikgotla.

relented, convincing himself that it was better to do that and pay his own way, then to go to school and feel indebted to the movement forever.[58] Finally, the recruits were given 'pseudo-names', or 'bush-names', for security purposes, so they wouldn't be recognised.

The Conditions Outside

Most of the recruits who left South Africa had never been outside the country before. They went through several countries, and experienced many different places and situations. Some spent considerable time in certain places and came out with interesting impressions of the places they had been.

Many of the recruits had never been on an aeroplane before, which was often a daunting experience. One comrade recalled, "On the plane from Botswana, we starved ourselves until we got to Lusaka...we thought we had to pay for the aeroplane food and drink."[59] Another was terrified to be flying, "It was my first time in a plane, I couldn't eat, I was horrified."[60] And a third was not so sure of the quality of the aeroplane: "It was my first plane, and it was a very shaky old plane. It was a very scary experience."[61]

Many recruits went through Lesotho and had a chance to see a bit of the capital city area. One recalled,

> Well first and foremost...I had a problem, language problem in Lesotho. But I managed to get myself to the capital, Maseru [from the

[58] Interview with Chalmers Nyombolo, Interviewed by Lynda von den Steinen.

[59] Interview with Binda.

[60] Interview with Mavuso.

[61] Interview with Mochele.

> place she was staying]...I had no problems with the government, in fact, many Lesotho locals were very, very sympathetic to our cause and very helpful because I had some Lesotho friends. They regarded me as a sister. And the people were very sympathetic because it was immediately after the Maseru massacre...So the Lesotho locals were very bitter about the South African government so that's why they were so warm towards us.[62]

Another didn't feel so far from home in Lesotho, "Lesotho is like South Africa, so we didn't even feel that you are in exile, because the weather was the same, and it was during December, you know, singers like Hugh Masekela and all, there were many shows and everything, so you didn't feel like you were really in exile."[63] One woman spent a long time in a refugee camp there, waiting for enough people to gather for them to go on to Tanzania. She said that they stayed there in two big dormitories, one occupied by the younger boys, and the other filled with more matured comrades. Life there was monotonous and boring. They had enough food, though it wasn't always nice, and without anything to do, they would just wander about town endlessly. Eventually they managed to work out a programme for the camp, with language lessons to learn Sesotho, some political lessons led by some of the mature comrades, and some sports as well.[64]

Botswana also inspired some new ideas. One man who spent time there found things very different from home, with very different cultural norms. He was surprised to see women, mothers riding a bike, which he had never seen at home in Cape Town. He found that in Botswana, mothers were often the heads of households. He also found himself sitting next to white people in bars, and it was a very strange situation for him. The living conditions at his ANC residence also surprised him. There were

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[62] Interview with Thundezwa Booi, Interviewer unknown.

[63] Interview with Ncame.

[64] Interview with Tengimfene.

women there, but everyone was expected to cook. They would help him out, give him directions and such, but when his cooking day arrived, he was the one who had to do it all. This was a big change for a man who had only fried an egg ever before. He also had to keep himself and his clothes looking spotless and well pressed, when before he had always just let his sisters do that sort of thing for him. His time in Botswana taught him many new skills and changed many of his ideas.[65]

Another woman remembered her time spent in Zambia. Unlike the neighbouring countries, Zambia really felt like somewhere far from home to her. She said, "What struck me most was the... soldiers guarding the airport there. They were too dark, too dark, I mean one could see that these are not South Africans." She went to a residence there, and they established a daily routine. They would do some gardening in the mornings, before it got too hot, then work at indoor chores like washing clothes. They would tell stories and play games, and spent a lot of time in the library there reading books they couldn't get a hold of in South Africa. They played sports like soft ball, soccer, volley ball, and table tennis. Then after supper they would have news and political discussions, followed by a period called 'jazz hour', which was filled with singing and listening to the radio. Though it was fun at first, it quickly became boring. They were not allowed to leave the residence, and they longed to mingle with the locals. Eventually they found themselves lying around, sleeping a lot, pretending to be sick just to get to go to the clinic and meet some local people. They even tried to brew some home-made beer. Finally, they were able to leave to go for military training after two months at the residence there.[66]

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[65] Interview with Petane.

[66] Interview with Tengimfene.

One of the hubs of transit for the recruits was Tanzania. Many of them went through Tanzania on their way to training. There they found a completely different place from what they knew and from what they had imagined. Every recruit who went through Tanzania commented first on the heat. "We arrived in Tanzania, and it was hot. We were surprised, we thought maybe it was the heat of the engines, but we got to the airport and it was still just as hot...It was so hot we couldn't do anything, walked around half naked, sweating all the time...moving out at night, to get out and take a walk or something."[67] Many who were used to Johannesburg were shocked at the differences between there and Dar es Salaam. One woman remembered,

> When we first landed in Tanzania, we were very excited because we hear the radio talking about Dar es Salaam, we thought it was like New York City. So when we arrived, it was in the evening and we saw just a humid place, very dull. Some medical officers fetched us at the airport. We asked them, 'Are we there or are we still proceeding to Tanzania?' They said, 'Welcome to Tanzania,' and we were astonished because the way it looked was not what we thought. We expected like Jo'burg or America, but the place was so tiny, people wearing dark things covering their faces...[68]

Another recalled her reaction upon arriving in Tanzania, "Now immediately we arrived in Tanzania, oh, things have changed, really. We see the place, the town, oh my, the place is dirty, you know the buildings, there, there's no paint, there's nothing. You can see that, no, there's poverty here. And then we, we stayed for three to six months and then there was a problem of morale, we were attacked by malaria. It, it was another misery."[69] One recruit recalled his arrival at the Dar es Salaam airport, "A rat ran across the floor, we said, 'Hey, this is really Africa now.' We went out of the airport, it was still very hot, there were cockroaches on the road, big ones we weren't

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[67] Interview with Mochele.

[68] Interview with Mavuso.

[69] Interview with Ncame.

used to. We were driven with cars into a flat there in Dar with a few guys, maybe 10 or so. We stayed there, eating meat, food, there were no shortages."[70] As they got to know the place, some began to like it better. One recruit said, "We managed to get around Dar es Salaam, went to the market, met local people, had the local women plait us. Tanzania was nice, people were very friendly. It was my first experience to hear the Muslims praying."[71] Another recalled that, "there was no difficulty with the language especially us who were staying in town. A number of people were in a position to speak English even if not fluent English but once you speak English they are in a position to follow, what exactly it is that you want to say... One also picked up some Swahili words."[72] He also compared South Africa and Tanzania and decided,

> There was a vast difference between the two... We were from a highly developed country when it comes to economy and the infrastructure. Then we had to adjust to a country that is a little bit less developed... But what was also noticeable was the political development. They were more politically developed... So that you couldn't realise any tension amongst the people of different colours... With us it still had those... whereby you tend to be surprised sometimes in a place you see just whites mixing easily with blacks. And theoretically this is what we hoped for. But at times when you see it happening practically it is not so easy to accept it.[73]

Some of the recruits stayed in camps there, like Dakawa or Temeke, outside of Dar es Salaam. There they had a routine of classes, cleaning, taking care of the camp, cooking, and the like, and some physical training and political education to begin to get them in shape for the real training camps. Others were put up in town at hotels. These were given money for food and ate out in restaurants, went to the beach occasionally, bought supplies. Eventually, from wherever they were staying, they

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[70] Interview with Mochele.

[71] Interview with Msimanga.

[72] Interview with Abraham Lentsoane, Interviewed by Wolfie Kodesh.

proceeded on to the destination they had been desperately waiting for: Angola, for their military basic training.

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[73] Interview with Abraham Lentsoane, Interviewed by Wolfie Kodesh.

Chapter 3
Life in the Camps

"Come friends to the forest of feast

feast of knowledge of bow and arrow

feast of whispers of spear on flight

the bush beckons all to the bush school"[1]

Introduction

From the Soweto uprisings until the regional peace measures which led to the closure of ANC camps in Angola in 1989, the vast majority of South Africans who went into exile to join Umkhonto we Sizwe did at least their initial training at one of the many MK camps in Angola. While a few did train elsewhere, and many went on to further training all over the world, this basic training in Angola is something of a universal experience for the MK soldiers dealt with in this study. While soldiers joining in 1976 and those joining in 1988 would have had many divergent experiences, there is definitely some consistency to the training program that can be explored here.

The June 16 Detachment

As one has seen in earlier chapters, the students and their sympathisers who fled South Africa in the immediate aftermath of the Soweto uprisings found their way to exile in many different ways. Through Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland,

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[1] From Matlou, Rebecca, "A Soldier at War (To the Year of the Spear)" in Feinberg, Barry, ed. Poets to the People: South African Freedom Poems, London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1980, p. 127.

Mozambique, Zambia, and Tanzania, with differing amounts of time spent in these places, eventually most ended up in Angola, at a transit camp just outside Luanda called "Engineering camp." From June until December, these soldiers-to-be collected in this camp, until the end of the year, when they were finally sent on to their basic training.

Nobody who comes into a brand new situation is really prepared for it. However, it is hard not to imagine what is awaiting you and what conditions will be like. This was no different for the South Africans who went into exile to join MK. The first group to leave the country after the uprisings and go to the training camps in Angola were going to a situation for which they could not possibly prepare. They were the pioneers and the first to be trained in the camps there, so even the soldiers who had already trained in other places could not tell them what things would be like.

One of the first things many of the ex-MK soldiers recalled about Angola and Engineering Camp would become one of the main concerns of their time there. Angola is in a malaria zone, and many soldiers fell prey to this disease during their training. One way of combating this was the use of mosquito nets, which is no surprise to those who have lived in malaria ridden areas. However, to those who had no experience with this, it was a very strange experience to arrive in Angola and inspect their sleeping arrangements. One man who came to Angola at this time remembered his first reactions,

> "Somebody said you'll find a bed, an empty bed there. So I'm going up there. On the floor, I saw a string of beds, with some nets and so on. I said, 'What's this thing?' I look around, I've never seen such a bed with a net. People are inside as if they are dead, or critically ill. Then I said- well there's an empty one. I look at this, there's sticks, four sticks two in front, two in back. I said, 'Oh gosh, I've had it' I just took them, pushed them aside... got into the bed. ...I thought I was going to sleep and I sleep. Something came... zzzzzzing!.... Ddddddddding!... Wwwwwwong! All these things. I said, 'What's this now?' Well I'd

> been to Tanzania, there's mosquitoes you know, there's net, but we never take them seriously....I never slept man, it was war, man it was war...I went down, stayed in the veranda until the morning- I couldn't sleep because of the mosquitoes and there were guys next to me, just snoring. And then I mentioned it to some comrades and they laughed and said, 'We did the same thing too'."[2]

Many other soldiers remembered having the same reaction, one noting that, "You remember soldiers sleep at halls. You'd find people, about 80 people that are sleeping here, there is 40 beds this side and that side. And every bed has a mosquito net. When you enter there, take your mind to the hospital."[3] This is just one of the many strange circumstances these new soldiers had to get used to in a hurry.

Once they got over their initial reactions, life in Engineering Camp was largely a game of waiting to go for training. For students who had left the country intending to spend a few weeks or months learning how to shoot, then heading straight back to South Africa with a gun to liberate their country, this was often an unpleasant experience. Mxolisi Petane remembers the camp as, "A place where soldiers were beginning to be... I don't want to say disillusioned or frustrated. They wanted to go to train."[4] In the meantime however, their time occupied with many activities. Meeting new people was a main part of this period. In addition to their comrades from home, they met Angolans from FAPLA, Zimbabweans from ZAPU, Namibians from SWAPO, and even Cubans who were assisting the Angolans, and would soon become instructors for MK as well. For many of them, it was exciting to see trained soldiers belonging to black armies that were also involved in liberating their countries. It excited many of them to think that this is where they were headed. While it was very

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[2] Interview with Sipho Binda (Mandla Jwara), Interviewed by Wolfie Kodesh.

[3] Interview with Mxolisi Petane, Interviewer unknown.

[4] Interview with Petane.

interesting to meet these new people, it was also difficult at times due to the cultural and linguistic mix. While in countries near to South Africa which were the first stops in exile, one might find Sesotho, Setwana, or English being spoken, which didn't seem so different from South Africa, once they had reached Angola, they found Portuguese spoken by the Angolans, and Spanish by the Cuban soldiers. But as one MK soldier noted, "[We had] difficulty with language, but it is typical of South Africans I think we catch on fast. Already some comrades speaking Espanola, Portuguese, teach us few words, how to greet, water, money, I love you, so on."[5]

Relations were not always so amicable, however. FAPLA was also sharing the camp, and the war against UNITA had exhausted many of their supplies, such as food. Many of the FAPLA soldiers often found themselves without, and noticed that the South Africans at the other end of the camp were well supplied. One soldier related, "One Angolan guy burst into our room, holding a grenade, without a pin, which we didn't know, and another guy pushing him, pulling him. We found out later this guy wanted to bomb us since they didn't have food and so on and we were almost like civilians, had what we needed."[6] Other soldiers had similar memories of conflicts with FAPLA soldiers over food. Activities were varied, and a full training operation was not in the works there, though they did not remain idle. One soldier recalled that they would while away the time playing soccer, doing obstacle courses, and doing light training.[7] Another remembered that they also would go to the cinema some evenings in town, and to the beach on Saturday or Sunday.[8] A female soldier fondly described

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[5] Interview with Sipho Binda.

[6] Interview with Meshack Mochele, Interviewed by Wolfie Kodesh.

[7] Interview with Solly Zachariah Shoke (Jabu), Interviewed by Wolfie Kodesh..

[8] Interview with Abraham Lentsoane (Titi Motsenang), Interviewed by Wolfie Kodesh.

the trips to the beach and a different side to the cultural exchanges. The women waiting to begin training were living in a house in town with the leaders, but would join the men from the camp in their excursions. She remembered that she and her female comrades met some of the Cuban forces at the beach, and noted that, "They liked women, they would sing, play the guitar, try to teach us to swim..." and that they eventually got into trouble once a couple of the Cuban guys tracked one of the girls back to their residence.[9] Despite some good times, however, the overwhelming urge was to go and train and head home to fight.

Their chance finally came around the end of 1976. The recruits piled into buses holding about 100 people each, led by Cuban escorts in case of ambush by the UNITA forces. They spent almost a whole day driving to the camp, which was far to the south of the capital city, Luanda. When driving south, it really became real to some that they were travelling through a country torn by war. One man remembered seeing what he called, 'road scars,' like signs with gunshot holes and overturned trucks.[10] Another woman recalled that Angola was terrible because of the war, and remembered going over a bridge made out of planks, and that now when she looks back, she finds the experience scary, though at the time she was too excited about getting training to worry too much.[11] One soldier said that the drive was exciting, and recalled a stop near a pineapple farm for a rest and some fruit, and then another stop at a restaurant to eat some more along the way.[12] Finally the excited recruits arrived at the camp they would be training at, just outside of Benguela. They were very

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[9] Interview with Tsidi Mhlambo, Interviewed by Lynda von den Steinen.

[10] Interview with Mochele.

[11] Interview with Thoko Thedorah Mavuso (Zukiswa Mindala), Interviewed by Wolfie Kodesh.

[12] Interview with Mochele

surprised to find a large empty, dirty space. A female soldier remembered arriving there to find no water, no houses, just a wide open space, very dry, a desert. She had expected the camp to be like a school or something, with dormitories and all, and found only one house, used by the Cubans that were guarding the place. She said that her dreams were just shattered. After 15-17 hours of driving, she hoped that perhaps they were still in transit, until one of the leaders came and said, 'Welcome to our new camp.'[13] The women were given one room in the house that was there, for all of them.[14] A female soldier noted that the room was small, and they slept like sardines, so that when one turned over, all of them had to do the same.[15] Eventually they got the camp organised for the next group of trainees, and managed at the same time to do their six months training. Many moved on to Nova Catengue, not far from the Benguela camp, to help set that up as well. The recruits of the next several years benefited from their efforts.

Post- Soweto generation recruits

Later recruits had better access to information about the camps. Some who were active before they left the country in underground structures, or who spent time in prison (particularly at Robben Island) were able to get information from trained MK soldiers who were working inside South Africa, or who had been caught and now shared a prison cell with them. Others would meet up with people they knew in exile, and exchange news of home for details of the camps, as one woman related,

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[13] Interview with Mavuso.

[14] 10 by one count, 11 by another.

[15] Interview with Mhlambo.

> Well the comrade I had left the country with had left me in Lusaka so I found him there so as he was the only person I could rely on, I took him aside, asked how life was there and such things. So he gave me a lot of information as to how should I behave... And in the process I also met comrades whom I'd been with in some schools here in South Africa who were already trained. So they also received me with a lot of enthusiasm. First question they asked was how was the situation back home, where who, where was who, what was who, so and so doing and all such things. And in return I also asked them about how military training is. So general there were lot of stories that we were being told. Well basically depending on who you- one met. Some of the stories were frightening, some were encouraging. But at the end we ended up being confused and just decided we're going forward. We'll just see what was in store for us...[16]

Some still arrived with no idea of where they were heading, and their reactions to the situations they found themselves in depended on their own perceptions of how things would be. One was surprised at how bad things were, having expected better:

> "As we used to see armies here inside the country living in barracks with conditions relatively looking good. When we arrived in the camps first it was a bit of a surprise for most of us. That those were real bushes and that people were living in dwellings built underground. But with all that what also surprised us was the amount of work that has been done by the comrades that were there before us who were able to build those areas and make them homes. For example, one was not aware that those dwellings are cemented. That in those dwellings there are beds for all of us. Well dressed beds with blankets, clean."[17]

Another expected far worse than what she found, "For me, I didn't find [the conditions] very hard, but for any person they were hard. Because I was imagining something that was worse than that. For instance, I was imagining that we are going to sleep in the hammock... and then we're going to eat the roots of the plants... So when I found tents and... I was sure of the three meals... I was satisfied because I was imagining something worse than that."[18] Some were just amazed to find themselves in

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[16] Interview with Mtombeli Tengimfene, Interviewer unknown.

[17] Interview with Zola Tyikwe, Interviewer unknown.

[18] Interview with Tengimfene.

the situations they were in and couldn't even imagine being where they ended up. One recruit remembered going to train in Quibaxe, driving through the jungle on a tar road that eventually disappeared into rough dirt roads, a very eerie atmosphere, and the relaxation of the journey being broken by a cry of "Inyoka!" [Zulu for snake], only to look up and find a real live snake hanging from the tree on the side of the road.[19] Whatever the circumstances, arriving at the camps was quite an experience for all, and many would remember it for the rest of their lives.

Training

Throughout the period covered in this study, the training program largely stayed the same in all of the big training camps. There were some differences as time went on, but the basic daily routine and the courses that were provided were very similar. From compiling many interviews it is possible to establish a clear picture of basic training for the MK soldiers.

Upon arrival at the training camps, the trainees were divided into sections of about 10 people, then three sections would be combined to create a platoon, then three platoons would make up a company, which would have around 100 people in it. The main training camps for the basic training had about 500 trainees doing the course at a time, and the course lasted about six months. Each section, platoon, company, and camp had a commander and a commissar. The commander was the person in charge, and the commissar was there as a person to guide people politically, and to sort out the problems that people encountered. The camp commanders and commissars were trained soldiers, while often the section, platoon, and company commanders and

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[19] Interview with Chalmers Nyombolo, Interviewed by Lynda von den Steinen.

commissars would be promising recruits singled out very early on. The commander and commissar were often referred to as the "father and mother" of the soldiers, respectively. One soldier remembered being introduced to this system, and his reactions, remarked that the commander was younger than he was, and slight, and wondering how he could be a commander when they should be big and tough. Then they told him about the commissar. He wanted to know, 'what's that?' They replied, 'Well, he teaches politics.' He said, 'Politics? We don't need that, we just need orders.' They explained, 'But you can go to the commissar if you have problems with the commander or the other soldiers, he's like your mother, you can go to him with your problems.'[20] Companies would often train together, and the different companies would rotate among different classes. In addition to about 500 trainees at a time, the camps also housed the staff to run the camp. Howard Barrell estimates that in a camp of that size, "There would be about 25 instructors covering the various subjects in the training programme; the camp administration would comprise the commander and about 10 others charged with portfolios like the political commissariat, ordinance, logistics, communications, personnel and instruction.[21]

The trainees had to wake up between 4:30 and 5:30 in the morning, depending on the camp where they were training. The first half hour to hour of the day would be spent doing morning exercise, which usually consisted of taking a long run, sometimes up to 6 or 7 kms. After the morning exercise, the trainees would then have a short time to wash, then they would go to breakfast, for which they were often given very little time to eat. One soldier remembers being given 3 minutes for breakfast, others about ten.

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[20] Interview with Binda.

[21] Barrell, Howard, MK: The ANC's Armed Struggle, London: Penguin, 1990, p. 43.

Then the trainees would assemble, have announcements, and someone would read the news. There were particular soldiers selected to listen to the news every night on the radio, and also receive news from the Department of Information and Propaganda, and then they would compile it and share it with the camp at this time. This was one way for the people living in the camps to stay in touch with the situation in the world and in South Africa. After this, it was usually around 6 or 7am, and they would then go to classes until about 12 or 1pm. They would then break for lunch, and then after lunch, there would be more classes, or work to do around the camp, marches to go on, or extra studies or practices for cultural groups. They would have dinner at night, and some time to relax, take extra classes, or hold practices for cultural groups. then lights out came around 10pm. Usually the trainees would find themselves standing guard for a couple of hours each night as well, and would often find it hard to stay awake in classes the next day. This routine went on from Monday through Friday, with Saturday and Sunday being less structured days, with sports, cultural events, extra classes, and a bit of time for relaxation. Classes consisted of fire arms, engineering (sabotage, bombs, and the like), Military and Combat work (MCW; the art of underground and guerrilla warfare, based on a system developed by the Soviets), politics, topography, first aid, physical training, tactics, and artillery.

Later groups of recruits found their routine changed, particularly during the period of heavy UNITA activity in the areas of their camps, and of South African bombing raids across the Namibian border. In these cases, the trainees spent most of their time outside of the camps in the bush, sleeping there, training there, holding classes there, and only returning to the camps for a bit of sleep, eating, and assemblies. In addition to this routine were special alarm drills, as described by Jack Simons in his

diary: "A mini alarm last night and a bigger more protracted one this morning starting at 4 a.m. Operation entailed evacuation of camp and taking cover some 100s of metres away." And the next day, "Another "alert"- breakfast at 5:30, long trek along river bed, scrambling up ravine to reach culvert from the back. Return at 10 a.m. Rest of morning recuperation!"[22] The camps during this period of the late seventies and early eighties often had extensive systems of trenches and dugouts for defence against air attacks, as well as underground bunker systems to keep the camp invisible from the air.

The politics classes were one of the main focuses of the training program. Several class periods each day would be set aside for this part of the program. Political education focused on several different aspects, some covering the history of South Africa, the ANC, the SACP, and MK. Others would study revolutions around the world, such as those in Vietnam, Russia, and Cuba. Also covered in detail were the theories surrounding Marxism and Leninism, as well as political economy and scientific socialism. MK focused largely on providing its soldiers with a detailed political understanding of the history of their own struggle as well as other peoples' struggles, and taught them the circumstances surrounding their own conditions in the present.

Since much of the time, policy usually precluded the quick few months of training and immediate return to South Africa with an AK-47, as so many of the youth fleeing the country were expecting, it was imperative to get them to look at the bigger picture. They studied issues like friendly and hostile countries surrounding their borders, international and regional influences, and the military might of South Africa. To keep their morale up when things seemed to be taking a long time, they were

[22] Simons' diary, in Karis and Carter, p.713.

reminded that many people had already been in exile for 15 years or so before they arrived there, and that the liberation of South Africa would not happen overnight. One soldier explained what his own ideas were at the beginning of his training, and how they changed over time in the camps:

> It was painful in that we had to unlearn all the wrong impressions about being a soldier, about ANC, about the revolution. They used to tell us- even if we send everyone who's here inside the country, we're not going to liberate the country- we must emphasise on politicising, involving our people at home. We said no, it's a waste of time, man. Why can't we take a weapon and go inside the country and shoot? [I] can stand there in Park Station, man, and open my weapon. And we're discussing with other trained comrades about this expectation. Some would argue- ANC's been fighting since the 1960s, look what's happened- we went through Wankie [the joint campaign waged with ZAPU to create an infiltration route through Zimbabwe to South Africa in 1968], this and that, we'll never get our liberation because these old men are refusing to fight. As we went on discovering what ANC, MK, revolution, and all, we began to have our own perspectives, to internalise the ANC politics, what we've read, and come to see that maybe the ANC is not acting because it doesn't want to send people in, its because of objective situations like the situations in Mozambique and Zimbabwe, and we began to understand the complexity of the situation. This is why the leadership is trying to emphasise doing politics all the time, patiently explaining the difficulty of the struggle, the power of the regime, and such. It was difficult to swallow, anyway, young as we were, energetic, burning with revolutionary zeal, we want to fight, NOW. Not in years to come with things have been prepared and so on. But the stay at Engineering [camp, outside of Luanda] was good in the sense that we were able to pose a lot of questions. Some were answered, some were left hanging. We were left also to discover on your own the answers to some questions.[23]

This political education was of uppermost importance, as the ANC believed that it was vital to know who your enemy was and what his capabilities were, and to be well enough instructed in these things to be able to educate those inside the country, if one were deployed there. Good political understanding was also important for keeping up

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[23] Interview with Binda, paraphrased.

the soldiers' morale especially in periods of hardships, boredom, or extended time in the camps. One soldier remarked:

> There were some times when we used to...not to get the normal food which we were supposed to get but in any case, we used to get three meals a day and we understood that we are people who are dependent upon the solidarity and also the commissars at the camp, they stressed the need for understanding a situation, because in exile and mostly in the camps, one lives under an abnormal life, but since one knows what one had brought him or her to Angola, then one accepts everything which will bring our people's freedom nearer.[24]

This political training helped keep the soldiers' morale up even in the darkest of times, and helped them develop the patience to wait for the time to go home.

Physical activities were often quite strenuous, consisting of long runs, practice marches, obstacle courses, and basic exercises to keep people fit. Often these exercises would come just after lunch, when one has just eaten, and may be tired from the morning classes and from night time guard duty. This course was sometimes known as "physico." One man described what they did in his camp for this period,

> Aish, you'll be grilled, you'll be, when you arrive in the field, you'll see a number of instructors. Oh, you start running around, when you are running, you are ducking. Or sometimes they used to say you must talk, talking, chatting to each other. We at first didn't know why they are doing this. And then when you, as you run more rounds and more rounds, talking dies down, you're no longer talking. And then even ducking. So, there will be station, one for, you know, push-ups, one for stomach exercise, one for this exercise... You run, you start from that, do ten push-ups, move, you run to the other one, you don't just go there walking. Do stretches, you run, do stomachs... you sweat, you sweat, you sweat, by the time you finish, you are dead.[25]

Sometimes the "physico" would require the trainees to drag themselves across the hard ground on their elbows, getting back to camp with scratches and cuts if the weather was dry, or covered in mud if it happened to be raining. Some camps had a special

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[24] Interview with Zebulon Xulu, Interviewer unknown.

[25] Interview of Lerumo Kalako, Interviewed by Lynda von den Steinen.

long march, staying overnight in the bush, at the end of the basic training course. One female comrade recalled this march and notes that the day before the march, a doctor would check everyone out to make sure they were fit, and many people would suddenly come down with sickness to escape it. Only she and one other female soldier participated with their male comrades. The trainees were told that the rivers were poisoned for the march, so they could only drink from their canteens, and there was a mock attack on the trainees at night from the instructors. On the way back, they were all out of water, and those who couldn't make it had to be carried back. She wanted to give up on the way back, but was determined to finish up, and having recently fallen in love with her husband-to-be, who was in her platoon, she used that feeling as a way to make it through[26]. By the time the trainees finished their course, they were in excellent physical shape.

One of the most exciting parts of the training for most recruits was the firearms portion of the course. Most of the youths who left during this period were really aching to get their hands on a gun and learn how to shoot it, and their first chance to do this was usually a great thrill. Their first sightings of already trained comrades was always memorable, and they couldn't wait to follow in the footsteps of those who had come before them. Upon arriving in Mozambique on the way to exile, many recruits were excited and amazed to see an army made up of black men and even women, looking sharp in their uniforms and carrying guns. Another had the same response upon arriving at Engineering Camp outside Luanda, "Our main interest was to see the weapons, to learn how does it work? Our eyes were always on the soldiers, looking at the weapons, thinking, 'we're going to use that thing, to learn to use that thing'... These young chaps, some very young, even 12, 14, Angolans, with weapons

[26] Interview with Tsidi Mhlambo.

hanging there, we would always try to call them to talk to them."[27] Eventually they would get their chance. Sometimes they would start out dry-firing the guns or using rubber bullets for practice, and their first attempts with live bullets were thrilling and occasionally humorous. One woman remembered, "When you shoot an AK, the cartridges come out the back of the gun, over your shoulder. There was one guy training with us who started shooting, felt the cartridges hitting him in the back, and got scared because he thought he was shooting himself by some mistake."[28] Another remembers the start of firearm training, "The first time I used a weapon in Benguela, I was very excited . We were taught how to assemble and disassemble, learning to do it in minutes, calculating the time. It was very exciting. Then we learned how to shoot a target, doing something practical, and they taught us how to use a grenade. I was a little nervous the first time, but as time went on, I felt confident. We were told how to detonate explosives. It was very exciting to see myself carrying a gun, aiming, shooting, doing the practical things."[29] Learning to shoot really brought home to the trainees exactly what they were there for, and what they were accomplishing.

Life in the Camps

Some got their shooting lessons early and quickly, as the presence of UNITA in the area of many training camps made guarding the camps a necessity. In the first batch or two of trainees, the trained instructors from the earlier generations would do the guard duties, but as it became more and more important, or in a camp with fewer people, often upon arrival, the trainees would be given the rudiments of shooting and

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[27] Interview with Mochele.

[28] Interview with Mhlambo.

a rifle and a couple would be sent straight to guard duty. Guarding was done in shifts of two hours, often during the middle of the night while everyone else was sleeping. One recruit explained what this was like,

> It was difficult to get in the routine, especially the question of to guard during the night. It was very frustrating, you know, to stay two hours alone, you know, so you just find yourself thinking, you know, homesick and thinking about home and thinking about other things, because you just tell yourself that you can't sleep because there are hyenas around, so there was... this thing that, I don't know whether it was true, that when we sleep, the hyena maybe will come and you know, attack you, because the hyenas see you, I don't know where because it's dark, he knows that there's somebody there and when you are sleeping he can hear that you are sleeping and the hyena can come immediately. So there was those fears so you are afraid to sleep and all that, and you just feel that, you know, when you are guarding you are having a responsibility of the camp, if the enemy can come and attack, they are going to kill you too, or you are going to account during the process.[30]

The guard duty also often made the trainees even more exhausted than they already were. Waking up as early as 4 or 4:30 in the morning, doing strenuous physical exercises throughout the day, sitting in classes and doing work such as fetching water or wood, or cleaning or building, then going to sleep around 9:30 or 10 at night, only to wake up for your two hours on guard duty, most trainees tended to fall asleep the moment their heads hit their pillows, if not during classes. One instructor who organised literacy camps, since many of the soldiers were illiterate or having problems with English, found herself teaching outside of normal class hours, and having exhausted pupils, as well as being tired herself. She related,

> Another problem was that, I mean once one is a trainee there's a lot of physical activity going on...A comrade is always tired...I mean I remember some of the days whereby after a night's duty I will teach and teach and then find that half of the class is asleep. I just ask the comrades, comrades, okay, I can see that everybody is tired so let's

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[29] Interview with Mavuso.

[30] Inerview with Weziwe Ncame, Interviewed by Lynda von den Steinen

> sleep. Then the whole class including the tutor will sleep. Well we used to post a sentry now who will watch for us when one of the seniors come. So when the seniors come I will wake up again and start teaching.[31]

Another recruit who went to a smaller training camp recalled the same problem, "We had makeshift classes, bench formations on high benches, and if you fall asleep, you fall off. It was hard to stay awake in class, particularly if you had late guard duties."[32]

Late night guard duty was only one of the hardships the trainees encountered at their camps in Angola. The most universal complaint, mentioned by almost all of the ex-soldiers interviewed, was about the food. The complaints were rarely about the amount of food they received, which was adequate for their survival. One recruit, in fact was amazed at how often he was fed, "You come to a place that is better your own home...when I'm saying this, better in the sense that look we are not used to three meals...if you have eaten in the morning you'd see when you come back. But you come to a place that insist that there's three meals a day. Full meals."[33] Sometimes in the camps in Angola, however, there were severe shortages. Usually this did not involve people foregoing meals, though occasionally this was the case. More often they would simply find themselves eating the same things for three meals a day, for a week or two while they waited for supplies to come in. Sometimes this would be pap, or rice and beans, or tea and bread, or the like, for three meals a day for a week or so. Otherwise, depending on donations and supplies from foreign countries, they often found themselves with large stocks of something they hated, such as powdered eggs, which were hated by all who mentioned them. Also not appreciated was the yellow

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[31] Interview with Tengimfene.

[32] Interview with Shirley Gunn, Interviewed by Lynda von den Steinen

[33] Interview with Mxolisi Petane.

mealie meal that was prevalent in Angola. They would occasionally find worm-filled beans for their nourishment, which had to be simply choked down, as weeding all the worms out left you with hardly anything, and anyway there wasn't time for it. Otherwise, meals usually consisted of rice, pap, or bread, with tea or cocoa, and mostly tinned meats. Occasionally fresh meat would be obtained through hunting expeditions, though this wasn't usually the case, since fairness would require enough meat to share with all 500 trainees and the staff members. Fruit was sometimes plentiful in the camps that were situated on old plantations, with lots of bananas, mangoes, and pineapples to enjoy. But the day to day food supplies tended to be monotonous, especially in times of shortage, and this is what the soldiers remembered, even after all these years.

Sickness was also a debilitating problem in the camps. Some camps did have their own doctor, or 'medico' in residence, but often there was only a regional doctor who would do rounds of the different camps for check-ups and complaints. Emergency cases often had to be driven to the nearest town with a hospital, or even all the way to Luanda. Occasionally, people died from their illnesses, without ever making it back to South Africa. This was very hard on the morale of the remaining soldiers. Malaria was the biggest problem in the camps, and the mosquito nets mentioned above were definitely necessary, as well as the anti-malarial pills offered to some of the camps. Jack Simons, in his diary kept while in the camps in Angola as a political instructor in 1979, wrote, "Feb. 8, Thursday:... Am told that +/- 120 cases of malaria- nearly half our population..." and then later, on Feb. 14, "I think malaria has shaken me badly- morale, drive, interest in work, the lot. Certainly took the glamour (such as there was) out of Novo [Catengue]...I dislike crawling under mosquito net,

and dislike even more being bitten!"[34] A large proportion of the trainees caught malaria at least once, and many went through it several times. One such person was an instructor at Benguela, who caught it many times, and eventually shot himself, citing his constant attacks of malaria as one of the reasons for his suicide.[35]

Malaria was not the only reason for suicides, nor was this the only case of a soldier who decided to end his life. Anything from boredom to years in the camps without sight of returning home, to failed love affairs, to fear of getting punished for indiscipline, to basic homesickness could trigger this behaviour in both untrained and trained MK soldiers. One soldier remembers three suicides during her years in the camps, one due to a failed love affair, in which the man shot both his lover and himself, and then two others at nearly the same time that another soldier died of typhoid fever.[36] These sorts of events were tragic in themselves, and even more so under the circumstances in which they occurred. The soldiers who left everything behind often found themselves wondering what the purpose of it all was, and if these fellow soldiers had not died in vain, as so many of them spent many years in the camps in Angola, doing further or specialised training, or working on training the new recruits, when the struggle in South Africa didn't seem to be changing noticeably. The morale of the camps dipped lowest during periods such as these.

Life in the camps wasn't all so terrible, however, and weekends were often the best time of all, a time of rest and relaxation, and of fun and games. Soccer teams were often organised, giving themselves names like 'Mandela Eleven' and 'Sisulu

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[34] "Diary of Jack Simons at Novo Catengue camp, Angola, January-March 1979 (abridged), in Karis and Carter, p. 710-11.

[35] Interview with Mhlambo.

[36] Interview with Ncame.

United', or the "Bolsheviks' and the 'Spears' and games were usually held on Saturdays. Volleyball games and swimming where it was possible were also popular. Requisition orders from the camps and requests sent to countries sending supplies to the ANC often asked for sporting equipment, one requesting jerseys, shorts, socks and boots for four rugby teams and 12 soccer teams, 20 rugby balls, equipment for softball, baseball, cricket, hockey, table tennis, and volleyball, track suits, canvas shoes, dumb-bells, skipping ropes, weights for weight lifting, books on sport, and karate and judo suits.[37] Indoor boards games were also popular for leisure time, and again the requisition orders reveal what games were played. One listed, "10 sets Scrabble, 10 sets Monopoly, 10 sets Chess, 10 sets Draughts, 10 sets Chinese Checkers, 10 sets Playing cards, 10 sets Playing cards (2), 10 boxes Table Tennis balls, 6 Table bats."[38] Cultural activities were also enjoyed on the weekends, as well as films and radio. One ex-soldier remembered,

> There's many cultural groups on camps. There were the Zulu dance group, the Xhosa dance group, there was the Sotho dance and many other traditional dance- South African dances. There was also the ... choir. There was the small quartets, there was drama, many other- so we'll be divided amongst- so I decided to join the Zulu dance... because I didn't want to do something that I knew like singing. I wanted to learn something new. So I joined the Zulu dance. So on certain days we'd go on certain evenings to recreational hall, call it the stage whereby each of those groups now will perform. Used to be wonderful night. Sometimes we'll go and watch films. Most of the films we watched were Soviet films.[39]

Also popular was listening to music and singing. One woman recalled, "Saturday nights, we would gather around the fire and start singing, before the curfew comes, we

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[37] Requisition list, date and origin unknown, from the ANC Lusaka collection in the Mayibuye Centre archives.

[38] Requisition list, date and origin unknown, from the ANC Lusaka collection in the Mayibuye Centre archives.

[39] Interview with Tengimfene.

would sing after listening to the news, or if we were not singing, we just sit and tune VOA a jazz station and just talk about home and everything."[40] Music was also a popular activity, jazz and traditional African music being the favourite types. Musical instruments were a frequently mentioned request in the requisition orders, and eventually a cultural ensemble was created for the ANC, which included several MK soldiers, and travelled the world performing and providing publicity for the ANC and its struggle. Holidays were also a time for suspension of the training schedule and having a good time, with dancing, music, and dramatic performances, and often feasts, with food not usually available to the soldiers and occasionally with beer for each person. Jack Simons wrote in his diary,

> Feb. 24, Saturday: Yesterday's commemoration of Red Army Day went off well, with a display of relevant Soviet literature, introduced effectively by members of ex-Moscow "special" platoon- a baseball match... and a football match between the "champion" Dynamoes and a "picked team." At night a culture evening- speeches by Cuban Commissar and Camp Commander (very good), followed by concert (highlight a drama, centred as usual around a shebeen, the most vividly remembered social aspect of Soweto life- coupled with crime. B/stan removals and resistance the political element a relatively new note in "Shebeen" acts)...[41]

The weekends were often a time of great homesickness for many of the soldiers. During the week, so much time was taken up by the training program that they were often too exhausted to think of home, but on the weekends, with more leisure time and activities like sports, singing, cultural dancing, and music that they had enjoyed in South Africa, thoughts often turned towards home. Memories of Friday night jols in Soweto, Saturday afternoon soccer games in Cape Town, or

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[40] Interview with Ribbon Mosholi, Interviewed by Hilda Bernstein.

[41] Simons' diary, in Karis and Carter, p.713.

Sundays spent with friends and family would often turn the soldiers introspective and they would long for home.

One issue of supply for the camps that became incredibly contentious was something that seems like a natural ingredient for any group of soldiers: cigarettes. Towards the mid-1980s, reports started to emerge and gain credence world-wide about the dangers of cigarette smoking. However, as anyone addicted to nicotine is sure to note, all the lectures in the world can't keep people from wanting another cigarette. The rations for the MK soldiers were set at 2 packs a week per comrade, which was easy enough to obtain until these newly accepted reports created problems. Many of the countries sending supplies to the ANC, largely European and particularly Scandinavian countries, had always had a policy of sending only supplies that were necessary for the survival of ANC members in exile, of which a large number were MK soldiers. They always refused to help with any sorts of weapons of war, which were generally supplied by the Eastern Bloc countries. With the advent of the anti-smoking movements around the world, many of these same countries began to have problems of conscience with supplying something potentially lethal to the soldiers. Two memos from this period make interesting reading for this problem. One explained the side of the anti-smokers and the lack of supplies, saying, "Our own Comrades in the medical field in Europe, some of them professors, have told me personally that smoking is even worse than publicly alleged. It not only gives one lung cancer, it can affect the respiratory system- asthma and bronchitis- it can affect various other parts of the body and blood steam. Therefore forcing our donors to supply cigarettes, is like asking them for food, clothing, transport, medicines—'& a little bit

of poison as well please."[42] Another memo which accepted these problems but dealt with the reality of addiction asserted, "Cigarettes burning issue: We ask for these but no response. In all countries campaigning agst. smoking, gives all sorts of diseases. So they do not want to give cigarettes. But not fair to withhold cigarettes. We will give some cigarettes but commissars must educate agst. smoking."[43] This problem caused major concerns for logistics officers and diplomats, as well as the smokers themselves.

One of the overwhelming responses from ex-soldiers who have been interviewed by many different interviewers about life in the camps is the spirit of camaraderie that existed there. The soldiers who joined MK came from all over South Africa, from Cape Town, Durban, Jo'burg, Port Elizabeth, smaller cities and towns around the country, and even from the rural areas. They came from different class backgrounds and family experiences, and they were black, coloured, Indian, and white. They had left a country where the biggest problems were of race and class, and arrived in exile to find a situation filled with people from the same place but without these problems. This is not to say it was utopian: there were still reports of some favouritism according to ethnicity or nepotism, though this seemed to be largely coming from the leadership. But overall, many of the soldiers had fond memories of the interaction between themselves and others. One man asserted that, "The camp made us feel like South Africans and not white or black or even Capetonians."[44] Another ex-MK soldier added, "Here we were from quite different schools of...from

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[42] Memo, date and author unknown, from ANC Lusaka collection.

[43] Memo, date and author unknown (but mentions mutiny in 1984, so must be around mid-1980s), ANC Lusaka collection.

[44] Interview with Thamsanqa Ngwevela, Interviewer unknown.

different schools, from different parts of society, and we just communicated...there was no question, you are from a higher class, you are from where, you are from the rural area.."[45] And a white comrade who did basic training in the camps eloquently expressed, "I've discovered my South Africanist, if I can call it that, outside. Of course, I missed... family, friends that I had there and the place itself. But...I didn't feel home as a white South Africa in a country whose politics I hated. And its only coming out that I was able to...to find a South Africa that I do really love."[46]

This camaraderie and spirit of togetherness, especially when combined with the political training, made it much easier to overcome the problems that they encountered in the camps. One soldier asserted, "Well, life in the camps, one cannot say its not difficult. It is difficult. But there is that spirit which makes you to carry on."[47] And a female comrade noted that, "It wasn't hard because at that time we were willing to do it. Its only now that we realise that what we were doing there was hard."[48] This sense of purpose, as well as the spirit that existed between the comrades, made life in the camps bearable even when times were tough. The leadership was also instrumental in morale, visiting the camps on occasion, particularly for holidays and graduations of basic training groups, giving speeches and visiting with the trainees. But their biggest impact, if people's memories can measure this, was the way they interacted with the soldiers, by putting their policies and rhetoric into action. One ex-soldier remembers a visit by Oliver Tambo to the camp, "The president comes. He's around here. We

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[45] Interview with Mongezi Stofile, Interviewed by Hilda Bernstein.

[46] Interview with Barry Guilder, Interviewed by Hilda Bernstein.

[47] Interview with Michael Meli, Interviewed by Hilda Bernstein.

[48] Interview with Joyce Stofile, Interviewed by Hilda Bernstein.

queue in the same queue we are going to get our food. This impresses us."[49] Another remembers a day at Engineering Camp when he was newly arrived in Angola and they were queuing for food, "There was a white guy in our queue, you know? Uh, he was standing there, then some, I think those who knew him said- 'do you know who this person is?' They said, 'that's Joe Slovo'. 'Joe Slovo? No man, not this one, man'...we expected Joe Slovo to look like a cowboy, you know? <laughs> 'And how can he be so modest in the queue? With us you know? He must go in front, man, he's the leader' and so on. No, he was queuing there. 'Why does he look so clean, you know? He's a terrorist?'"[50] This realisation of having the top leaders in the queue waiting their turn for food like a regular trainee gave much more than lip service to the ideas of equality preached by the ANC.

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[49] Interview with Petane.

[50] Interview with Binda.

Chapter 4
Angola in the 1980s

Long is the road to freedom
Your impatience
Will not make it shorter comrade
I know heart
Is bursting with anger
Your brain burning
With the heat of vengeance

Waiting tortures
Waiting waiting waiting
Here there nowhere and everywhere
Longing
Lingering questions
Suspicion
Who is who isn't
I know your pain
Many have felt it from time began

Unpraised burial without lamentations
Many have trod on this road
Before you
Often bloody footprints
Landmarks
For you and me
To follow
The long uneasy road to freedom[1]

[1] Reddy, Freddy, "The Road to Freedom," from Sechaba, April issue 1985, p.32.

Introduction

By the early 1980s, a large number of the Soweto Generation of MK soldiers had spent many years in the camps in Angola. Frustration and boredom began to set in for those who had been there for so long. These feelings were aggravated by the conditions in the camps in Angola, the war with UNITA which involved many of them, and the activities of the security department in dealing with the 'spy scare'. All of these problems contributed to a mutiny on the part of 90% of the cadres stationed in Angola in the end of 1983 and 1984. The mutiny was put down fiercely by the security department and the leadership, but the gravity of the situation was not lost on them. A commission of inquiry was convened to examine the mutiny and the impetus for it, and several recommendations and changes came from it. A National Consultative Conference was called for 1985, and while the rhetoric surrounding this conference stressed that the mutiny did not lead to its birth, a look at the submissions from all corners of the organisation shows that the mutiny and the situations leading up to it were foremost in the minds of many MK and ANC personnel and the call for a conference had been one of the main demands of the mutineers. Some changes were put into effect in the set-up of the organisation in the next few years, but many things remained unchanged, and many of the problems still existed. The aftermath of the mutiny also affected the experiences of the new recruits and their time in MK.

Many documents from the post-mutiny period are also looked at as well as many of the documents and reports submitted for the National Consultative Conference in 1985, as these deal with the time before the mutiny and explore the problems that led to the mutiny. Many of these documents written in the immediate aftermath of the mutiny are particularly helpful at finding a picture of what life in Angola was like during the pre-mutiny period.

While the accusations against the ANC that came out in the early 1990s tended to be overly critical of the movement and often exaggerated the conditions, and the ANC submission to the TRC tended to downplay some of the problems that existed, the documents sent in by various sections of the organisation in preparation for the National Consultative Conference in 1985 and the Stuart commission report that investigated the mutiny and its causes were solidly grounded in the complaints of the cadres from the few years preceding the mutiny. These sources provide the most detailed and unbiased tales of the conditions in Angola during this period and are extremely helpful in coming up with a portrait of the years preceding their release. Through all these sources, as well as secondary accounts from journals and books, it is possible to see many sides of the story and portray the circumstances during this period in Angola.

Conditions in the Angolan Camps in the early 1980s

For the soldiers who had left South Africa in the wake of the Soweto uprisings, the camps in Angola were an exciting place during their first few years there. They were trained largely by Cuban and Soviet instructors who had a high level of training themselves, and provided interesting and well thought out training programs. They had some problems with supplies, but the overwhelming urge to train and return to South Africa and the youthful zeal and enthusiasm with which they approached their training often made these problems mere inconveniences in their minds. The training they received was new to them and very exciting, and they dreamed of their imminent return to South Africa.

As these young soldiers completed their initial training, many were sent on for advanced training programs both in Angola and abroad. A few returned to South

Africa as trained MK soldiers, but these were the small minority. Upon completing their further training, many were sent back to Angola, and spent their time there doing more training, working in support capacities for the organisation there, or instructing the new recruits that continued to trickle into the camps in Angola. As more and more time passed, the enthusiasm and sense of immediate return to South Africa turned into a more jaded and less hopeful attitude in many of MK's now trained soldiers. By the early 1980s, some of the people living in the camps in Angola had already spent more than five years outside of South Africa, and didn't see much action of any worth going on inside the country. Demoralisation and depression set in for many of them, as well as boredom and stagnation. Problems which had seemed small and inconsequential when they first arrived now grew to be significant and inescapable. This change of attitude in many of the soldiers living in Angola became a serious obstacle for the organisation.

The conditions in the Angolan camps in the early 1980s were not ideal in the best of times. When the conditions were combined with the general feeling of demoralisation on the parts of the troops, this could only make things worse. Lines of supply, for example, were a common problem during this period. Food, clothing and medicine, though sometimes found in great quantities in storage facilities in Luanda, didn't reach the camps, particularly the furthest outlying ones. Food was a very hot issue, and many complaints were registered about it. While food had always been a problem in the camps, in the earlier days, comrades were more inclined to accept the conditions, as they still had the revolutionary zeal that let them justify the problems and accept them as their lot. As time went on, however, complaints became more frequent and the issue became common in the camps.

Fresh meat and vegetables were very scarce in the early 1980s. When Wolfie Kodesh visited the "Moscow" camp in Angola in 1984, he was told that they had had fresh meat only once in the last month, eggs once in 2 or 3 weeks, and no fresh vegetables at all. They further told him that the "office stopped us getting fresh meat because they said there was no money. This was stopped for two years."[2] This was the case for many of the camps. Often the supplies either didn't make it to the camps from Luanda, or weren't available in Luanda. There was a solution, however. Many of the local towns or villages in the vicinities of the camps had fresh meat and vegetables, and some people in the camps bartered with the villagers with surplus clothing or foodstuffs in order to get food. Unfortunately, this practice was discouraged by the leadership, and people who bartered for goods with these surplus products could be harshly disciplined for their actions. In his notebook on projects in Angola from 1984, Kodesh suggests that bartering be allowed, supplied, and controlled, and seen as a viable alternative for getting fresh food to the camps. But this report came too late to stop the issue from blowing up.

Medicine and medical treatment were also key issues. Malaria was rampant in many camps, and treatment minimal. One report submitted for the National Consultative Conference in 1985 pointed out,

> 1- In our camps there is little transport or at times no transport at all for the Medical department.
> 2- Trainees are normally going to camps for training without Medical check-up at all.
> 3- Malaria cases are kept in our Medical points for a long time even though the medical officer sees that the patient gets worse without being taken to the hospital in Luanda
> 4- No proper food or diet for our Malaria cases in the West.[3]

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[2] Kodesh, Wolfie, "Moscow 6/12/84," from notebook on projects in Angola.

[3] National Consultative Conference 1985: MHQ unit Lusaka, regional preparation document.

The lack of proper medical care was more than just an inconvenience. Many people in the camps came down with malaria, which was a horrible disease to have to suffer through. And even worse than catching it themselves, some had to watch their fellow comrades suffer through the illness, some even dying from it for lack of proper medical care. At times like these feelings of futility would set in among the cadres, who would wonder why this comrade of theirs could just die in exile, never having the chance to set foot in South Africa again. Some thought that deaths like this were senseless and should have been prevented by a more aggressive policy about deploying people back into South Africa.

Transport was also a substatial problem during this period, and often exacerbated other problems. Without proper transport, it was even more difficult to get food, medicine, and medical officers to and from the camps. Kodesh's notebook pointed out that adequate transport would consist of one truck and one Landrover for each camp: a modest goal. However, he found that one camp had one Landrover and no truck, and yet another had no working transport, and had to borrow a truck from another camp, which could not easily spare it.[4] More transport might also have allowed periodic trips to Luanda to break the boredom of the routines in the camps.

One of the biggest problems in the camps was that of pure boredom and stagnation. One soldier noted, "on a typical day in the camps, a cadre would be awaken[ed] at 5 am. He would drag himself from his sleeping bag to face another day of boring routine, in the company of the same faces, thousands of miles from home."[5] Another soldier explained that there were some periods of immense boredom. He also

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[4] Kodesh, Wolfie, notebook on projects in Angola.

[5] Twala, M in Twala, M and Bernard, E, Mbokodo- Inside MK: Mwezi Twala-A Soldier's Story, Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 1994, p. 44.

mentioned that some of the people who were the least disciplined in the camp, who were always complaining and hating life there, performed really well once they were sent back to South Africa, but they just couldn't take the waiting and the boredom of the camps.[6] Not only the routine and the long stay in the camps bored the soldiers.

Often the material they were being taught did not change, even if they had been in the camps for years and had gone through several courses. One man related his response to the repetitive material,

> If you are going to teach me that the ANC was formed in 1912 for 6 years, that thing is not going to change. You taught me that when I came here, I've done my training, you taught me that, the ANC was formed in Bloemfontein in 1912. Even 1980 I must still study that, come on... Let him come to us and ask us what we are interested to know. We can study the history of Vietnam, Cuba, a number of countries. See we ever advocated for academic classes. But this up and down that we are doing it's bringing no development. Rather than studying the history of the ANC every day for 3 years.[7]

Even beyond simple repetition, other problems plagued the training program. In the first few years of the camps in Angola, highly trained instructors, Cubans, Russians, and South Africans who had been in exile for many years would lead the classes. Later, as more and more trainees finished their initial training and went on to advanced training, they began to return to the camps as instructors. But many of them simply regurgitated the information that had been taught to them. One woman remembered, "The instructors were comrades who had been trained in Europe, especially in the Soviet Union, and the tendency was just to regurgitate what they had learnt. And it created a lot of problems because when comrades start asking questions, especially sensitive things like explosives, you know, 'why do you mix this proportion of this

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[6] Interview with Garth Strachan, Interviewed by Lynda von den Steinen.

[7] Interview with Abraham Lentsoane, Interviewed by Wolfie Kodesh.

acid? Why not the other acid?' and so on, and comrades used to get stuck."[8] When this repetition and lack of dynamic teaching style was combined with the long length of time many soldiers found themselves spending in Angola, the effect could be devastating.

Spending years in the camps with no reprieve and very little change in the routine was enough to cause anyone to find themselves in a state of extreme boredom. One report to the National Consultative Conference asserted, "This department [Personnel and Training] should up-date its training programme and should sen[d] comrades to military academy and even academic schools. It can only be absurd to keep comrades for 8 yrs in the camps without any improvement or advance in both military or academic schools."[9] In her Honours thesis, Occupational Hazards: Observations of Conditions in Umkhonto we Sizwe's Angolan Camps, Rosie Pilcher related one soldier's response: "Mishak recalls that not being able to go back was very *very* hard: that at times they would be warned that the struggle from the camps might take as long as another twenty years, and then he would have to just walk away from everyone and think it over: try and deal with it although not all, mentally, could."[10] One man explained to the Stuart Commission, a commission created to investigate the causes of the mutiny, that, "Our lengthy stay and conditions in exile (i.e. camps) has made some of us to lose all sense of human feeling, lose complete touch with humanity, we do not have the same resistance." The report goes on to say, "The commission believes that the conditions in the camps, the total isolation from the

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[8] Interview with Ribbon Mosholi, Interviewed by Hilda Bernstein.

[9] National Consultative Conference 1985: MHQ unit Lusaka, regional preparation document.

[10] Pilcher, Rosie, Occupational Hazards: Observations of Conditions in Umkhonto we Sizwe's Angolan Camps, unpublished thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of an honours degree in history at the University of Cape Town, January 1998.

outside world, the desperation and frustration of not being deployed make it practically impossible for cadres to survive (politically, morally and psychologically) in the camps for several years."[11] The long years in the camps caused serious stress in the lives of the rank and file soldiers.

Beyond the basic boredom, the supplies of recreational materials broke down during this period. Libraries were badly stocked, games and sports equipment were not sufficient, and film and video equipment was ofteninoperable. They were not even allowed a day or so to take a trip to Luanda for the cinema or the beach. One soldier remembered them complaining about this, "There were times we say, 'hey comrades, we are tired now, we are too much in this bush... Take us for a trip to Luanda, we must go and see the beach, go to the cinema and come back.' [The] answer that was given was, 'comrades this is a revolution and that is not possible.' And... a person who's telling you that 'this is the revolution', he goes to Luanda... and once he reaches Luanda, he goes to the beach, he goes to the cinema. He comes and join in the camp... Now you're asking for that chance, they say its a revolution, its not possible."[12] This boredom and despair of ever seeing home again took a devastating toll on the soldiers who were living in Angola. And when these feelings were exacerbated by the bad lines of supplies, leaving them with inadequate food and medical care, it was only a matter of time before they rebelled against their situation.

To make matters worse, there was a lot of bad blood during this period between the rank and file soldiers and the leadership. The rank and file believed that the leaders were living the easy life, not suffering these deprivations, while they were

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[11] "Stuart Commission Report 1984", in Appendices to the African National Congress Policy Statement to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, August 1996, p. 10

[12] Interview with Lentsoane.

suffering in the camps. Many documents during the aftermath of the mutiny pointed to the inequality in circumstances between the average soldiers and those in positions of power. Much of this hostility was directed towards the chief representative of Angola's office. Comments from the rank and file when interviewed in the aftermath of the mutiny included, "No money for camps but new cars bought constantly for Chief Rep's office,"[13] "Instead of the Northern Camps and other outlying sectors being given top priority, it became blatantly clear that Luanda itself and particularly the Chief Rep's residence was the top priority."[14] and "House of Chief Rep. should not be a place where everything is eaten and not elsewhere."[15] These inequalities extended beyond the leadership in Luanda however. Another document notes, "Commanders and other members of the administration should cease to eat fresh food which other comrades can not obtain because this will have wrong interpretation and raise misunderstanding among comrades."[16] The leaders and commanders did not always deal with these complaints diplomatically either. One document reports that, "Irrelevant demoralising and sarcastic answers were advance[d] in reply to questions posed by the rank and file to those in authority."[17] Another report remarked on the changes in relations between the camp leaders and the rank and file, "The normal standard was that everybody does his own washing and cleaning their rooms, members of the administration included, but today with the youth in the administration they

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[13] Programme of TG [Treasurer General] in Angola- December 1984.

[14] Main Observations about situation in Angola- 27/12/84.

[15] Kodesh, Wolfie, "Meeting with office and Regional Command: 23/12/84," from notebook on projects in Angola.

[16] ANC summary report, Logistics Department (Luanda).

[17] Document submitted for National Consultative Conference of 1985, from unit C-13.

[want] to have soldiers working as domestic servants for them."[18] The blatant disregard for the ANC policy of equality in the movement incensed on the rank and file, and added more fuel to the fire that was to lead to mutiny. These issues alone were enough to cause serious demoralisation and dissatisfaction among the comrades stationed in Angola's camps, but even more problems arose during this period, as can be seen below.

The War with UNITA

The Angolan government's decision to let the ANC establish training camps within its borders rested on more than Pan-African solidarity, though this was certainly a part of it. The regional situation in Southern Africa was a complicated one that drew many countries into relationships of one kind or another. South Africa was illegally controlling Namibia, as well as continuing their policies of repression in South Africa. This gave them two prime enemies, SWAPO in Namibia, and the ANC of South Africa. The defence of Namibia was key to the apartheid government's plan to keep the countries bordering South Africa hostile to ANC infiltration routes. Angola, which had recently gained its independence from Portugal in 1974, was governed by the MPLA, the main Angolan liberation movement. Independence had not brought them peace, however, and the country was in a constant state of civil war between the government and UNITA, a rival movement. South Africa, who wanted to keep the Namibian/Angolan border from falling into the MPLA's hands, which would allow SWAPO access to the country, was supporting UNITA with arms, money, and sometimes military force in order to keep Angola destabilised and to cause problems for both MK and SWAPO forces who were based there.

[18] Document submitted for National Consultative Conference of 1985, from unit C-13.

MK's camps were strategically placed, as Rosie Pilcher points out, "Effectively they buffeted Luanda from all directions which was tactically to the latter's advantage given that UNITA posed a very real threat."[19] While MK did not actively fight against UNITA during their first few years in Angola, it was difficult for them to remain neutral in this fight. At first, MK took purely a defensive stance, fighting UNITA only when its own camps were threatened. However, as time went on, they eventually found themselves committing to assist FAPLA (the MPLA's army) in the fight against their rival movement. South Africa's support of UNITA made their involvement even more justified, as they were able to fight their enemy directly, though still far from the real battleground of South Africa.

The original response of the MK soldiers to this call for help from FAPLA was very enthusiastic. The Stuart Commission report of 1984 remarks,

> At this early stage there were apparently no signs of unhappiness or unwillingness on the part of comrades. The early enthusiasm was due to a number of factors:
> a) The need to defend MK base camps developed into a general political understanding of the need to participate practically in the struggle against imperialism, against a bandit force-UNITA- which was used as an extension of the South African defence forces;
> b) The need to get out of the camps, away from the boredom of camp life because some comrades had been staying in the camps since 1977;
> c) The need to gain combat experience.[20]

The first operations against UNITA went very smoothly, and the soldiers were able to feel a sense of victory in the early days. Later, however, this was not the case. FAPLA forces were unorganised and many operations went badly. Pilcher noted,

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[19] Pilcher, Rosie, Occupational Hazards: Observations of Conditions in Umkhonto we Sizwe's Angolan Camps, unpublished thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of an honours degree in history at the University of Cape Town, January 1998.

[20] "Stuart Commission Report 1984", in Appendices to the African National Congress Policy Statement to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, August 1996, p. 17.

> The campaign was waged with very little professionalism, which even internal reports attest to: there was frequently, if not always, a lack of reconnaissance, knowledge of the enemy in all his forms, a lack of adequate command from above and shambolic supply lines: troops were not unknown to wander through enemy territory, without reconnaissance, detached from control, without sufficient food for several days at a time.[21]

One report for the National Consultative Conference asserted,

> In August 1983 when demoralisation had reached its climax almost the whole army was mobilised for the Eastern Front in Angola, even the comrades who were preparing to get home were diverted to this front instead of reinforcing the home front... Some of our experiences in that front are alarming. There was no proper troop control, no reliable communication system, missions were not properly planned some times not planned altogether. Logistical distribution was not satisfactory. Our forces were reinforced by militia which was not properly trained and poorly equipped and relations were at the lowest critical level.[22]

These experiences naturally led to many MK casualties.

The soldiers began to question why they were involved in this fight at all, and the original enthusiasm evaporated to be replaced with dissent and hostility towards the situation. The Stuart Commission report noted one particular battle on 26th December 1983, in which the MK forces fell into an ambush. The FAPLA forces supporting them ran away from the ambush, and 5 MK soldiers were killed. The commission reported, "Some time later, a decision was taken that the dead bodies of our fallen comrades should be retrieved, and for the first time, our comrades saw death- with the dead bodies mutilated and some in an advanced stage of decomposition."[23] The MK soldiers did not take these casualties well.

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[21] "Stuart Commission Report 1984", in Appendices to the African National Congress Policy Statement to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, August 1996, p. 17.

[22] Document submitted for National Consultative Conference of 1985, from unit C-13.

[23] "Stuart Commission Report 1984", in Appendices to the African National Congress Policy Statement to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, August 1996, pp.18-19.

Many of the soldiers who had been in the camps during this campaign remember their reactions well. One man explained,

> When the whole Eastern Front campaigns started, it was very exciting. We thought we'd gain some experience. We thought it would break the monotony of staying in the camp and waiting to go back to South Africa, but when it happened it became difficult, that's why problems arose. As you would experience difficulties, you would think about where you stand, about where you come from, about why are we here, etc... We were seeing our comrades dying in ambushes and raids, being maimed, others getting frustrated completely, because we thought this war was going to be soon (over).[24]

Another man recalled, "after some few ambushes...most of our people were injured. They start to say they can't fight in a foreign country... Why should we fight Rhodesia, why should we fight here in Angola while we should go home and fight at home."[25] The disillusionment and frustration of fighting against UNITA was to become a substantial complaint in the mutiny that soon followed.

The Security Department

The origins and duties of the Security and Intelligence Department of the ANC are best explained by their submission to the TRC.

> The roots of NAT [Department of National Security and Intelligence] can be traced to the establishment of a military intelligence unit in the 1960s, tasked with undertaking reconnaissance missions to find routes for the infiltration of trained MK cadres; the establishment of reception areas inside the country for these cadres; and the selection of inanimate targets for armed propaganda attacks. At this time the Department had no counter-intelligence capacity: there was no structure specifically tasked with the screening of recruits and exposure of agents in our midst. In the 1960's, cadres were carefully recruited or selected by ANC branches inside the country before being sent abroad for military

[24] Interview with Sipho Binda, Interviewed by Wolfie Kodesh.

[25] Interview with Graham Morodi, Interviewed by Wolfie Kodesh.

> training. This screening and selection process inside the country resulted in a degree of complacency in the ANC's mission in exile...[26] The new phase after the upheavels [sic] of 1976 saw the mass exodus of youth, seeking contact with the ANC driven by the desire to acquire the skills necessary to respond to the brutality of the regime with military force. It was critical for the ANC to set up the necessary structures to process all these new recruits: for ensuring proper deployment of cadres; for utilising information they passed on to the ANC, which could be used to build the underground; and to ensure that agents of the regime were weeded out.[27]

The purpose and duties of the security department were straight forward enough, but in practice, the lines were much more blurred. With thousands of people leaving South Africa and actively seeking out the ANC and MK in the wake of the Soweto uprisings, the security department faced a task larger than it had ever imagined.

As seen in Chapter 2, the recruits leaving South Africa would be asked to write an autobiography, including details on themselves and their political activities within the country, as well as details on people who they suspected of being involved with the enemy. In this way they would weed out some of the blatant enemy agents who came without proper cover stories, and did manage to catch many spies in this way. Others came much more prepared however. The TRC submission explained,

> Some agents were exposed because they were known within the country. Others were naïve and inconsistencies in their biographies which all recruits had to write were easily spotted. However, some were well-trained in the fields of political, military, and intelligence work. This included briefings on how to aim at being deployed in certain positions of strategic importance, how to rise within the ranks of the ANC, how to identify key moments at which agitation against the leadership could serve to undermine the ANC, how to gather information for necessary assassinations and other attacks, or to carry out such deeds themselves.[28]

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[26] ANC, Further Submissions and Responses by the African National Congress to Questions Raised by the Commission for Truth and Reconciliation, 12 May 1997, p.106.

[27] ANC, Statement to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, August 1996, p.68.

[28] ANC, Statement to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, August 1996, p.68.

Many of these agents managed to escape the security nets and made their way into the organisation undetected. Some caused great damage to the organisation before being caught.

The first serious attack on MK's structures in Angola by South African agents occurred in September of 1977, at Nova Catengue camp in the south of the country. One spy managed to poison the food at this camp, and almost the entire population was affected by this. One man who was there at the time related,

> So this chap came then with his poison, put poison in the food. You know we are poisoning 500 people that, that's how serious the enemy agents were. That was September of 1977... Fortunately because our kitchens were separated, Cubans were eating in their own kitchen. They were preparing their food on their own. We were preparing our food. So they were not affected. I mean they were there, fresh, helped us, came with their doctors- 30 Cuban plus 30 Cuban doctors coming to the camp. If you have an idea where the camp is. Camp is not a place that is easily accessible. But they came there. We were injected and whatever and whatever. That saved of us from dying. Not a single person died from that thing. Was it or not their quick response... It was a slow poison that would have taken us.[29]

Another woman remembered the poisoning, explaining that her group was going for night shooting practice, when people started complaining about feeling bad after eating the fish that night. Some thought it was a lack of good cleaning of the fish, and the Cubans thought that they just didn't want to go for lessons, but then everyone got sick. They had to call the Cubans from town by helicopter, and they nursed them back to health, but they were sick for about the whole week.[30] Another woman recalled the poisoning. She had not been so hungry that evening, and wasn't fond of the fish they had, so she didn't eat much. Then when everyone got sick, she was afraid that they would think she had done it, since she wasn't sick, so she pretended to be sick and

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[29] Interview with Mxolisi Petane, Interviewer unknown.

[30] Interview with Thoko Mavuso, Interviewed by Wolfie Kodesh.

have the same symptoms as everyone else.[31] The poisoning was a huge blow to the morale of the trainees, and people were suspicious for a long time about who had done it. The actual culprit was not caught until 1981.

The second major strike by enemy forces was the bombing of Nova Catengue in March of 1979. One woman was there for the bombing and recalled,

> They raided the camp, ja, and they dropped more than five hundred bombs of different types there and then two comrades, in fact there were three, two of our South African comrades and one Cuban was killed in that raid and just about everything was destroyed within seconds. The operation lasted for three minutes... It was all over, there was nothing left of the camp at all. A camp which we had built up, you know, with our own hands, for over a year we had worked on that camp, within three minutes, it was all gone, razed to the ground, there was nothing, absolutely nothing. Even the chickens that were there burnt to death... And the comrades were really brutally killed because I think they spotted them, when they tried to run to the defence post outside, there where we were hiding, hey thought that the planes were leaving and they came out of the dugouts and then only to come and find that the planes were returning for a second round, to come back for a second time, and then they were spotted and they were gunned down by machine gun. One comrade's head was totally gone and you couldn't even pick up their bodies, because you would try and pick them up, the leg would come off, so they had to be picked up with spades... So we just had to make graves and bury them there in the camp. And it was for the first time that it really dawned on me that now we are involved in war... it was... at that time that I really realised how vicious the Boers are, that, you know, if we were in the camp at that time, there wouldn't be a single one of us that would have survived... If they could have got us there, just lucky that we had started evacuating the camp a few weeks before the bombardment... And at the time they bombarded, it was the time we usually assemble for [the morning formation] before we disperse into our different activities at 7 o'clock.[32]

The South African forces that attacked had clear intelligence about the routine of the camp, and had obviously been informed from inside the movement. The camp had to be abandoned after the attack, as it was razed to the ground, and as a demoralising act,

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[31] Interview with Mpho Msimanga, Interviewed by Wolfie Kodesh.

[32] Interview with Gloria Meek, Interviewed by Hilda Bernstein.

it was immensely successful, even though they came when the soldiers were elsewhere. Otherwise it would have been completely devastating, taking out 500 of the trainees and their instructors two full countries away from home.

The immediate reaction of the security department was to consolidate the department and to train and deploy new recruits, as well as to establish a detention centre, Camp 32, in Angola. One of the first tasks it set itself was the recruitment of more personnel to the department. Often the department would recruit youths coming out of the country, send them on a course in the East Germany, and then deploy them to duties in security and intelligence. This would become one of its biggest mistakes. Camp 32, also known as Quatro [four in Portuguese] after the notorious 'number four' prison in Johannesburg, was to become the most notorious part of the security department.

The poisoning and bombing at Novo Catengue were enough to cause the department to worry about enemy spies, but two years after the bombing of Nova Catengue, another incident heightened the panic about enemy spies. In March of 1981, the ANC accidentally uncovered a spy ring, that involved some people in very high positions in the organisation. One spy, known as 'Piper', was caught, and led the security department to many others. ' The men identified as spies included the commander of Quibaxe camp in Angola, the head of MK Security in Angola, and another man deployed in security. These men had been above suspicion, and were considered some of the best and brightest of their group of recruits, until a freak break allowed the security department to break the ring. This 'Spy Scare' of 1981 led to serious tightening of security and eventually to such extreme measures on the part of the security people that the rank and file in Angola lived in a state of fear and the security department was generally hated. Complaints against the security department

were foremost in the mutineers' statements and appeared in almost every unit which submitted a report to the National Consultative Conference the next year.

In the camps in Angola, one of the main manifestations of this spy scare was the idea that anyone who criticised the movement or committed breaches of discipline was an enemy agent who was trying to demoralise the cadres and move them to rebel against the movement. This was plausible, as sometimes the actual spies would purposely undermine conditions in the camps in order to demoralise and cause dissatisfaction among the cadres. One man who was a company commissar in Mazimbu in the early 1980s recalls the problems he had with the commander of the camp. He often argued with the commander, who would issue unreasonable orders and be unwilling to negotiate. Himself, his camp, and the company which he worked with were seen as dissenters. They found out later that the commander was a spy, and then understood why he had acted in this way. The frustration the cadres felt over these issues was real, and caused them much dismay.[33] Other spies were known to encourage their comrades to smoke dagga or drink illicit alcohol, among other breaches of discipline. With the unsettled conditions in the camps at the time, some of the comrades were easily led in this direction.

However, during this period, many people got in trouble when indiscipline arose from other causes. It reached a point where anyone caught smoking a joint, drinking alcohol, or just asking to be sent home to fight, would be branded an enemy agent. Many people found themselves so depressed about the long waiting period in the camps and the conditions they found themselves in, that they turned to dagga or alcohol to escape their problems. Some times in the past, dagga smoking and drinking

[33] Interview with Lentsoane.

were more tolerated by the commanders and the security department. This idea that anyone breaching discipline must be an enemy spy changed this situation.

If one were unlucky enough to be caught, he faced serious and harsh punishment. One man remembered his own experiences when he was living in the camp at Malange. He hadn't smoked dagga in three years, though he had enjoyed the occasional joint earlier in his life. At one point he decided to have a puff off of someone else's joint, and this happened just when the security department started rounding up the smokers and punishing them. He and his fellow smokers were rounded up and beaten until they confessed their crime. They were also forced to tell the security men who else they knew who smoked dope. He was tied to a post and beaten, then left overnight in the cold. He was with a group of 40 men who were punished for this indiscipline, and he recalled hearing his commissar, Oupa Maloi being beaten to death nearby for a similar crime. He was then sentenced to three months of hard labour, and then released back into the ranks. He went then to another camp, Caculama, where he was stationed with Zimbabwean officers, and recalled that there they were able to smoke dagga freely. These contradictions from camp to camp made it very difficult to figure out what actions would be punished at any particular time, and left many soldiers in a state of fear and uncertainty.[34] Nor was this an isolated incident. Many reports point to severe torture of cadres who committed indiscipline. One report submitted for the National Consultative Conference pointed out problems with the security department abusing the cadres. "1- Cadres disappeared without trace at the hands of the security, 2-Individuals would kill without any accountability, 3-Beatings to death became rife, 4-Members of the security assumed

[34] Interview with Chalmers Nyombolo, Interviewed by Lynda von den Steinen.

enormous powers...Persecution became the order of the day."[35] The people in the camps reached a stage where they constantly feared what might befall them if they stepped out of line. Many felt this treatment was very unfair. As soldiers at Malange camp asserted when approached by Wolfie Kodesh in 1984, "Not all mistakes are made on purpose"[36] This idea that any step out of line was a purposeful attempt to damage the organisation caused countless difficulties and a state of fear for many of the MK cadres.

Another issue that caused problems during this period had similar roots. As indiscipline was seen as sabotage of the organisation, so was any dissent from the ranks. Criticism of the conditions in the camps, complaints about the length of time spent in the camps or any other legitimate concerns were also looked upon by the security department as forms of sabotage and people who voiced their problems were viewed as enemy agents. When the Treasurer General visited camps in Angola, he was told, "Frank and open talk [is] not tolerated at some camps and there is a fear of victimisation if you talk up."[37] This closing off of any official routes for legitimate complaints left the soldiers without any route to channel their frustrations and grievances, which led to further frustration and dissatisfaction in the rank and file, and contributed in large part to the mutiny that was to come.

Once someone, for whatever reason, was branded an enemy agent, it was almost impossible to come out from under the accusation. And often security department personnel would spread rumours or distribute reports branding people as

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[35] National Consultative Conference 1985: MHQ unit Lusaka, regional preparation document.

[36] Kodesh, Wolfie, notebook on projects in Angola.

[37] Programme of the Treasurer General in Angola- December 1984.

agents when they were not. This false and unsupported information was rarely corrected. One report shows some examples of this happening.

> Dissemination of wrong information: This department [security] is the chief culprit, a number of comrades have been victims to this shortcoming. The members introduce unfounded allegations about this or that comrade being an agent or having deserted the organisation, this is spread in the rank and file officially and unofficially only to learn later when the man shows up that he/she was being deliberately destroyed. In some instances an official report is given only to learn the contrary is true. Facts enumerated here under bears testimony in that regard... The chief of the security in Mozambique Willy Williams rounded our residences up and reported that [Solomon Tefo] has joined the enemy ranks after disappearing from Maputo; he further said that he has been seen in and around Nelspruit in a roadblock wearing a uniform. A few months later the man emerged with the same Willy Williams and we were again given an explanation that the comrade had lost his sense, i.e. he was mad not as they reported before. In the West [Angola] comrade Ten-Ten was also reported to have defected only to find that he was very much working with the organisation, comrade Mzwai [head of security] made that report. Furthermore a number of comrades have been labelled only to discover later that they are instructing or doing some important duties somewhere. This information is leaked by the security deliberately or due to its inefficiency... It has been our bitter experience that some of our cadres have remained suspects for too long. Further no checking and counter checking has been done. Unfortunately information has been forced out of them resulting in confession under duress or torture.[38]

Many people found themselves branded as traitors, and condemned to spend years and years in the camps, as, without security clearance, they were not able to get deployed to the front. This led to even more demoralisation, particularly for those who had simply made a mistake and were loyal to MK and the ANC. Some have even found that the stigma of being an enemy agent has followed them back to South Africa today, where they are treated with suspicion and disgust.

Many people had far worse problems with the security department. Abuse and torture of suspects was common. Some suspects found themselves sent to Quatro, the infamous prison camp in the north of Angola. The history of Quatro, or camp 32, is

long and detailed. The story of the abuse and torture of suspects that took place there can be found in the many documents released in the early 1990s which first broke the story of abuse in ANC camps. The ANC admitted the systematic torture in their submissions to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Only a few brief details are included here, but a whole thesis could easily be written on the topic of Quatro. The Skweyiya report, written by a commission appointed to investigate the origins of the mutiny, documented the conditions in Quatro. It cites overcrowded cells, inadequate health care, even worse food supplies than the other camps, harsh labour, and serious psychological and physical torture. Often inmates were forced to do hard labour until they collapsed, and when they did, they were severely beaten by the guards.[39] Systematic torture was endemic, and various torture practices became synonymous with Quatro camp. The Motsuenyane Commission, which also investigated the mutiny's origins, documented many common abuses,

- lengthy isolation in solitary confinement;
- regular beatings under the feet or elsewhere with guava tree sticks or with coffee tree sticks;
- napalm- being rubbed with (or rolling naked on) hairy beans or leaves of a plant which caused itching;
- pompa- blowing ones cheeks or pumping them up so that a guard would slap the cheeks causing excruciating pain to the ears;
- pawpaw- being covered on the face with the skin of a scooped out pawpaw fruit and beaten;
- Beirut- flogging while naked and lying in a face-down position;
- helicopter- being tied hand and foot and suspended on a pole or log like a pig on a spit;
- being tied to a tree and remaining there in public view for a long time;
- red ants introduced into clothes one was wearing and being bitten by these ants;
- Slaughter- digging a hole shoulder deep and being beaten on the head and hands as you obey the instruction to come out of the hole;

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[38] National Consultative Conference 1985: MHQ unit Lusaka, regional preparation document.

[39] "Skweyiya Commission Report 1992", in Appendices to the African National Congress Policy Statement to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, August 1996.

- Starvation- being denied food as a form of punishment;
- chopping wood for hours on end;
- 1000 litre tank- drawing water and pulling a 1000 litre tank uphill with others and being beaten in the process;
- Third degree interrogation- non-stop interrogation for two days or more.[40]

These are only a few examples of the daily torture that went on in the camp. Beyond these, suspects were often beaten and tortured until they signed false confessions, which were difficult to refute once signed. Some people were kept in Quatro for many years under these circumstances, and many never had charges brought against them, or a chance to have their day in court to refute the allegations. Some who were kept in these conditions still remain loyal to the ANC today, despite the treatment meted out to them. Others found that their experiences at the hands of the security department disillusioned them with the movement and would never support it again.

The security department's notorious behaviour was the primary grievance of the mutineers, and one of the major issues raised by the MK soldiers in preparation for the National Consultative Conference that followed it. The serious problems between the security department and the rank and file soldiers caused a lot of hatred, animosity, fear, and unhappiness to the soldiers. Many used the Conference as their first opportunity to strike back at the department, and attacked them in the harshest possible words. One unit asserted,

> The backbone of all armies is the Security department...It is through practical experience that the security department more often than not and whether consciously or not is the source of a very serious source of catastrophy rather than security and firmness to the organisation...Following the sequence of events therefore it is clear to all genuine and freedom loving patriots in the organisation as a whole that the security department is rotten it is the source of ALL EVILS

[40] Motsuenyane Commission Report, 20 August 1993, in Appendices to the African National Congress Policy Statement to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, August 1996, p. 44-45.

> AND HENCE THE NERVE CENTRE OF REACTION instead of progress [capitals theirs][41]

One of the main complaints of the cadres was the choice of personnel for the department. The cadres chosen for training and deployment as security officers were often very young, and after being sent on a course in the GDR, they were deployed with full powers over the rank and file soldiers. Many complaints came from the various camps about this. One suggested, "Age limit in the Security Department: Some operatives are too young and socially inexperienced to handle this task. Comrades suggest inclusion of older comrades to guide and assist them."[42] Another remarked, "Political consciousness and maturity should be the prime qualification of appointment to the responsibility of recording officer [a security dept. position]"[43] The youth and inexperience of many security department members was seen as a large reason for the problems that stemmed from the department. The attitudes of the security men and women were also a problem. One report noted, "In the security all the 'yes men' type of cadres are serving, they first get the basic training sent to GDR, then work in this important department. Hence the chaotic nature of their working, beatings instead of persuasion because of ignorance and political immaturity... [The] majority of their cadres ended being renegades and nothing has been done since 1977."[44] The youth and political immaturity of the security cadres was mentioned in many submissions to the National Consultative Conference and was seen to be a large part of the problem.

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[41] Report submitted in preparation for the National Consultative Conference of 1995, from "Unit U."

[42] Report submitted in preparation for the National Consultative Conference of 1995, from the Luanda District.

[43] Report submitted in preparation for the National Consultative Conference of 1995, from Viana Camp.

[44] National Consultative Conference 1985: MHQ unit Lusaka, regional preparation document

The omnipotence of the department was also seen as a weakness. One report noted, "The security department works independently as a supreme body, is very negligent and also relaxed. It also has too much power."[45] With this power that was unanswerable to any checks and balances, the security department was given a 'blank check' to do what they liked. Often their answer was not seriously to root out enemy spies, but to abuse their power and hurt often innocent bystanders. One report noted, "Most are apolitical, inexperienced and even non-security officers or functionaries in their daily work. The best they do is to look for drunk comrades, come into love affairs of other cadres, and... use force at slightest provocation. Force is the primary in their activities. Their criterion is faulty to say the least."[46] Overall, the hatred and fear of the security department affected all of the soldiers in Angola and were a huge part of the cause of the mutiny that was to follow.

Mutiny

Because the mutiny in MK has been documented by many sources, here follows only a brief summary of the events.[47] The mutiny began in late December 1983 and early January of 1984. Dissatisfaction with the problems seen above finally crystallised into action on the part of some soldiers. Following a particularly bad battle with UNITA, many soldiers in camps in the Malange district began to shoot

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[45] Report submitted in preparation for the National Consultative Conference of 1995, from the Luanda District.

[46] National Consultative Conference 1985: MHQ unit Lusaka, regional preparation document

[47] This summary is gleaned from several different sources, including the ANC submissions to the Truth Commission, particularly the Stuart and Motsuenyane commission reports, the articles released in the early 1990s by dissenters, bringing to public knowledge the abuses and the mutiny for the first time, various interviews and first-hand accounts, and a chapter from Ellis and Sechaba's book Comrades

their weapons into the air, protesting their situation and demanding attention from the leadership. They demanded that they be addressed by Oliver Tambo, the president of the ANC, Joe Slovo, the Commander of MK, and Chris Hani, MK's commissar.

By February, the action had moved to Luanda, to Viana transit camp just outside the city. Soldiers from all corners of Angola streamed into the camp to find out what was going on and decide whether they supported the mutiny. Some sources claim that the soldiers were planning to storm the leadership in Luanda, but were diverted to Viana, while others say that the mutineers were moved to Viana, and then others came of their own accord, sometimes commandeering vehicles to get there. The shooting in the air continued, and the soldiers refused to be disarmed, citing fear of the reprisals of the security department if they gave up their weapons. Chris Hani met with the mutineers at one point, asking all those who supported the ANC to make themselves known. One man who was there recalled, "Thereafter came the leadership, came Chris Hani, called a meeting in Viana and first of all the things, he asked that all the people who were there, comrades were there, he asked the people, look here, I want to know who are the people who are no longer interested to be within the ANC, they must step out so as they can go to the UN. None of the comrades left or went out, none."[48] This showed that the mutineers did not care to give up their struggle, but merely to change the circumstances in which they found themselves. A committee of ten was elected to present their grievances to the leadership. Among other things, the mutineers demanded a national consultative conference to be called, a change in the attitude towards deploying people to the front and a stepping up of the struggle inside South Africa, and the disbandment and investigation of the security department. On February 16, FAPLA sent some forces to take over the camp and disarm the mutineers,

and a few casualties accrued on both sides. Many of the mutineers were sent to Quatro, and others were sent to other camps under a cloud of suspicion.

A few months later, at Pango camp there was another revolt. Again, the mutiny was quelled, but more casualties occurred on both sides, and the fighting was more serious and had more severe consequences. Seven of the Pango mutineers were executed, and another group sentenced to execution was reprieved at the last minute. More people were sent to Quatro and others faced discipline for their actions. This marked the end of the mutiny.

The response of the leadership to the mutiny was mixed. Some leaders acknowledged that the mutineers had legitimate grievances, while others maintained that the whole thing was simply the fault of enemy agitators, who preyed on soldiers who were delinquent in their political development. However, the mutineers did have many legitimate complaints, but lacked the outlet to vent them in a constructive way. This led to approximately 90% of the cadres in Angola taking part in the mutiny in order to get themselves noticed and heard by the leadership. But whether the reasons for the mutiny were justified by their circumstances, the leadership was united in its response to the mutiny itself. Any way it was looked at, the mutiny represented a serious breach of military code, and had to be put down severely in order to prevent it from happening again. The Stuart Commission shared this view, and noted,

> However, the Commission, while accepting that the cadres had many genuine grievances, strongly criticise the tactics adopted to solve these. Under no circumstances can we condone:
> - the indiscriminate shooting and terrorising of the Angolan people;
> - the total rejection and contempt of authority;
> - the breakdown of military discipline;

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[48] Interview with Jeff Mtembu, Interviewed by Hilda Bernstein.

- the orgy of drinking and dagga smoking.[during the course of the mutiny, many soldiers took advantage of the lack of authority to engage in drinking and smoking sessions][49]

The mutiny was a serious obstacle for MK to overcome and solve. Its effects would remain to emerge over the next few years. However, it was clear that things could not go on as before, and things had to be done to change the situation even if the form the protest came in was illegitimate.

The results of the mutiny

The mutiny made it perfectly clear that things were going poorly for the majority of soldiers in Angola. The grievances that led to the mutiny showed that many areas of the organisation could do with some reform and change. In the immediate aftermath of the mutiny, many investigations were undertaken to find out what should be done to change things. Some of the recommendations were put into effect, while others were largely forgotten and never implemented.

In the months following the mutiny, both the Treasurer General's department and Wolfie Kodesh, who was a senior logistics man, were sent to Angola to talk to the soldiers in the camps and investigate some of the problems. The report from the TG's office and Wolfie Kodesh's notebook on projects in Angola refer to many problems and offer many solutions. Systems for keeping track of supplies and getting them to the camps where they were needed were developed. Suggestions for supplementing the logistics department's efforts with a system of bartering with locals were presented. Some personnel changes were put forth, such as replacing the illiterate man in charge of logistics in Luanda with someone more qualified to keep records and deal

[49] "Stuart Commission Report 1984", in Appendices to the African National Congress Policy Statement to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, August 1996, p. 25.

with requisitions. Problems of deployment, leadership, the security department, and relations between the rank and file and the leaders were dealt with and suggestions made to improve these. However, assessment of the degree to which any of these recommendations were implemented is elusive. None of the available sources document changes that occurred in these areas following the reports, and records of programs being implemented according to the recommendations do not appear to exist. Reports may have been submitted, and then never pursued, but some changes may have been put into effect after the reports reached the leadership. No conclusion can be reached at this time.

Investigation into the mutiny itself was done by the Stuart Commission later in 1984 as well. The report is a detailed and well-researched look at the problems that led to the mutiny as well as the mutiny itself. However, once it was submitted to the leadership, it did not surface again for many years. Concerted efforts were made to conceal the mutiny and its origins, and no public knowledge of the revolt came to light until the early 1990s, when a number of people returned to South Africa and began to bring issues of abuse and problems to light. This was largely done as a way to discredit the ANC, but did contain a lot of truth in the accusations. Some rumours and leaks had surfaced before this, but the story of the mutiny was largely suppressed until these people brought it to light. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission provided a place for the ANC to answer their accusers, and the organisation did submit a lot about abuses as well as submitting the Stuart Commission report and other subsequent reports detailing abuses of ANC people by their own organisation.

The most significant event following the mutiny was the calling of the National Consultative Conference of 1985. The rhetoric surrounding the conference denied that its calling had anything to do with the mutiny. But one of the mutineers' demands

was the calling of a conference just like this one. And even if the conference's origins had nothing to do with the mutiny, which is unlikely in the extreme, the reports coming in from all corners of the organisation brought up the same problems that led to the mutiny and the mutiny itself almost universally. Further, many changes came in the course of the conference that directly addressed the complaints of and problems faced by the mutineers. Mzwai Piliso, the head of the security department, and Andrew Masondo, the National Commissar, two of the men who the mutineers wished to see removed from their lives in Angola, were redeployed to other positions, though Joe Modise, the Commander of MK, who was also one of the mutineers' most hated characters was retained in his position. A Code of Conduct was drawn up and adopted at the conference, putting into writing the policies of the ANC which prevented abuses such as the ones that had taken place in Angola. And a Department of Justice, put into place as a way to keep an eye on the security department and develop a system of checks and balances which would limit the powers of the security department to misbehave.

However, the extent to which these changes had any real effect on the circumstances of the movement is unclear. It is known that the Officer of Justice had trouble getting co-operation from the security department, which largely neutralised his office. And abuses did continue, though heightened awareness did cause the abuses to be less severe. The process of contributing to the conference itself was not necessarily welcomed by many of the soldiers. One report from Angola mentioned, "Complete mistrust of the Regional Conference." This mistrust was not unfounded, as the regional report for the national conference severely played down the problems that had been brought up by the various Angolan camps. Some of the camp reports attack the conditions in the camps, the war with UNITA and the security department in no

uncertain terms, but the official report from the regional office neglected to deal with these issues seriously and sometimes omitted them altogether. While the conference did address some problems, in many cases, the problems did not see solution, and many practices that had caused problems for the soldiers continued.

Inside the camps, very little change appeared. While a serious study of conditions before and after the mutiny has not been done, by looking at the testimonies of people who lived in the camps in the before and the after periods, very little difference can be discerned. The post-1984 group does mention a policy of 'criticism and self-criticism' which was in principle a forum allowing the cadres to air their grievances as well as to look at their own performances and look for ways to improve them. However, one soldier remembers that while this practice did occur on a regular basis, the cadres still did not feel that they could be open and honest in their criticism. More often they would just say that things were fine, or bring up petty gripes about other people in the camp.[50] In this area as well, change was not very noticeable, if it happened at all.

As for the mutineers, their lives would not be the same again. Of the ones who were taken to Quatro, some stayed there for years. Some didn't get out until the camps in Angola were vacated in 1989, and were then taken to Tanzania. Some were kept in other camps, and never saw deployment. Some were seen as dissidents for the rest of their time in Angola. Others were 'rehabilitated' and found their way back into the folds of MK. One soldier recalled dealing with the mutineers in his camp. They were difficult at first, would argue a lot, and were hostile to the authority. But they would fight out the issues in discussion forums and try their best to go on with the program of the camp. He recalled that eventually the camp was transformed, and

went back to normal. One of the mutineers went on to work as a political education officer, and some others became instructors eventually.[51] Others never escaped the wrath of the security department. Some of the mutineers who had been imprisoned in Tanzania, were only released in 1988. A woman who was working in the communication department there remembered having the mutineers in the camp. The security men would warn them that these people were dissidents, that they shouldn't listen to them, and that they were enemy agents. But during interaction with the men, they seemed just like normal guys, so they didn't know where to put their sympathies. The mutineers were ostracised, and the people who encountered the didn't know whether to believe the stories the security department told them or to believe their instincts that the mutineers were decent guys.[52] Overall, the mutiny continued to effect many people long after it was suppressed.

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[50] Conversation with Weziwe Ncame (LV).

[51] Interview with Meshack Mochele, Interviewed by Wolfie Kodesh.

[52] Interview with Weziwe Ncame, Interviewed by Lynda von den Steinen.

Chapter 5
Operations

The MK Oath
I shall go:
Where all men are deaf
Whether dead or alive
Where all sounds are all one
An echo upon an echo
Where bones brittle
In a kiss with copper
Where blood like crude
Oozes from sabotaged lines
Because I have taken oath
In the People's Court
To march forward into the Battle Storm

I must go:
As big guns roar
And tanks rumble
Whilst bombs thunder
Like vicious volcanoes
And pistols spit
Like poisonous snakes
And ricochets screams
Like wicked witches
Where rifles hiss
Like cornered cobras
And grunts and groans are common cries
The signals of the silent world
For I have taken oath
In the People's Court
To march forward into the Battle Storm

I'll be gone
To where sappers swing
In solemn solos:
"A mine a man"
That's their sweetest song
The only chorus with a safe note.
Since I have taken oath
In the People's Court
To march forward into the Battle Storm.[1]

[1] Sejake, Wellington, "The MK Oath," in Dawn, monthly journal of Umkhonto we Sizwe, Vol.3, No.11, December 1979, p.41.

Introduction

When the Soweto generation of recruits and those who followed them chose to join Umkhonto we Sizwe, one goal was foremost in their minds; to go back to South Africa to fight the apartheid government. Many never saw this opportunity. They found themselves in countries all over the world, training or studying. They became instructors in the camps, or worked in administrative capacities. They found places in the diplomatic level of the organisation. Many different possibilities existed, and for many reasons, some soldiers never saw the front lines of the battle. To trace the fates of all of the recruits would be an immense and seemingly impossible task.

However, some did find themselves deployed in the front line states (Botswana, Mozambique, Swaziland, Lesotho, and Zimbabwe), and others got the orders they had waited for: go home and fight. Some who operated inside had never been in exile, while others had served their time in the camps and waited, sometimes for years, to receive their marching orders.

This chapter will look at some aspects of life underground inside South Africa, as well as experiences in the front line states for MK's soldiers. The sources available for this part of MK's history are severely limited. At this time, many people remain reluctant to speak of their experiences operating within South Africa. Some will only give vague ideas of what they went through. Many refuse to discuss the subject at all. Records of operations were rarely kept. Often the leadership's knowledge of attacks by its cadres came only through press reports. With this profound lack of material, a clear picture is difficult to attain.

However, enough details have emerged to make it possible to explore some aspects of this topic. Rather than evaluating the success or failure of MK's operations,

or to relate names, dates, and details of the operations themselves,[2] this chapter will use interviews with ex-soldiers and persons who worked in the political underground, some ANC documents, a few transcripts from hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and some already published works to provide a rough sketch of what some of the soldiers operating in the front lines and inside South Africa experienced. Hopefully, the future will see much more information come to light, and people will eventually be willing to share their experiences and their parts in history.

Receiving the orders

For the soldiers stationed in the camps in Angola, the arrival of a truck that would take soldiers back to Luanda for the first step of the return to South Africa was always exciting. When the truck pulled in to the camp, an immediate sense of excitement would permeate the trainees, and a desperate hope that they would be called to go back. If they were, it was with little or no notice, and they were ordered not to tell anyone of their orders, so any friends they had in the camp had to be left in the dark. But usually the impending departure overwhelmed all of the other feelings and they would look forward expectantly to their pending return to South Africa to fight.

Others left South Africa at the request of the organisation in order to undergo a faster and more specialised training program in order to expedite their return home. They were often sent to Pango or a similar camp in Angola, which had fewer trainees, a faster program, and more stringent security and adherence to pseudonyms. They would leave for a short period of time, get trained, and return to South Africa

[2] For this sort of exploration see Tom Lodge's and Howard Barrell's works listed in the bibliography. For a list of operations over the years, see the ANC submission to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

immediately. Some never even went that far for their training. Some were given crash courses in the front line states or even inside South Africa itself. However one was trained, the order to go inside or to the front as an operational soldier was exciting and often scary.

The return

For those who went outside to the camps in Angola or other training facilities before being deployed inside the country, the return to South Africa was very similar to the passage out. Similar routes were used, and many of the same people worked to help them along the way. Many front line countries had safe houses in which to put them up on their way through to South Africa. One woman, who worked for MK in Lesotho and Swaziland, remembered that her family was involved with the ANC, and long before she became involved herself, she recalled men coming in and out of their home in Swaziland on a constant basis. Often she would find herself sharing her room with many MK soldiers or recruits who were on their way into or out of the country.[3] The returnees, unless they had left the country with a good cover story, or been given false identification documents, would find themselves climbing the fences to get back into the country, entering illegally, just as they had left.

The Front Line States

MK's struggle was made harder than many other liberation armies' in that South Africa's neighbouring states were not always welcoming to their struggle. Until 1974, Mozambique was still under Portuguese rule. Zimbabwe received independence from

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[3] Interview with Nosizwe Khumalo, Interviewed by Lynda von den Steinen.

the white government only in 1980, and Namibia remained under South African occupation until 1990. Botswana and Swaziland were reluctant to antagonise South Africa, as so much of their economies depended on South Africa's goodwill. Lesotho was ready to help, but as a landlocked state, surrounded completely by South Africa and dependant on her for economic reasons, the access was difficult for MK's soldiers. The co-operation of the neighbouring states thus varied and changed.

Until the independence of Zimbabwe, MK access through that country was largely impossible due to the guerrilla war raging inside its borders. Once independence was won, the ANC did not find things much easier, as ZANU had won the elections and the ANC had backed the losing party in allying itself with ZAPU, so the new government had little interest in helping them. After a few years, the ZAPU government's negative sentiments softened, and the ANC was allowed to have a presence in the country, though MK's soldiers and commanders still had to operate underground there. If caught, they did not face serious punishment, but the agreement with the government meant that they had to keep a low profile. One woman who worked in Zimbabwe transporting weapons, money, and supplies into South Africa through Botswana and Swaziland recalled that she had to act as if she was a normal expatriate, and with her background as a student leader, a lot of people would criticise her, thinking that she was no longer working for the ANC. Meanwhile, she was doing all sorts of work for MK and their special operations unit underground. She found that she had to cut herself off from South Africans who were in Zimbabwe, which made her feel rather isolated, as that was the community in which she would have felt most at home.[4] Another man recalled his time in Zimbabwe, where he was supposed to be

[4] Interview with Angela Brown, Interviewed by Wolfie Kodesh.

to hold media workshops for church groups. He would have to work his full day, from 8-5, doing the workshops, then spend the nights going to secret meetings.[5]

Beyond this basic use of Zimbabwe as a crossing point into South Africa for arms, supplies, and personnel, at one point MK tried to open a guerrilla front on the Zimbabwean border. One man who was part of the command recalled the process during 1985 and 1986. Many people were infiltrated through Kruger Park, sometimes up to eight or ten people at a time, but the capabilities of the security forces dealt them a serious blow throughout the operation. He recalled,

> The process [had] largely failed. It's failed significantly. Not a single group of personnel to my knowledge have been located into the country, because of the enemy's capacities...So, very little progress has been made by mid-1986 and you have moved towards a situation where the idea of establishing a guerrilla zone is almost subconsciously moving away, and you've moved into mine warfare and hit-and-run tactics- at best the movement of sections of MK cadres to ambush and carry out attacks on farms...By late 1986, 1987, there is very near to a 100 percent casualty rate.[6]

He recalled how horrible the situation was, for him to have to command people to go into the country in this process, knowing that their chances of surviving were nil.[7] As time went on, operating out of Zimbabwe became easier and easier, but with all of the concentration of South Africa's forces on that border, often it served only as a base from which to launch missions through other front line states.

Botswana, Lesotho, and Mozambique were originally very lenient about letting MK operate out of their countries. Swaziland was, by all accounts, the worst environment to work in. Botswana did not officially allow the ANC and MK to operate in their country or use it as a base, and if one were caught with weapons, he

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[5] Interview with Chris Vick, Interviewed Lynda von den Steinen

[6] Interview with Garth Strachan, Interviewed by Howard Barrell.

[7] Interview with Garth Strachan, Interviewed by Lynda von den Steinen.

would face a prison sentence. But when it came to people working underground, in the early 1980s, the people operating there didn't face much trouble from the authorities, though they did have to keep their work secret. Mozambique was more open in the help they offered the ANC in the 1970s and early 1980s. The ANC and MK were allowed to operate openly as long as they didn't infiltrate South Africa directly across the Mozambiquean borders, but rather went through Swaziland first. Lesotho was generally helpful in allowing MK and the ANC to operate in their country, though their landlocked location limited the usefulness of their more open policy. Swaziland, on the other hand, was never very accepting of the ANC, and refused to have MK operate inside. One ex-MK soldier, who moved to Swaziland with her parents when she was still young, hypothesised that the Swazis never really knew oppression on the scale that the South Africans had to deal with it, and so they didn't understand the whole thing. She would often be asked by Swazi citizens why she bothered to be a part of such activity, and if she really believed that it would have any sort of significance.[8] The levels of co-operation with the ANC on the part of the front line states varied considerably, but all did house a certain number of MK and ANC personnel, with or without their knowledge, and all were used as passages in and out of South Africa for personnel, supplies, money, communications, and weapons.

Whatever open operation or co-operation the ANC and MK enjoyed in the different front line states, the early- to mid- 1980s saw the disappearance of much of the willingness to help. When the South African security forces started to attack the neighbouring countries in attempts to hit ANC and MK personnel, as well as to intimidate and destabilise the front line states, some of the countries yielded to the

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[8] Interview with Khumalo.

pressure to stop helping the ANC. Mozambique was hit in 1981, in the Matola raid, which killed several people. One man who was there at the time recalled, "It was quite obvious it was the work of agents who had crossed over, one kilometre from South Africa...and this was the beginning of the terror campaign that was launched. We lived like rats. We had to run for our lives, we had to sleep [under/out of] the house often, we would get word from Frelimo that so many Boers were seen crossing over, don't sleep in your house...It was a massacre, they attacked three of our houses...They killed 12 of our comrades in three houses. The thirteenth one died subsequently in hospital and they kidnapped two."[9] Later, the South Africans attacked a jam factory with their planes, killing three Mozambiqueans, and later attacked a Mozambiquean house, killing a number of Mozambiqueans and only one ANC member.[10] Many car bombs, assassinations, and raids followed.

Maseru, Lesotho's capital, was hit in December of 1982, and 28 South Africans and 12 Lesotho citizens were killed there by South African commandos. One man who escaped death that night recalled seeing the house across the street which belonged to Chris Hani getting attacked and his flight:

> Around 1 a.m. there was a loud bang which seemed like a bomb. The vibration shook our little house. The second blast happened immediately after the first. I didn't know what was happening but I was dead sure that whatever it was, it was in my neighbourhood. I peeped through the window only to find the house opposite us, owned by Chris Hani, in flames...We went for the door and started to count one, two...my comrade was just about to dash out when the firing started. We quickly crawled back inside leaving the door open as it was. This time the firing was heavier...Again, the firing stopped. We repeated counting, one, two, three...my comrade dashed off. Immediately after, I followed him. We ran as fast as our legs could carry us. Behind us, the firing started. We wondered whether they saw us or whether they were continuing to destroy Hani's house. We didn't

[9] Interview with Indres Naidoo, Interviewed by Hilda Bernstein.

[10] Interview with Naidoo (HiB)

> stop to look but ran in the direction of town. We arrived at the house of a comrade, who was terrified to open the door. Well, eventually he did and we told him what had happened. After some 15-20 minutes, there was a knock at the door. We all froze, saying 'Well, they followed us and finally caught up with us' We asked who it was and, to our relief, it was some of our comrades. They told us that a house where some of our comrades were staying in Thamae, Maseru, had been attacked too. We were frightened, wondering how many had been killed but hoping that it should be either one or none. ..Morning came and around 5 a.m. we walked back...We soon discovered that more than two places had been attacked. The death toll was rising. There was sadness and bitterness in all our faces. We vowed to avenge their death.[11]

Gaborone in Botswana did not escape the raids. In 1983, that city was attacked by South African commandos, to the great surprise of those there. As one man remembered,

> The house across the road from me was attacked and I thought they were coming for me...I was woken up at about half-one in the morning by the sounds of shots. I immediately got up, looked out the window and saw SADF attacking the house across the road. I immediately knew what was going on but didn't know...I knew there were comrades staying across the road...I thought that I was also a target, and my response...I had no means of defence, I was alone in the house and no way of escape because both exits from the house opened right into the view of the SADF soldiers who were just about ten/twenty metres from my front and back door. So I just sat it out. The next morning, of course, when we took stock, 12 people had been killed, quite a few of them locals, or non-ANC people...about six ANC people had been killed. What it interesting about the raid is that this thing had been happening in Mozambique and Lesotho and the problems in Swaziland had been starting and I think we had told ourselves that Botswana was somehow immune."[12]

Swaziland, which had always had less co-operation between the ANC and the Swazi people, experienced ongoing problems. The Swazi government and police often co-operated with the South African government, allowing kidnappings and arrests of ANC personnel in Swaziland. One woman who was operating in Swaziland and

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[11] International Defence and Aid Fund, Fact Paper on Southern Africa No. 12: Massacre at Maseru, South African Aggression Against Lesotho, London: IDAF, 1985, p.19-20.

[12] Interview with Barry Guilder, Interviewed by Hilda Bernstein.

Lesotho recalled her boyfriend, who was an MK soldier, being kidnapped, taken back to South Africa, and arrested and eventually tortured to death by the South Africans, though he was operating inside Swaziland. She was arrested with him, and taken to the border, and would have also been kidnapped if not for the timely intervention of her uncle at the border. She recalled that every time she returned to Swaziland from Lesotho, she would get scared wondering what was awaiting her there, and what would happen to her.[13] Unlike the South African attacks on Angola which had happened earlier, these attacks on neighbouring countries were unexpected and unprecedented.

The different countries' reactions to these raids varied. Mozambique eventually succumbed to the combined attacks both through raids and through the South African support for the rival army that was fighting the government forces in the south of the country, and signed the Nkomati accord in 1984, which ejected the ANC and MK personnel from the country and refused to let them operate in Mozambique. In Botswana, things got more difficult after the raid. One man related,

> It got to a situation where we would frequently get arrested by the local police, jailed, held for two weeks, maybe more, deported to Lusaka. Lusaka's position was that it couldn't afford to send new comrades back and we got sent back illegally and this carried on indefinitely. It was a sort of, in fact you could use the term, I know its sexist- gentleman's agreement- we would get arrested, deported, they'd know we would come back and it would be a cat-and-mouse game, until we got arrested again...But the effect of that was that the more often you got arrested and deported the better known you became to the local police and the more difficult it was to even go down to the shops for a packet of cigarettes.[14]

In Lesotho, the problems were fewer. The Lesotho people and government were very supportive of the ANC's struggle and refused to be intimidated by the South African government. The raids, however, are thought to have played a part in the coup that

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[13] Interview with Khumalo.

[14] Interview with Guilder.

ousted Leabua Jonathan as the leader of the country. While life inside the country was far more dangerous than that in the front line states for MK operatives, raids, bombings, assassinations, and the like often occurred in the front line states as well, making the people operating there constantly fearful for their lives.

Operating inside South Africa

Operations inside South Africa took a number of forms. In the early years following the Soweto uprisings, missions were often hit-and run operations, with units entering the country, hitting a target, and then escaping back into the front line states. Later, some units became more established inside the country and carried out operations for long periods of time, until capture, death, or until their covers were blown and they escaped back into the neighbouring countries.

Originally, the targets hit by MK largely focused on sabotage of government installations. Railways lines, police stations, and government offices formed the majority of targets, though some security police were also attacked. After the Kabwe conference of 1985, the focus changed, and more targets were deemed legitimate. SADF and SAP personnel and installations and those working with the government were also deemed legitimate targets.[15] ANC policy stressed the avoidance of civilian casualties, and this policy is mentioned by most of the MK personnel who participated in operations. Although occasionally civilian personnel, or 'soft targets' were hit by

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[15] ANC, Statement to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, August 1996, p. 49-51.

MK units, more often restraint was practised and the units made major efforts to avoid these casualties.

The hit-and-run operations were largely orchestrated and supplied from outside of the country. The units that were established inside at the time lacked much support from outside. One man who was operating inside in the immediate aftermath of the uprisings recalled that he had no contact with any other ANC cell or structure inside the country, and that he was basically generating his own ideas out of his experience.[16] Another operating at the same time recalled, "We were entirely self-reliant...They picked us up at the border and dropped us at Komatipoort, that was all." His group came in for reconnaissance, left, came back in for the operations, and then left again.[17] This procedure worked well, but neglected to build up a serious presence inside the country, or to get in contact with the people inside the country. Even later, in the early- to mid- 1980s, a special operations unit was set up that organised and carried out hit-and-run operations of a spectacular nature, including the attacks on the Sasol plants, the rocket attack on Voortrekkerhoogte, and other major successes for MK. In his statement to the Truth and Reconciliation, one member of this unit explained their process for carrying out an operation.

> Initially we would have perhaps documentary information which we would pick up on- do some studies around it. For instance if one took the whole question of the power grid etc., a lot of the initial information was gained from documentation, the entire pylon grid was gleaned from documentation [outside of the country]. On the basis of that we would then send initial reconnaissance to determine whether the information that we had gleaned from documents was accurate, reasonably accurate and on the basis of that we would get those reports, we would then draw up initial plans, we would then send units to say: "We are thinking of tackling the following targets, go inside and carry detailed reconnaissance on these." The units would then go to the actual

[16] Interview with Jeremy Cronin, Interviewed by Howard Barrell.

[17] Interview with Naledi Tsiki, Interviewed by Howard Barrell.

> targets, determine what they were able to do and at the same time they would find areas where they could base in, they would begin to look at drawing up a plan of action as to what they were going to do at every point. And each time the cadres then came back to headquarters and reported on what was happening and what they were able to do, we then talked to them about what happens in this case or another case, you know:" Will you be in a position to survive should you face various contingencies"? Of course we couldn't plan for all the contingencies but we tried to look at an all round plan. We would then go into a situation or drawing up a proper plan, we would then infiltrate material that we thought appropriate for that operation, get it into the country,...then people would be sent into the country with the resources that they required, money, the weapons...they would then get to their operational areas. Prior to the time they would then check out the area that they were going to operate in, get to the base areas, establish that, if they needed any additional support they would establish that themselves. They would then go and draw the material from the caches, check the equipment, clean it if it required that and prepare themselves for the operation. They would then carry out final, a final reconnaissance prior to the operation and finally carry out the operation. They would then also withdraw and also trying to ensure that here was an alternative that existed at most times.[18]

Later, the unit was given free reign to choose their own targets. Another member of the same unit explained the process they went through in a real attack.

> I chose the Ciskei Consulate as it represented the discredited...system. The ANC led campaign to discredit the homelands governments was under way at the time. There also existed intense repression at the time which continued until 1994. This was deemed a legitimate target. Reconnaissance of the target revealed that all offices on the floors, on the particular floor, were vacated at the latest by 5.30 pm. The cleaning staff only became active on the floor in the later hours around 8 pm. Mohammed Ismail and I reconnoitred the target the day before the operation was carried out. The following day, I on my own placed the charge at 5.30 pm. The explosion took place around 7.30 pm. According to reports one person was injured.[19]

Similar procedures were followed by many units. Targets had to be established as legitimate, reconnaissance had to be carried out to establish the routine of a place, and

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[18] Transcript of Aboobaker Ismail's hearing for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

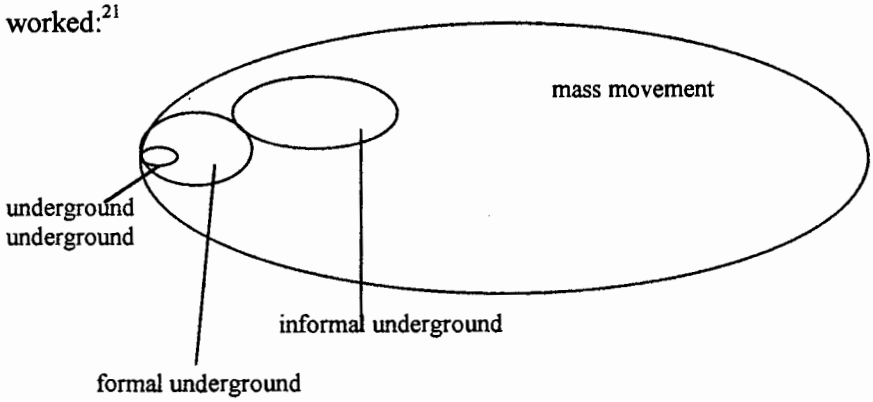
[19] Transcript of Mohamed Shaik's hearing for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

the people who would be there at any given time, so as to avoid unnecessary casualties, then the operation had to be carried out.

Other units had to enter the country, establish bases or safe houses, and undertake a number of tasks. These units were intended to stay active as long as possible. One source notes that in the mid-1980s, "The average MK cadre's period of survival in a unit which remained active was short- about six months, according to one MK officer's estimate."[20] Some units survived longer than this, and others lasted for a shorter time. Survival generally referred to the unit remaining in action and undetected. Arrest could end the survival, as well as blowing their cover and escaping back out of the country.

The units served a number of functions, not just restricted to operations and attacks. They also worked to recruit new members, and sometimes to give them crash course training. Political education also played a part of their roles inside the country, as well as reconnaissance and intelligence.

The set up inside South Africa was a complicated one. A diagram suggested by Howard Barrell, who has written a good deal on MK, gives an idea of how things worked:[21]



[20] Barrell, H. MK: The ANC's Armed Struggle, London: Penguin, 1990, p.60.

[21] Interview with Howard Barrell, Interviewed by Lynda von den Steinen.

The 'underground underground' refers to those who were in the country illegally and operated completely as underground units. The 'formal underground' refers to those who were in the country with legitimate cover stories, perhaps with legitimate or forged ID documents, and were working underground on the side. The 'informal underground' refers to those who saw themselves as working for the ANC and furthering its goals, though they worked without any guidance or contact with the organisation. Then the 'mass movement' refers to the general movement working against the apartheid government.

Those who were working in the 'underground underground' had to work under serious security and secrecy. They did not have cover stories and were in the country illegally, which placed them in far more danger of being picked up by the police. They would stay in 'safe houses' or at bases they established themselves. One unit actually created a sort of urban dugout system, using tactics learned from the Vietnamese. They were set up for living in the bush, while operating in the Pretoria area. One member explained that they created hideouts that were not visible to the naked eye, but were central to the area in which they were operating.[22] This was an extreme case, however. Most units working this far underground had to operate out of safe houses. One woman who was part of a mixed race unit working in Cape Town explained that they usually rented a house in one area or another, and then made efforts not to draw attention to themselves. If they were staying in a Coloured area, she would stay in the house and out of sight, as she was white. If they stayed in a white area, the non-white members of the group would remain out of sight. In this way, they avoided attracting attention to themselves.[23]

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[22] Interview with Solly Shoke, Interviewed by Wolfie Kodesh.

[23] Interview with Shirley Gunn, Interviewed by Lynda von den Steinen

Those working in the 'formal underground' usually had cover stories to explain their presence in the country and their lifestyles. They would either hold normal jobs or appear to hold normal jobs, and would be integrated into their communities as normal members of the area. One man explained that his contact found him a place to stay and he had to come up with a story of who he was and what he was doing. He said he was James, from the Free State, and had happened to get a job in Johannesburg, so he would stay with these people until he managed to organise other arrangements. Every day he would have to wake up as though he was going to work and then come back in the evening as though he had just finished. Really he didn't have a job, and was doing underground work during the days, but in this way, he was able to stay in this home and look like a normal member of the community.[24] The people in the 'informal underground' were very useful to the people working inside the country, as contacts, couriers, and support personnel. While they were not necessarily directly involved in the organisation, they shared a common purpose, and as normal citizens, had more freedom of movement and connections with the communities in which the units were operating. They could also be given political education which would bring them closer to the folds of the ANC, and they provided a good pool of recruits for training and for membership of the ANC.

Communication and supply routes were tricky parts of working inside the country. There were practically as many different ways to communicate as there were operatives in the country. Communication had to be possible among the units, their regional command, and the leadership outside of the country. While many units had a large amount of autonomy, able to go for long periods without communicating with

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[24] Interview with Shoke.

their leaders, and authorised to designate their own targets, carry out operations, and do their other duties without checking in constantly with their higher ups, there were always times when communication was necessary. Supplies needed to be brought into the country so operations could be carried out. Changes in policy or specific orders needed to be able to reach the units. Communication was a key part of operations inside the country, but often was very difficult due to the long and often insecure lines among the different levels of personnel.

Supplies were brought into the country in various ways. Often one person or unit would be responsible for bringing arms, money, or messages into the country and locating them somewhere. They would then report back to someone in touch with the unit inside, who would receive information on where the supplies were located. In this way, security was maintained, as the units would not know the people who delivered the stuff, or even how to find them, and vice versa. Often vehicles were purchased by the organisation, then adapted to have hidden compartments where the material to be brought in could be stored. The vehicles would then be driven across the border without the material being found, and the supplies would be hidden somewhere where the units would be able to locate them. One woman involved in bringing supplies in from Zimbabwe explained,

> I used to travel maybe every 6 weeks, two months I'd go the whole Botswana route...we were doing our own arms carrying. And I- that's where I will drive the weapons down and hand them over...they were all custom sort of- custom built DLBs [Dead Letter Boxes] as well-hidden caches in...I would generally buy vehicles, generally in Botswana because it's cheaper and get back. We would deal with them, we had some very good people who are excellent...at hiding these things. And then we had a very effective way of wrapping, it would all be sort of foil and then...gloves and seal everything...I mean our packing was just like a jigsaw puzzle. And it was that- some aspect of it was very professional...Well I had to make contact with people and transfer or- in some occasions because things weren't set up we actually had to dig holes, bury these and generally...so that [another]

> person's responsibility then to make sure that the person coming in from South Africa would then know exactly where it was.[25]

Another example from Zimbabwe became famous when it was discovered. The ANC actually set up a backpackers touring company that operated out of Europe, doing 'Cape to Cairo' holidays in a bus. People on their holidays would travel on the bus, and when they stopped in Zambia or Zimbabwe, while they went to see the sights, the operatives would load weapons into concealed compartments within the touring bus. The tourists would then ride on top of these weapons into South Africa, where someone else would unload them.[26] Another man recalled his experiences in bringing supplies in to the country. He would go to Lesotho with another operative, and the ANC personnel would hide pamphlets and literature in their vehicle. They wouldn't be told where it was hidden or how it was done, and would find themselves terribly nervous as they crossed the border, but they were never caught.[27] These are only a few examples of methods of bringing things into the country. Many vehicles were adapted in these ways to bring in supplies for those that were operating inside.

The methods of communication were incredibly varied and frequently as sophisticated as they were simple. Often communication was done through couriers. One man who was supposed to be a student at the University of Cape Town had a room in a residence, and people would drop off a parcel, or a newspaper with some message wrapped inside of it, and he would pick them up at his residence. In this way many messages got through without compromising the couriers or the people sending and receiving the messages, who never actually saw one another. Another very useful

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[25] Interview with Brown.

[26] Interview with Strachan (LV)

[27] Interview with Ayanda Ntsaluba, Interviewed by Wolfie Kodesh.

and successful method was the use of Dead Letter Boxes (DLBs). With only two letters and a number, one trained in this method could find a DLB anywhere in South Africa. One might receive a letter regarding a theatre production a friend had seen, so something else seemingly innocuous, with pinpricks under the key letters and number, or an ad in the newspaper that held the important information while posing as an innocent personal advertisement. With the two letters and a number, one could find the correct area, find a mark on a stone or wall or something, and find the hiding spot with the supplies, whether money, messages, or even weapons.[28] This was also useful for security as the people planting things in the DLBs and the people receiving the supplies never met and couldn't compromise each other if they were caught.

Another common method was that of a 'book code'. One person on each end of the communication had to have a copy of the same book, and that was the way to crack the code. Without knowing what book was being used, the code was impossible to decipher. One man who worked for the political underground and often did reconnaissance for MK's operations explained the process. He had been using a copy of The Omen: Final Conflict, and in order to write the letter he would have to find the word he wanted in the book, write the page number, line number, and word number for each word in the letter. This was particularly difficult in cases where place names or people's names were involved, as he had to write the code out for each letter of the name in question. Once the coded letter was completed, he would photograph the paper with the coded report, process the pictures, and cut the negative into the smallest possible piece. He would then take a postcard, slice it open, slip in the negative, glue it shut, address it, and go to a post box away from his home to post it. The process of translating a report into code could take as long as three or four hours, and the whole

[28] Interview with Barrell.

process was terribly time consuming, but once done, the code was very difficult to break.[29] Also popular for arranging meetings were newspaper advertisements, as mentioned above. A simple classified ad in the Mail and Guardian that read, "Dear Ruby, dinner last Friday night was divine, let's do it again next week." would translate into a particular place and time for meeting, if one knew the right way to analyse it.[30] These are but a few ways of communicating that allowed important information to be sent and received by the units operating inside the country without being overly suspicious or easily interceptable by the security police.

Also important was combating any surveillance that the police might have on a soldier, particularly one that was working in the 'formal underground,' with a cover story and possibly a documented background in activism. Using public telephones or borrowing an acquaintance's phone was one way to get around any phone taps that might occur. Phone taps could also be useful in spreading dis-information. If one suspected that his phone was tapped, but pretended to have no idea, it was possible to elaborate a cover story or send incorrect information to the authorities. Talking outside the home was often a way to get away from surveillance. One man who worked with his wife in the political underground recalls that whenever they wanted to discuss anything that would compromise them, they would go for a walk.[31] Others suggested that sometimes being blatant was a good way to confuse the security police. By having a high profile as a political journalist, the same man was able to say to the security police, "I would have to be really stupid to be drawing attention to myself by

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[29] Interview with Vick.

[30] Interview with Vick.

[31] Interview with Barrell.

writing about the ANC if I was also working for them." While this approach was dangerous, it did manage to get him out of trouble on a couple of occasions.[32] Another woman was called in by the security police and forced to write a statement before being released. She had been trained to stick as much as possible to the truth, for example, not denying knowing someone if she could have been seen with them, but simply denying knowledge of their activities. Once she was released, she returned home and immediately reproduced her statement so as to remember exactly what she had told them. This came in handy when she was called back in every Monday by the police and asked to rewrite the statement. She was able to go over the statement she had reproduced and stick to the same story.[33] By switching around meeting places, calling on different phones, and otherwise changing one's modus operandi, it was possible to escape surveillance in many instances.

Another common method of communications and support for the unit was through couriers and contacts, who were part of the 'informal underground' or who had been recruited for the purpose of communications. One woman who was operating in Lesotho was enrolled at Roma University there, and actively sought out South African students to recruit in this way. She would befriend them, then give them political education to bring them to the side of the ANC. Once this had happened, with a little training as well, she was able to give their names and details to incoming MK soldiers as contacts, or to send them to South Africa with messages for the units inside. As legitimate South African students, they were able to get in and out of the country easily and without suspicion, and they knew the communities inside

[32] Interview with Barrell.

[33] Interview with Khumalo.

well.[34] Many people came in to the folds of the ANC and MK this way, starting out as friends or often, in the case of women, lovers of MK soldiers, who would mould them into ANC supporters and then use them as couriers or contacts. This same woman often got into long debates and arguments with some male comrades, arguing that when one recruited men, they merely talked to them, but when recruiting women, the men often entered into relationships with them and then gradually brought them into the folds of the ANC in this manner. She herself had become involved this way, and didn't think it was necessary to have these double standards.[35] Through couriers and contacts who were recruited to help in this way, many messages and much support was able to pass through to the units working in the country.

Despite all of these different methods of communication and supplies, units sometimes became cut off from their connections to the outside. This often happened when someone in a key position in the lines of communication was captured by the police. In some cases the units were forced to come up with money, contacts, and even material for weapons on their own. Some used contacts with people they knew in the area, while others called on the informal underground to find support. One man who operated a unit in Cape Town for two years, which was an unusually long time, found his unit cut off for a period. He explained, "After some time, communication between us and headquarters was cut off, we had to fend for ourselves, to go look for money, contacts, support, and all. We succeeded. We relinked with headquarters again later, and supplies came in, especially arms and explosives, and our operations

[34] Interview with Khumalo.

[35] Interview with Khumalo.

grew in scope and quality."[36] In this way some units were able to lengthen their survival by remaining in action even without support from the outside.

Details on actual operations carried out by the units are few and far between, and some people are still worried that they could get in trouble for exposing their involvement in this area. However, for an idea of the scope of operations, and the years in which MK was most effective in this area, see Tom Lodge and Bill Nasson's book, All Here, and Now, which gives charts of the number and type of operations each year. For a list of operations, see the ANC's submission to the Truth Commission.

The Effects of Working Underground

Working inside the country was a terribly dangerous assignment. Some lucky MK soldiers managed to escape back out of the country if their covers were blown or the police caught on to their activities. Shoot-outs with police happened on occasion, and many soldiers died in confrontations like this. Even if one were caught without violence, he often faced torture at the hands of police. 'Accidents' in police custody occured, and many activists died at the hands of the police or in their custody, due to excessive torture, neglect, sickness, or sometimes purposeful murders. Even if one survived police custody, a trial could find one imprisoned for lengthy periods of time or even executed if the crime were deemed serious enough. Many MK soldiers lost their lives through judicial decisions during this period. That is one of the reasons why the ANC government is so strongly opposed to the death penalty today. Working inside the country even as a political operative was terribly dangerous, and to work as a soldier, actively attacking the apartheid government and structures was something

[36] Interview with Tony Yengeni, Interviewed by Wolfie Kodesh.

that brought the deaths of many soldiers. Conditions like this made life underground exceedingly stressful and taxing. Many people who operated inside the country have severe emotional and psychological scars that have not healed to this day.

The first few months or even years of operation could often be as exciting as they were stressful. Finally being able to put training to use and make an active contribution to the struggle was enormously exciting, and often very fulfilling. Many ex-soldiers cite an intense rush of adrenalin and a major high that came with carrying out an operation. The stress, danger, and excitement that came with carrying out an attack often left one seriously excited for a period after the attack was completed. If an operative was working in the 'formal underground,' and living as a normal member of the community, this could be a dangerous condition, as it was hard to explain this post-operation rush if people met this person and wondered why he was acting so strangely.

Eventually, however, the elation and excitement would gradually wear off, and the stress and fear would take the upper hand. One woman recalls that the first year she worked underground, she was always excited, but then the stress became too much for her. She was seeing her comrades dying and being captured, and a feeling of serious depression and fear became far more common to her.[37] Another man who was working in the political underground remarked that living under constant stress and paranoia was very enervating, it made him very tired, terribly worn down and lonely.[38] The drain on one's emotional strength was often immense, and many of those who worked inside the country and in the front lines eventually found themselves burning

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[37] Interview with Khumalo.

[38] Interview with Barrell.

out on the work, and many had to move on to other postings far away from it all to recover.

Security was always an important consideration for those who worked in South Africa and in the front lines. Secrets became a huge part of their lives, and lies were also usually necessary. If an operative had a rough experience, he simply could not share it with someone else due to security conditions, and often people ended up feeling horribly isolated and alone. The need to keep people from knowing too much also fed this isolation. One sometimes only had contact with one or two other people, and sometimes had rare and sparse communication with the people above him, though some people worked in units of three or so people, and did have some support available to them. People in the front lines often had contact with the leaders and visits from them, which could keep up their morale, but the people working inside the country were often without this support.

While it was easy enough to remember that there were hundreds of other people in the same situation and thousands outside supporting the work one is doing, it is much harder to believe that and feel the support when one is cut off from the rest of one's comrades. One man who worked in the political underground, often carrying out reconnaissance for MK's operational units as well as doing political work, noted that he never really received feedback on the work he was doing, due to its very nature, and it was often very discouraging and disheartening not to have the affirmation of his work. While he knew that what he was doing was worthwhile, he had no idea of how much his work really was having an effect, or whether it was effecting anything at all. This lack of support led to a deep feeling of isolation and depression on some

occasions.[39] By the very nature of the work most of the underground soldiers were undertaking, the feeling of having a huge organisation and thousands of people behind one just wasn't there most of the time, and many soldiers became very discouraged.

Some also had problems due to their personalities. One woman who worked with a unit in Cape Town explained that she was a very talkative and outgoing person, and life underground was really terrible for her because she had to suppress that side of her. Another man in her unit was more introverted and solitary, and didn't have so much difficulty with the situation, but for her it was really a horrible situation.[40] The emotional drain that life underground had on the soldiers was often devastating, and many found themselves burnt out after a short period in operations.

For those who were working inside the country under a cover story, it was often very difficult to adapt once they were demobilised. By the very nature of working clandestinely while maintaining an above-board identity, they had to lie all the time. Each operative working in this way had to build up a legend around themselves, and constantly support it and embroider it. Some people who went through this found that their lives were profoundly affected by this situation. One man who worked in the political underground noted that he would have a partner, and wouldn't be able to tell her the truth, wouldn't be able to unburden himself to her, and would have to lie constantly. Even today, he finds it hard to deal with relationships. With all of the lies, legends, secrets, and deceptions he was involved in, it all became a way of life. Now he finds it hard to have a close and trusting relationship, and even to this day, he finds it hard to tell the truth when lying comes so naturally to him.[41] Another woman who

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[39] Interview with Vick.

[40] Interview with Gunn.

[41] Interview with Vick.

worked in the front lines finds that since she made friendships as a way of recruiting people, and picked people to be with who would be useful to the struggle, she ended up without many close relationships in her life. Even today she finds it hard to get close to people, and rarely allows herself to get involved in serious friendships.[42] Many people who were involved in the underground have underlying problems which stem from their time underground and still affect them today.

Some others feel that they missed out on life by being involved in the struggle. One woman mentioned that while she was involved with MK, she would sometimes wonder whether it was all worthwhile. She knew that other people she had grown up with had made something of their lives, maybe received an education, found a good job, made money, settled down to marriage and children, had done things that she wanted for herself in earlier years. She doesn't regret what she did, but often found herself plagued by self-doubt during her time in the struggle.[43] Another woman realised that she never really had a normal youth. She spent all of her time involved in politics. Instead of thinking of boys or having a spotty face in her teenage years, she was going to rallies and only knowing people involved with the struggle. She feels like she wants to do things now that she wasn't able to do when she was younger.[44] Many people who worked underground and spent their whole lives doing this sort of work find themselves working through a lot of emotional problems today as a result. But few would change the routes their lives had taken if they had the chance.

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[42] Interview with Khumalo.

[43] Interview with Khumalo.

[44] Conversation with Rassool (LV)

The constant fear and stress also took a toll on many people. Fear of arrest, fear of failure, uncertainty about the future, and knowledge of what awaited one if he was captured hung over the heads of these soldiers constantly, and was also very draining. One woman who worked in the front lines around the time of the raids that were going on recalled that every time she went back into Swaziland, she would find herself wondering what would be awaiting her. She would go to sleep not knowing if someone were going to attack and kill her during the night. Every time she went to the border, she would be harassed by the Swazi citizens there, and the whole situation was very depressing and draining. Eventually she simply had to get out, and left to go overseas for many years.[45] Living under a constant sense of danger and fear was also very difficult for the operatives.

Conclusion

For the MK soldiers working inside South Africa and in the front line states, life was filled with danger, fear, and excitement. Some found themselves eventually arrested and put in prison. Others had to flee the country. Some had breakdowns from the stress of the circumstances they found themselves in. Many are still affected by their circumstances today. But they were lucky in that they had the chance to do what they had intended all along, and are secure in the fact that they did something important and notable. Many lost comrades and friends to death at the hands of the security forces. Many others did not survive to tell their stories today. This chapter looks only at a few slices of the lives of the MK soldiers working in operations inside South Africa and in the front line states. Much detail and information on this subject still needs to be found and documented.

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[45] Interview with Khumalo.

Chapter 6
Women in MK

But my point argument and logic
come
from piles of dead bodies
and the necks struggling under the yoke
ask them what they think of me
"a nice girl like you" as you put it
when I shoulder with pride
this AK 47[1]

Introduction

Women made up a minority of Umkhonto we Sizwe's cadres, but played an important part in the army, nonetheless. They went through the same training as their male comrades, and some returned to the country to fight as fully fledged MK soldiers, while others contributed to the organisation in exile. With the ANC's stress on non-sexism, the presence of women in its army was a crucial issue. The women who joined did so with the idea of being equal players in the army, and proved themselves to be just as good as their male comrades. However, life in MK as a woman had many problems and added stresses that the men did not have to deal with. This made their contributions and successes all the more notable. This chapter will deal with the question of why so few women joined MK, what they found when they got there, their treatment in MK, and their subsequent activities. It will look at both the good and bad side of being a woman in MK, and the particular place they held in the organisation.

Why so few women in MK?

[1] From Kumalo, Lerato, "No more words now," in ed. Molefe, Sono, Malibongwe- ANC Women: Poetry is also their weapon, ANC, p. 14.

Women played a vital part in the struggle for liberation in South Africa. Making up more than fifty percent of the population of the country, and often finding themselves doubly discriminated against on the basis of both race and gender, they sometimes had even more reason to fight back than their male counterparts. However, the number of women that found their way to Umkhonto we Sizwe was very small. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report notes that by the early 1990s, only 20% of MK was composed of women. This statistic is misleading, however, as according to the women and men who were in MK, the percentage of women in the training camps was often much lower. The first group of the Soweto generation to go to the training camps in Angola remember only 2% of the intake being female. By the mid-1980s, the percentage of women was closer to 10%, but still far from the 20% the TRC claims in the early 1990s. These small percentages are particularly notable when compared to the active role women have played in many other revolutions, both in Africa and abroad. This thesis looks only at those people who *did* join MK, rather than all those who might have, and thus is missing the crucial testimonies of the huge number of women who *did not* join MK. However, from various documents as well as interviews with those women who did become MK soldiers, it is possible to find several reasons for this lack of participation in the army by women, and answer some of the questions that arise from these reasons. As the issue of gender in struggle histories has been greatly neglected, issues such as these rarely see the light of day. This chapter will only look at a narrow slice of the lives of women in the struggle, but hopefully the future will see more studies of marginalised groups in history, such as women.

The involvement of more women in MK could have been advantageous for their fight against apartheid. In a society as patriarchal as South Africa was during this period, women would have been underestimated and sometimes even above suspicion

in their movements and actions in a way that men could not match. There was a famous incident in Pretoria of a white woman who would go into police stations and ask to use their toilets. She would then plant bombs inside the police station. As a white woman, she was not suspected of having ulterior motives in requesting the use of the toilets, and caused some serious damage in this way.[2] Black women would have been in a good position to work underground and cause damage to the white communities, as many were employed in white households as maids. More trained women working underground in this capacity could have achieved a lot both in terms of intelligence and in inflicting damage on key portions of the white community, such as police officers and politicians. One article in the ANC women's section journal, Voice of Women explained,

> We should co-ordinate our activities and confront the enemy on all corners of our country; on the factory floor and even after working hours. We who work as domestic servants should use whatever methods we can master to demonstrate our strength to those known members of the SADF who think they are out of reach when they are in their houses. Those of us working on the farms, the more so that most farmers are part of the SADF and have subjected women and children to the most terrible conditions- have the revolutionary duty to weaken the farmers through methods like sabotage. We should use all means in our power to destroy their fields which are a symbol of oppression. Let us leave the enemy more disillusioned and panick-stricken than every before... We the women are a very capable force in our country. We can move from place to place unnoticed and perform lots of tasks in the interest of our liberation struggle. We can even move and work in the white areas and complement a lot of our actions in the black townships.[3]

Many internal ANC papers recognised this potential for women to serve the struggle. One mentioned, "The experience of the Vietnamese have shown once more the special role that can be played by women in intelligence collecting. It remains for us to

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[2] See Ncame, Rachael Weziwe, The Role of Women in Umkhonto we Sizwe, 1976-1990, unpublished Honours thesis for the University of the Western Cape, 1998, p. 23.

[3] "December Sixteen and our People's War" in Voice of Women, 4th Quarter, 1985, p. 4.

explore prospects of training more women in this field."[4] Despite the recognition in many areas of the potential of recruiting and training more women, this idea was neglected by the organisation. The women were most often brought to the movement through their own women's organisations and through the actions of women already involved in the struggle. But it is clear that the recruitment and training of more women could only have been beneficial to MK and its actions.

While it is impossible accurately to say how many women were involved in the Soweto uprisings, some indications do exist. John Kane-Berman notes,

> Girls participated actively in the demonstrations. Photographs show a large number in marches. In August 1976, 110 youngsters between the ages of 12 and 25 were convicted of public violence at Hammanskraal (just north of Pretoria): 53 were males and 57 females. The previous month a press report had it that 280 schoolgirls went on the 'rampage'. Both the police and the chairman of the Cape Peninsula Bantu Affairs Administration Board claimed that violence in the Peninsula townships shortly after Christmas began when girls and young women attacked a men's hostel in Nyanga...[5]

As was noted in Chapter 1, many girls who went on to join MK were involved in the Soweto uprisings. It is clear that the reason for so few women joining MK was not from a lack of participation on their part during events inside of South Africa, where they were just as active as their male counterparts, and in large numbers.

One might guess that women didn't have the impetus to leave, and were treated less harshly by the police. However, this is patently untrue. As seen in Chapters 1 and 2, many women had it just as hard as the men. In many cases, it was worse for the women, as in addition to the physical and psychological torture heaped on both men and women by the police, women had the added threat of rape at the hands of the

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[4] Report of Commission on Military Training, Improvement of Skills and Deployment, part of preparatory papers for the National Consultative Conference in 1985.

[5] Kane-Berman, p. 8.

police, and the physical, mental, and social effects of that. A quick glance through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's final report, particularly the special hearing on women, details major abuse of women at the hands of the security police. One excerpt gives an idea of the horror involved

> Ms. Thandi Shezi first had her hands and feet chained while she was assaulted. 'Then they unchained me, and Sam took the white sack and put it on my head... they poured acid on this water that they were pouring on me and that acid got into my eye and today I can't see properly in the other eye... they used this electrodes to choke me...until I bit my tongue and my tongue got torn... And one of them said, "We must just humiliate her and show her that this ANC can't do anything for her"... then the whole four of them started raping me whilst they were insulting me and using vulgar words and said I must tell them the truth.[6]

Men could sometimes keep their spirits up by knowing that they were holding out against the police, but when women tried the same tactic, it often backfired on them, as seen in the TRC report. One woman recalled that when men, "stood ground against the physical abuse, there was a sense of respect- where the torturers would even say: "Hy is 'n man" [He is a man]. But when a woman refused to bow down, to be cowed down, then that unleashed the wrath of the torturers, because in their own discourse a woman, a black 'meid', a 'kaffermeid' [kaffir servant girl], had no right to have the strength to withstand their torture." She noted also, "It was always 'You think you are a man, you think you are strong, we are going to bring you down, we've brought down better people than yourself, men, strong men'".[7]

Many other women who went into detention pregnant ended up miscarrying their children due to their torture at the hands of the police. Many were threatened

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[6] Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report, Cape Town: Juta and Co. Ltd., 1998, Volume Four, Chapter Ten, p.296.

[7] Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report, Cape Town: Juta and Co. Ltd., 1998, Volume Four, Chapter Ten, p. 301.

with dire consequences for their children or other members of their families. These examples are only the tip of the iceberg of the contents of this section of the TRC report, and the TRC report only a small portion of the experiences the women of South Africa were subjected to. To tell all the horrible details of the things women in detention and prison went through would take ages, but even with these few examples, it is clear that when it came to police harassment women had as much reason as men both to fight back and to flee into exile to keep from being captured.

One reason for the scarcity of women in MK was their position in society. In any patriarchal society, the women are more restricted to the private sphere of life, dealing more with the children, family, and household than the men do. When women did get involved in politics, they were often discouraged by their family members and by society. The TRC report also provides some examples of this problem. One woman, who was the daughter of a PAC leader, related that the policy was, "Women should stay at home, should not participate. It was all by way of trying to say when we [the men] go out to jail, when we [the men] go out and be killed, you look after the children...The husbands wouldn't share much."[8] No less a prominent leader than Govan Mbeki expressed a similar sentiment in the ANC, "The police were looking for meetings. So when you left you did not tell your wife where you were going, and when you returned...they were asleep and your food was on the stove...Women created problems for the (liberation) movement because they wanted to know."[9]

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[8] Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report, Cape Town: Juta and Co. Ltd., 1998, Volume Four, Chapter Ten, p. 289.

[9] Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report, Cape Town: Juta and Co. Ltd., 1998, Volume Four, Chapter Ten, p. 289.

Single women and young girls were in slightly better positions to become involved in politics, as they didn't have children and husbands to leave behind, but they were often subject to the same restrictions on the part of their parents. One ex-MK woman remembers that during the Soweto uprisings she and her two sisters, the eldest three of six children, were involved in the events. Their father was opposed, and when the subject came up, he would exclaim, "No daughter of mine would be involved in all this." When her sister was assaulted by police during a demonstration, the other two girls had to fix her up and hide her from their father until she had healed.[10] While many men fled into exile and left behind parents, girlfriends, even wives and children, many women didn't feel that they could leave behind their families and leave the country. Further, the nature of apartheid was such that many women were left at home while the men went to work as migrant labourers, and any children would have been without support and guidance had they left. And many let their family commitments stand in the way of their involvement in politics. One ex-MK soldier asserted, "MK made a big mistake of not recruiting more women. Women are in many ways more naturally suited to this kind of work. Unfortunately it was harder for women to leave, especially for long periods of time, as they were too involved in aspects of their communities and families."[11] Even for those who did get involved, it was difficult for them constantly to fight the idea that women had specific roles in society, notably not that of soldiers. One woman who did go on to MK noted, "Before training I thought men were the only people who could make use of a gun. I did not understand the role of women in the liberation struggle. I thought the role of women was to cook for the men who would do the fighting. The impression I had was that a

[10] Interview with Tsidi Mhlambo, Interviewed by Lynda von den Steinen.

[11] Interview with Shirley Gunn, Interviewed by Lynda von den Steinen

woman who handled weapons undermined herself, meaning one was not acting as a 'lady'."[12] However, as noted above, a large number of women was still involved in the Soweto uprisings, and these societal restrictions were not the sole cause of the lack of women in the army.

The only other reason evident within the limited sources used in this study is the process which recruits experienced on their way into exile. When asked whether the recruits wanted to go into school or the military, pressure was often applied to influence people in one way or the other. As noted in Chapter 2, young girls were often encouraged to go into school rather than the military. Many of those whose interviews are used in this study fought this pressure and insisted on going into the military, but many others must have yielded. There was also a lot of pressure for men of this generation from their comrades to go into the military, though, as one man remembered, "We looked down on students, thought that they left, ran away from apartheid, and were going to school, we asked them, 'who's going to fight for you?' We didn't want to feel that small."[13] Women had a bit more leeway in the matter, due to stereotypes and prejudices about their gender, and were not looked on so badly for choosing to study.

During the township revolts of the 1980s, and the resulting wave of people who joined MK, women became more prominent in the resistance to apartheid. With the rise of women's organisations in many areas and their activity in the larger congress-aligned UDF, women found themselves more involved in the events sweeping the nation. Many women who had previously left these things to men found themselves

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[12] Mokoena, S., "Women in Umkhonto," in Mayibuye: the Fortnightly Journal of the ANC, Number 11, 1981, p. 3.

[13] Interview with Sipho Binda, Interviewed by Wolfie Kodesh.

jumping in to the struggle in earnest. As seen in Chapter 2, many older women were becoming interested in playing a larger part in the struggle. She explained,

> You know what really inspired me in the question of MK is that women inside the country were so angry about...or tired...sick and tired of the soldiers in the township, occupying the township, that they used to say, 'Caesarine, you know some of our brothers and kids went away in 76, they are not coming back. We are expecting them to come and kill these people, just have a look they are occupying the township. Now we want to go'...and I'm talking about grownups in [their] fifties, in [their] sixties, now want to go and join this MK. To go and fetch arms and fire these people as their mothers because it seems to me that they are not really serious, they are not prepared to come back and as their leader inside the country, you know that thing is sort, you must be exemplary, that's why I decided...Because mothers really are prepared to go for MK and come back and fight because they couldn't stand how kids were harassed, tortured and all that in front of them by this SADF in the townships.[14]

By this period, many more women found their ways into MK, though they were still a serious minority. While these and many other issues influenced women in their choices to join MK, the reasons for more women not joining emerge less readily from the limited sources used herein, so clearly merit further exploration.

Women in the Training Camps and Relations with the Male Comrades

Women went through the same training program as the men in the camps in Angola. However, they faced many problems that were unique to their gender, and many prejudices existed against them. While the training program was the same, many found attitudes towards them that didn't exist for them men. Love affairs, sexual relations, and in many cases sexual harassment added another level to their experiences in the camps. And many had to find a way to balance their identities as soldiers and as women.

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[14] Interview with Caesarine Gwanamakuru, Interviewed by Hilda Bernstein.

The first group of women to join MK in the wake of the Soweto uprisings went to Angola with the rest of the recruits, but were accommodated in the town of Luanda, at the former South African embassy, which had become a residence for ANC personnel in Angola, rather than at the Engineering transit camp just outside of town with their male comrades. Some women who arrived very soon after the Soweto uprisings recall that they ended up cooking for the men in the camp,

> We used to cook for them where we were staying because the food in this camp where they were, was just too bad and the place was dirty, they had to start from scratch keeping the place clean, because the Angolan comrades- they didn't seem to be conscious about cleanliness, especially the soldiers. The place was filthy and the way, the manner in which they cooked was [not] healthy so the request was made by the comrades that we cook for them and bring their food there every day. Well we did that, because we could see for ourselves that really there was a problem.[15]

Later on, the men's camp learned to take care of themselves, and the women simply dealt with their own residence. At first this caused some problems with the male comrades, who couldn't understand why the women were staying in town in a nice house, while they were stuck at the camp, going through the initial training. One man recalled that the women were staying in town and it made them angry, they thought, 'they call themselves soldiers, but stay in town.'[16] A compromise was reached in which the women would still stay at the embassy but participate in the training program in the camps. On Christmas, they baked cakes and brought them to the camp for a party[17], but in general, their cooking was done at the embassy, where they were

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[15] Interview with Gloria Meek, Interviewed by Hilda Bernstein.

[16] Interview with Binda.

[17] Interview with Meek

staying with some of the leaders, and was done on a rotating basis with the male leaders also doing their share of the work.[18]

When they reached the training camp in Benguela, they were finally put in with the rest of the recruits for a general program of training, sharing equally in the duties. The women were given a room in the old plantation house there to share, which by all reports was quite crowded. One woman remembered, "There were 10 women sharing a small room, we slept like sardines, if one turned, we all turned."[19] Early on in the training there, water became scarce, and the women banded together to make the most of their rations. One woman explained, "There was a breakdown in the generator, so the generator could no longer pump water and it was quite a long distance that this water had to come from. So water rationing started in the camp. You could only get a cup of water to wash your teeth, your whole body and everything! We had to wash in that cup of water. So what we used to do, we collected a big tin and we contribute each our cup of water and we all used to bath out of that tin there!"[20] Another woman described the situation in more detail, relating that the women would put all of their cups together in a basin and then take turns washing themselves piece by piece, starting by each woman washing her face, then each her teeth, and so on, working gradually, limb by limb, to the more dirty parts, and ending with the vital areas of women who were currently menstruating. In this way, the water stayed cleaner for longer for all of them to wash with.[21] Sometimes they would run low on supplies, and if they were out of toothpaste, would brush their teeth with soap, and when out of

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[18] Interview with Mhlambo.

[19] Interview with Mhlambo.

[20] Interview with Meek.

[21] Interview with Mhlambo.

soap, wash their bodies with toothpaste. The men would simply not wash in this predicament, but the women would simply laugh and make do with what they had.[22] The women would often share their supplies and work out systems like this to combat the conditions in which they were living.

When it came to the training program, by all accounts the women and men went through the same routines. Some accounts note that originally the women were given their own platoon, but that this did not work out well, and they were soon integrated into platoons with the male trainees. One remembered,

> We were made to make a platoon of our own, a women, and well we were in the company with men, but we were a platoon on our own, but it didn't work out because... it was so difficult to adjust to military life. In the morning we have to be very sharp, ten minutes for washing, ten minutes for eating, all these things, and it was quite difficult for us to wear our uniforms, boots and everything, so sometimes we would be 20 , 30 minutes late and our whole detachment would be waiting for us to come to the... because they can't go on without... the detachment there, and they would really get mad at us, come and find that somebody's still struggling to put on their boots, other one is struggling with the uniform, one is still washing and they are waiting in the detachment for us, in the formation for us to come there, so it was quite interesting in the beginning, it was quite funny, but later on this thing... as time went by we got used to these things, and then the platoon was split into different sections. We had to join the male comrades in the different platoons because they found that that platoon was just too indisciplined and it was... it was not organised... So they thought that if they put us in the sections with the men, things will be better and really things did improve, we learnt to be faster because they... I would... scream at us if we were late, so things did improve in that way.[23]

Once things got going and the women became used to the training program and routine, they settled into the platoons with their male comrades, and did the training there alongside them. A paper written for the women's conference in September 1987 remarked, "Women enjoy equality in practice. They participate in all activities of the

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[22] Interview with Mhlambo.

[23] Interview with Meek.

army. In training there is no differentiation, as in responsibility."[24] Sometimes the women surpassed the men at the training, which was not appreciated by many of the male comrades. One woman recalled,

> Men think that women cannot do what are called difficult tasks. For instance, when the time came for us [to] go to the shooting range for the first time, you know they would be very protective. 'Oh, this gun is too heavy, you can't use that,' and so on. And when you beat them at the shooting range, you know its like, 'What is happening, can you give us...how do you do it?' Because they think in order to shoot straight, you must be very strong, because the gun is heavy and the recoil is very hard, it can break your shoulder if you are not very careful and especially when it comes to pistol training. Because the rifle is much easier than the pistol. The pistol is very heavy and you have to hold it on one hand very steady and I learnt that the trick is not to aim too long. Because when you aim too long, then the hand starts quivering and by the time you pull the trigger, you are off the target completely. So the best thing is to aim very briefly and pull and that does it. Now people tend to want to make sure that the target is within the sights and it doesn't take long to know that the sights are correct. And other than that, I didn't find so much discrimination.[25]

Many of the men took the successes of the women as blows to their own manhood, and reacted by making fun of the women. One woman related, "Some of the men will tease us you know, especially when we're doing tactics, running, and especially if, let say if you, if I run faster than one of them, the males, they'll start passing funny remarks, 'no no no no, you can't beat me you're a woman'... They used to say such things, and it just would discourage you...I was voted best combatant two or three times in my detachment."[26] Another woman noted,

> It was sort of a semi-desert in Benguela...the grass was thorny, it was hard grass, you know, it was thorny and it was dry, very dry...you had to go and crawl and we would come back all bleeding, our arms...knees scorched because of crawling in the hard grass, oh, and as time went by

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[24] Second African National Congress Women's Conference: National Preparatory Committee Papers: Women in MK. Paper 3B, p. 2.

[25] Interview with Ribbon Mosholi, Interviewed by Hilda Bernstein.

[26] Interview with Mpho Msimanga, Interviewed by Wolfie Kodesh.

> we even developed scabs, you know, on our arms there and our knees and its something we couldn't get used, because now when you wear dresses everything is exposed... and the male comrades were laughing at us because of that.[27]

One paper submitted for the women's conference in 1987 explained, "It is a common belief in capitalist countries that a woman who works and is independent is not attractive to males. The undeveloped male has a fear of the woman who understands the world and is able to solve the problems of life. He fears the woman with independent political ideas, worse still one who is a military commander."[28] Sadly, this kind of behaviour and fear is not singular to unenlightened men in capitalist countries. The women had to deal with this in the training camps, despite the high level of political education and emphasis on sexual equality. These discouragements and petty insults from the men caused many of the women to become depressed and to begin to wonder if there was something wrong with them as women to be doing all of this.

Not all of their comrades were so discouraging, however. Many did their best to support the female comrades and accept them as soldiers. One ex-soldier remembered, "Sometimes when I think of these things, I really see that if one is determined to do a thing, you really succeed. And it was because of the support that the comrades gave me. They didn't take me as a woman really and so that made me not to take myself as a woman, but as a comrade who has a fight to win. So this always gave me an encouragement."[29] Some women simply used their own strength

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[27] Interview with Meek.

[28] Second African National Congress Women's Conference, September 1987, National Preparatory Committee Papers: Paper No. 3(B)- Women in MK, p. 3.

[29] Interview with Elizabeth Matsemba, Interviewed by Hilda Bernstein.

and determination to get through the program, and ignored those who wanted to bring them down. One woman said,

> It wasn't hard because at that time we were willing to do it. Its only now that we realise that what we were doing there was hard. But at that time, we were just...you know, like this with the men, we had just forgotten that we were women. We were just training, learning how to shoot. At first it was difficult, but we didn't really want to show them that we were scared at what we were...because we are...we want to go and fight and we want them to train, we want to be soldiers. Want to prove ourselves, yes.[30]

Even the women who couldn't quite keep up with their other comrades did not find themselves left behind. One woman explained the policy during training:

> Obviously, sometimes we are tired as women, so the only people that are going to take responsibility are the men that we are training with, because the motto of the training is that we move with the pace of the slowest, but not the laziest...and obviously once they are tired there must be an assistant for them because they are part of the platoon, and there's a belief that what if you're going to fight with them at home, what are you going to do? If you tell yourself that you'll leave her there, maybe the enemy can come and then she can release any information, you can be in danger, so in most cases you have to assist, you know.[31]

In any case, as the training programs continued, the women found themselves matching and occasionally surpassing their male comrades in the training, and found ways to deal with what prejudices they did encounter.

The women faced some difficulties in training that didn't effect the men. One commonly mentioned problem was going through menstruation while training. One woman remembered that they received sanitary pads from Russia that were huge and thick. They would have to wear these under their uniforms, and the size and bulk made them feel like they had tails like rabbits. Then they would find themselves going through obstacle courses, and had to cross rivers hanging from ropes, wearing these

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[30] Interview with Joyce Stofile, Interviewed by Hilda Bernstein.

[31] Interview with Weziwe Ncame, Interviewed by Lynda von den Steinen.

things, and it was terribly uncomfortable and embarrassing.[32] Another problem came with pains that occurred during menstruation. Some women experience pains so acute they can't do anything, and need to just rest for the couple of days that these hit them. However, during training, this involved a trip to the infirmary and sick leave for a couple of days. Weziwe Ncame, in her thesis on women in MK noted,

> In most cases proof was needed, like for instance the medical officer in the camp must give the platoon commander a letter to explain and also to allow the sick person to sleep for 24 hours depending on how the medical officer analysed the sickness. There were also situations where women were suffering from menstrual pains and it was very difficult to explain up to such an extent that women were forced out of their beds and seen as lazy people who do not want to co-operate.[33]

Even when women were stricken by problems that the men faced, they were sometimes still branded as lazy and trying to get out of training. Ncame noted, "If women were sick of malaria they were interpreted as lazy people."[34] This was the case even though many female ex-soldiers remarked that the women in the camps fell sick far less often than the men.[35] Often the problems particular to women were not understood by the male commanders, medical officers, and comrades.

Medical check-ups were also an issue for the women more than for the men. One woman remembers that during the mid-1980s in her camp, they had access to a very well trained female gynaecologist who had studied in Western Europe, and their medical treatment was excellent.[36] But another woman in the camps a year later remembered a horrible doctor who checked them far too often,

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[32] Interview with Mhlambo.

[33] Ncame, p. 16.

[34] Ncame, p. 15.

[35] See Interview with Mhlambo (LV), and Interview with Mavuso (WK).

[36] Interview with Thundezwa Booi, Interviewer Unknown.

> And what was irritating me in the camps was that I, I don't know, they like this check-up thing, you know, to check females time and again because they said there are disease, within the camps, because of water and all that, so in most cases you find that the medico in most cases are men, so, it, it was very irritating, up to such an extent that you ask yourself whether this man, this medical man is really checking you or, is, is he enjoying the job that he's doing...So he used to check us every fortnight.[37]

Many of these problems and discomforts were experienced by the women in the camps, and often the men they were complaining to did not take their views seriously.

The women in MK constantly had to find ways to balance their identities as women and the lives as soldiers. Often this struggle came down to issues of supplies, of finding dresses to wear on the weekends and getting cosmetics from the logistics department. The leadership was usually good about providing these things for the women, but the men they were training with sometimes had problems with this. One woman noted, "The ANC afforded to accommodate our needs as women. I remember I was running out of soap, I don't remember us running out of cosmetics. Actually that was life, the first time in my life where I had so many cosmetics in my life. And I missed that, I wish it would come back now. I need that now because I have to buy it in South Africa. So they never neglected those things that we need those things."[38] Another recalls someone asking them what they needed, "The women said gowns, when it comes to Sundays, we'd like to look nice, instead of wearing combats everyday. Even there in the army, we felt it would be nice. We felt the same from Monday to Friday, and wanted to have something different. It was difficult to differentiate in fatigues if one is a man or woman. And a lot of the men passed funny remarks, it was very painful. They would say, 'look how ugly they are, you can't even

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[37] Interview with Ncame.

[38] Interview with Booi.

see the difference between them and us.' So it was for our own morale and benefit and self-esteem that we are women and want to feel comfortable on the weekend."[39] Another woman remembered that the issue of uniforms for the women caused some problems in the camps. She recalled that they had dress uniforms that consisted of a mini-dress. The women liked the uniforms a lot, and they would wear them to meals or to events outside of training. But the men would complain that the women were only wearing the minis to attract the Cuban instructors, and that it wasn't fair to them to have to look at women in mini-skirts, as they had been so long without the sight of women's legs, that it would drive them crazy. The women fought to retain their right to wear the uniforms, and eventually Joe Modise, the commander of the army came to intervene. He asked the men what would happen when they were sent home to fight and weren't able to deal with seeing women's legs. They were allowed to keep the uniforms, but the men were still upset about the issue, at both the women and at Modise.[40] This problem of how to feel like women in the camps was wide spread.

One of the most serious issues for the women in the camps was that of their social and sexual relations with men. With such small numbers of women in the camps, problems were only natural between the sexes. The women were in great demand as partners, and with so few, the majority of men were going to have to do without. Affairs often occurred, and brought with them a wide variety of problems. The young girls training in the camp largely found themselves conducting relationships with the leaders and instructors. This caused a lot of friction between them and their fellow trainees. One woman explained the problems that arose from this issue:

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[39] Interview with Msimanga.

[40] Interview with Mhlambo.

> You find there are attitudes within the people that you're training with, you know, because they, they, they feel that they are powerless, they feel that, you know, the affairs that you are having are not affairs of equal partners, a situation has forced you to have an affairs... so you find that if you are having problems in your training, you know its difficult for them to assist you. Because they know that well, at the end of the day you don't belong to this platoon that you are training in, in most cases you'll find that even us women, you know, we, we don't see ourselves as belonging to those platoons because maybe I, I'm having an affair with a camp commander, so I see myself as a camp commander too, I undermine the people that I'm training with because I know that maybe anytime somebody will call me or anytime I'm having cosmetics or whatever so you find that these men decide to frustrate you within the process of training to say that there's where that we do have power to.[41]

These frictions led to bad blood between the women and the men that they were training with. There were many reasons suggested for why the women tended toward the leaders and instructors for their relationships rather than their fellow trainees. Many suggested that the women went with the leaders due to their access towards supplies that were not available to the rank and file. One would often see a commander going to town to meet with the regional leaders and returning with special treats for his girlfriend. A woman hypothesised, "I don't know if its natural, but its always the case that obviously, when you are few, you will have an affair with the people that are in power...maybe there's some incentives that you are going to get, maybe the person will go to Luanda or Malange and bring some food or juice or some things that are not in the camps."[42] In other cases, some women were approached by the commanders and instructors, and didn't feel that they were allowed to turn them down, as they were in positions of power.

Another woman offers a very different reason, however, noting that when they first arrived in the camps, the men they were training with were so similar to the men

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[41] Interview with Ncame.

[42] Interview with Ncame.

they had known at home, while the instructors and leaders were older, and had already been trained in exotic places they had only ever heard about. They were more advanced in their political understanding and carried an air of romanticism and mystique about them that attracted the women to them. The girls would go to visit them as a group, and their fellow trainees would complain, because the rhetoric of the organisation said that they were all equal, but here were the instructors, who had their own tent, who get the women to come visit them, and it wasn't fair. The commissar had a talk with the women, telling them that he understood that they were all human, and prone to get involved in affairs, but since there were so few women, they must be considerate of the people around them, and if they must have an affair, they should do their best to keep it private, to avoid upsetting those who aren't involved in relationships. Most of the women agreed that this was only fair and did their best to be considerate, though occasionally someone would disregard this advice and cause more trouble between the women and the other trainees.[43] For whatever reasons these affairs happened, they often led to problems within the rank and file trainees.

Apart from these affairs that were entered into voluntarily, due to the huge disparity in numbers, often sexual harassment and serious sexual abuse of these women occurred. One woman lamented, "We were a minority in a group of men you see, and you know whenever you're in the minority there's always some kind of victimisation you see."[44] At times, approaches by the men were only an irritation. One woman remembered that there would be someone who didn't know her at all, who would watch her shoot or something, and then come up and declare his love for her.

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[43] Interview with Mhlambo.

[44] Interview with Booi.

As she was a white woman, she couldn't just tell them to 'get lost' like the black women could, but ended up having to spend several minutes turning him down, and explaining that it wasn't a racial issue.[45] Another woman recalled that the women called the men 'wolves'. They would go for supper around five in the evening, and queue for food, hang around the mess area, and the wolves would attack, grab them after eating and try to get them to go to their rooms with them. Those of the women who weren't interested in such antics would band together and watch out for each other, and just laugh at the guys who were making moves towards them.[46]

In many cases, however, the approaches from men were not so harmless. Weziwe Ncame related one such instance.

> There was a situation where a female trainee was on guard duty and the other commander of that camp decided to go and propose her when she was on duty. During the process he decided to show his private parts to the woman so that she can see how he feels about her. The woman was scared and decided to run away to her tent. The commander on duty who was patrolling realised that the post was vacant, he went to the tent and he found the woman who was on duty sobbing painfully. He asked her [what] had happened and she narrated the whole story to him. Fortunately the member of the Umkhonto we Sizwe command from the military headquarters was in the camp for a visit. The woman decided to approach him and tell him about the incident, his response was to say what does she expect as she is attractive. The member of the Umkhonto we Sizwe command was also interested in the same woman and he started proposing. Her situation was painful as the women were silent since they did not have any place to complain or anybody to solve their problems.[47]

Unfortunately this was not an isolated incident. Many women were forced into affairs or flat out raped by people in the camps, often those who held positions of power. They were often afraid to report incidents such as this due to responses such as the one

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[45] Interview with Gunn.

[46] Interview with Mhlambo.

[47] Ncame, p. 6.

above, which were unfortunately the rule rather than the exception. Ncame noted, "The female comrade was powerless in the sense that she did not have a say, it was believed in Umkhonto we Sizwe that an order is an order, you have to comply and complain later."[48] Many were made to feel guilty for the incidents, though they were only victims. Another incident related by Ncame shows a similar attack, "There was an incident of a white female comrade who was usually called by the comrades in the security department to go and interpret some documents that were written in Afrikaans. It was a genuine task, but as the time goes on, the man decided to push his personal interest. The woman was bold enough to resist. She was silent about the issue and she did not report it to anybody else."[49]

The security department was particularly notorious in their abuse of power, as seen in Chapter 4. This abuse naturally extended to their treatment of women. Many of the young women who left the country to find schooling through the ANC found themselves in a tragic situation. An article exposing abuses in the ANC ranks reported, "It was a tradition in the ANC, especially in Imbokodo [the security department], to sexually abuse young girls and those who were desperately in need of scholarships. When they refused sexual intercourse with Imbokodo they were immediately detained and labelled agents of the SA government."[50] While it was probably not as wide spread a phenomenon as this quote suggests, this abuse did occur on several occasions, and must have been devastating for the girls involved. Another

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[48] Ncame, p. 14-15.

[49] Ncame. p. 15.

[50] Mngqibisa, Olefile Samuel, "Women in the ANC and SWAPO: Sexual Abuse of Young Women in the ANC Camps," in Searchlight South Africa, Vol 3, No 3 (No 11), October 1993, p.12.

woman faced a horrible fate at the hand of the security department, and told her story to Weziwe Ncame,

> She was a born again [Christian] and decided to join Umkhonto we Sizwe. Her situation was pathetic according to her, as she was not interested to have any sexual relationship as her belief did not allow her to do so. The whole situation was not accepted by the security department as she ended up in prison with the allegation that she was sent by the apartheid regime to infiltrate Umkhonto we Sizwe. The reason for not having any sexual relationship in the camp was seen as a tactic as she was targeting some officers within the army. Because of that harassment she decided to have an affair with another trainee...The man was sick because of malaria, he was called by the security department so as to write a statement claiming that the woman is the cause of the sickness. Unfortunately the same woman was having some of heavy flow during menstruation which was to the advantage of the security department which said that there were sharp blades inserted to her vagina by the apartheid regime so as to affect the officers and kill them if she can have sexual intercourse with one of them.[51]

This unfortunate woman was condemned first for not having a relationship, and then for having one. These were not isolated incidents in the camps. Many women fled South Africa to join MK and fight for the liberation of their country from injustices and tortures such as these. They joined an organisation that purported to be non-sexist in nature and to be struggling for human rights, and found themselves living nightmares as bad as the ones they could have encountered at home at the hands of the enemy. It must have been even worse in these cases, as they thought they were in the hands of the 'good guys' and found themselves abused, and their trust violated, and avenues of protest were rarely available to them.

Women in the camps were not only exposed to horrors and abuse, however. Many formed genuine love affairs with their comrades. Some found fulfilling affairs with men they trained with. Some had children with these men. Others eventually married men they had met in exile. But with affairs, pregnancies and marriages, came

more difficulties, due to the situation they found themselves in. When women found themselves pregnant, or ended up with venereal diseases from the men they had relations with, the reaction of the organisation was to condemn them. Very often they found themselves in trouble for these things, and usually they found themselves alone in their trouble. The idea that two people were involved in the relations was not well accepted. One woman who found herself infected with a venereal disease found little desire on the part of the medical department to trace it back to its source and treat the man that might have transmitted it to her. Ncame related, "There was a woman that was dismissed from the camp as I was told. The reason was that she was suffering from the venereal disease as other men had consulted the medical officer and said that they had sexual relationship with her. The medical officer was not interested to find the cause and even the solution to the problem as it can be possible that the woman got the disease from other men. She was the only person that was dismissed from the camp."[52] Often the woman alone was disciplined and held responsible for cases such as this.

Pregnancy was often seen in the same way. Women who became pregnant were often vilified and said to be using pregnancy as a way to get out of training and the military. One woman explained, "When we arrived there was a high rate of pregnancy. That was the way people opted to get out of the military training. That was a way people opted to [see] their situation, homesickness, frustration and everything."[53] Even the official documents point to this wish to get out of the army as the reason for women getting pregnant. One said, "Demoralisation and the inability to

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[51] Ncame, p. 26.

[52] Ncame, p. 33.

[53] Interview with Booi.

solve problems; over indulgence in sex and unplanned and unnecessary pregnancies. Clearly this Is a form of running away from responsibility and one's duty as a patriot."[54] Many women who got pregnant did not intend to, however. Some birth control was offered, but very little education went with it. Many of the women in the camps left home before finishing school, and were quite young. The organisation would prescribe birth control for those who asked, but didn't always give people the instruction and education about birth control that could have prevented some of these pregnancies. A paper written for the women's conference of 1987 commented, "We must also embark, together with the Health Department, on a rigorous sex education programme for both males and females in all our areas to avoid unplanned and unwanted babies. Simply prescribing a loop is not a solution to the problem, but rather to the solution of a problem with another problem."[55] And even when birth control was prescribed and used, it was not always effective. One woman who became pregnant in the camps noted, "Well, unfortunately I got pregnant, when I was in the camp, I can't explain even today what happened because I was using contraceptives, tablets then, so my mind is telling me maybe those tablets were outdated or something like that...And during that time, I mean, I don't know, pregnancy was a sin or something like that."[56] Another woman accidentally fell pregnant when she was about to leave for special training in Moscow. She didn't want to get demobilised and sent to Tanzania, and wanted to go to Moscow, so she ended up hiding the pregnancy during the training period. When it was finally discovered, the organisation was very

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[54] Second African National Congress Women's Conference, September 1987, National Preparatory Committee Papers: Paper No. 3(B)- Women in MK, p. 3.

[55] Second African National Congress Women's Conference, September 1987, National Preparatory Committee Papers: Paper No. 3(A)- Women in MK, p. 5.

[56] Interview with Ncame.

displeased. The Russians were mad because they thought she should have been having proper ante-natal care rather than vigorous training, and the ANC was mad because the man who had gotten her pregnant had been made a commander and they thought he was abusing his power (though they had become a couple during training when they were both at the same rank.) She was then shipped back to Tanzania to have the baby.[57]

Regardless of why they became pregnant and whether it was purposeful, most pregnant women in MK went through the same process. An ex-commissar of the women's desk related, "If a woman got pregnant, she was sent to Tanzania you see. And when you compare Tanzania and the other regions its not a favourable region because it has a lot of problems, malaria and development generally. So people had to- so women didn't like the idea of going to Tanzania."[58] A woman who became pregnant in 1987 remembered,

> Immediately [when you] get pregnant, obviously their attitude that people are not serious with life, how can they do this? And the only thing, they must go to Tanzania. And stay there with your child. You, you don't go to Tanzania on condition that you are married, so there was some discrimination of that, of some sort also, or on condition that you know, the people who made you pregnant is, is in the hierarchy of power, maybe he can say something.[59]

Most of the pregnant women were sent to Tanzania, stayed there to give birth, and remained there for about two years with their children. From there they could remain with their child, or make other arrangements. Some arranged to send the children home to their families within South Africa. One woman recalled,

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[57] Interview with Mhlambo.

[58] Interview with Booi.

[59] Interview with Ncame.

> So I got pregnant in 1987, late, then I went to Tanzania, stayed in Tanzania, I gave birth, on the 8th of February 1988, I stayed there up to '89, I tried to make contact, because I was having friends from, who were staying in London, so I used to write letters from Tanzania, you know, to London, and they used to post those letters to South Africa, so I did have contact with my mother, I used to write her, then she'd write back and then. And then in 1989, we made an arrangement that she must come and take the child. [interviewer: Was the father involved at all, or was it just...] No, it was my own decision, because I was alone in Tanzania, and so, I, I couldn't make a decision with anybody, but we contradicted in that decision because he said he don't want the child to go to, to South Africa now, so I just told him, if you don't want the child to go to my mother, it's fine, you can stay with the child, I'm going to Soviet Union, because I was going to Soviet Union for another training. So, I mean he didn't want to take that responsibility. So my mother came and took the child, and I went to Soviet Union, to do another training.[60]

Others left their children to grow up in Tanzania while going on to other assignments. Arrangements were available in Tanzania for children without their parents present. One woman related, "In 1987 I was given forms to fill in and the reply came back within a month. I was to be sent to Germany. It was painful to leave my children but I had no other choice. But the ANC had adequate childcare facilities and I knew that they would be well looked after. As I left, I told my children, 'You know...although I may be your mother, your real mother and father are the ANC. The ANC will look after you, feed you and clothe you.'"[61] This route was often encouraged, or at least desired in theory. One paper prepared for the ANC women's conference in 1987 commented, "We seem to travel in a dead end street with marriage and babies being at the end of the street. There is not and can never be a contradiction between marriage and having babies on the one hand and fighting on the other. There have been revolutions before, women have married and women have borne children

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[60] Interview with Ncame.

[61] Matlala, Johanna, "From the Bottom of my Heart," from Majodina, Zonke, Exiles and Homecoming: The Untold Stories, Johannesburg: Heinemann Publishers, 1995, p.29.

during these, but women have fought. We are not and cannot be exceptions."[62] Often the fathers did not see their children much, if at all. One of the papers in preparation for the National Consultative Conference in 1985 noted that this needed to change, "All fathers of children must be given a chance to go and see their children while they are still small because the children turn to call their fathers uncles." [63] A very few mothers managed to find ways to take their children with them into the assignments they were given. Sometimes this was simply a post in Lusaka or in a foreign country, but some even took their children with them to the front lines or inside South Africa to work underground. One woman remembered that she took a young child with her to Cape Town when she was working in an underground MK unit there, and laughed at the memory of fellow members of her unit passing her in the house they were staying in and saluting her as she sat there nursing her child.[64] Another woman who left Mozambique in the wake of the Nkomati accord recalled illegally crossing the border to Swaziland, climbing the fences with a child on her back and her five year old son climbing the fences next to her.[65] This allowed them to stay with their children and bring them up, and even provided a better cover for the operatives, as people were less inclined to suspect a mother with children of being a trained soldier.

Serious relationships and marriages did occur between soldiers in MK, though they brought with them major problems of their own. One of the worst of these was that when a soldier received orders to go on a mission to a particular area or to go for

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[62] Second African National Congress Women's Conference, September 1987, National Preparatory Committee Papers: Paper No. 3(A)- Women in MK, p. 4.

[63] "State of Organisation in Women's Section", Women's section report for National Consultative Conference, 1985.

[64] Interview with Gunn.

[65] Interview with Mhlambo.

further training, they could be whisked off at a moment's notice. And they were instructed not to tell anyone of their impending departure. So in some cases, a couple could be living in the same camp, and upon waking up the next morning, one might find that their partner had left, and they would not even know where they had gone. Many did break the instructions and inform their partners, but this separation was still just as painful. One woman remembered that she had decided not to get involved with anyone in the camps, as she would never know when one of them would be sent somewhere else, an she didn't just want to go through a series of relationships with whoever was in the camp at any one time. She had become great friends with one man in her platoon, but explained her views to him early on. One day he came to her and told her he was in love with her, and she was furious, and felt that he had betrayed their friendship. They eventually ended up in a relationship, and enjoyed each other's company for a while, when she received word that she was to leave for special training on a certain day. She agonised over the news for a long time, and then the night before she was to leave, finally got together with her partner to let him know that she was to leave. Before she could tell him, however, he revealed that he was to be shipped out the next day as well. They were happy that they would at least get to travel to Luanda together before going to their assignments, and ecstatic when they found themselves boarding the same plane to a training program in Russia.[66] More often, however, couples found themselves deployed to different places and separated as a result.

Getting married in the camps was not an easy proposition either. With the common slogan that the ANC was each comrade's mother and father, they had to approach the leadership for permission to get married, and hope that they would receive a positive response. Many long and emotional letters requesting permission to

[66] Interview with Mhlambo.

marry can be found in the files of the ANC's Lusaka office at the Mayibuye Centre at the University of Cape Town. Though contact with the families at home was frowned upon, many people made their first contact upon deciding to get married, as the idea of marrying without even telling their families was contrary to the way they had been brought up. Even if the marriage was approved, hardships still persisted. Though the policy was to keep married couples together whenever possible, often husbands and wives would find themselves deployed in different areas, or even on different continents. This was necessary due to the need for the soldiers to do their duties regardless of their situations. One paper prepared for the women's conference in 1987 notes, "Marriage...must not be reduced to a cul de sac. We must be able to balance between our politico-revolutionary obligations and duties on the one hand and our social and marital responsibilities on the other."[67] This was definitely a case of easier said than done. In many cases, one would be sent to a posting somewhere, and the spouse would not be able to join them for a few years. In some cases, people made serious sacrifices and efforts to stay together. One woman, who was stationed in Lusaka while her husband was in Maputo, convinced the leadership to send her to Maputo to rectify a problem in communication. Once there, she convinced the regional leader that she could do a lot of good there, and got him to request her presence there on a more permanent basis. She eventually brought her children with her and they were able to live as a family while still doing their duties as MK soldiers. When the Nkomati accord of 1984 led to the removal of ANC members from Mozambique, she again convinced the leadership to allow her to join her husband to

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[67] Second African National Congress Women's Conference, September 1987, National Preparatory Committee Papers: Paper No. 3(A)- Women in MK, p. 5.

work in Swaziland instead of sending her back to Lusaka.[68] This, however, was the exception rather than the rule, and many marriages went through such stress under the circumstances, that they ended in divorces or separations in later years.

The Women's Section

The women of MK were required to join the women's section during their time in the organisation. There were women's sections in the training camps, at a regional level, and at the level of the overall organisation. The women would generally meet on a weekly basis to discuss women's issues, the situation for women in South Africa, and the history of women in the struggle, as well as any problems that they might be encountering. They were also responsible for organising celebrations and educational programmes for the commemoration of women's day to share with the other members of MK. While the women's section was meant as a way for women to become empowered, to become educated about their predecessors' contributions to the struggle and to find ways to maximise their own participation, it did not have any sort of decision making powers, and was unable to contribute much to the policy of the organisation as a whole, particularly when the women's section in question was within the training camps. Unfortunately, this section that could have done a lot towards addressing the problems of women in the camps was thus unable to contribute meaningfully to the policies.

The women's section were organised with a commander, a commissar, and a logistics person, who largely dealt with issues of cosmetics, clothing, and sanitary pads. They met every Thursday in each camp to discuss issues related to women in

[68] Second African National Congress Women's Conference, September 1987, National Preparatory Committee Papers: Paper No. 3(A)- Women in MK, p. 5.

the organisation, and prepared celebrations for women's day. Some of the women involved did not really see the point of all of this. One recalled,

> So we must have a women's section of some sort in MK, it was not called women's section as such, it was called, what? Umzana? Umzana, it's...a small house in English, you know? So, we used to have these meetings that we have to discuss about the...history of women, you know, about August 9th, how did women contribute, and all those things, prepare ourselves for women conferences and all that. So we, we used to have meeting every Thursday, to discuss all those things. To me it didn't make any sense. But I mean, I, I, I didn't have the capacity maybe to try to challenge it, to say why? Why women only? Why not, it must not be a program of everybody, that we must study about these things... So, because they expected that since a woman must come from somewhere or even in the camp to celebrate the August 9th, to say what happened and all that, and then it ends there. So I'm still asking myself why was the reason for that?[69]

Another remembered a women's day celebration in which the women chosen to do the speech on women's history and contribution to the struggle ended up spending the time complaining about their treatment in the camps. Afterwards they were told that this was not the appropriate outlet for their complaints, even if they were valid ones, but apparently they had felt that this would be their best chance to air their views to the camp as a whole.[70] Sometimes the women's meetings would simply not focus on important issues. Looking through the files of the Lusaka women's section, one is struck by the huge amount of correspondence dedicated to logistics, supplies of clothing, stockings, underwear, and cosmetics. Sometimes the meetings would disintegrate into gossip sessions. In some cases, people believed that the women's section should be done away with at all levels of the organisation. In the report from the comrades in Botswana in preparation for the National Consultative Conference in 1985, one man who had been working inside South Africa said, "We do not need

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[69] Interview with Ncame.

[70] Interview with Mhlambo.

special youth and women sections inside the country within the u/g [underground]. We should recruit and give tasks on the basis of assessment of individuals irrespective of age or sex."[71] Overall, if the women's section was going to achieve anything, they really needed to have outlets to the decision making process of the ANC. Without this, the Umzana meetings were not particularly useful, and were not seen as such by the women involved. But by and large, the women's section was the only place the women had to discuss their problems as females in the army and to learn about their gender's contributions to the struggle.

Women's Deployment

The deployment of women after training was a much-discussed and contentious issue. This arena was one in which the prejudices and sexism against women became most noticeable. Even though the women went through the same training as the men, and often proved themselves as the equals or even superiors to their male comrades, when it came to deployment to further training or to the front lines and inside the country, women met substantial discrimination. A paper submitted for the National Consultative Conference in 1985 commented, "Our female comrades featured prominently as typist, general office workers and in Amandla Cultural group, but never as combatants at least to our knowledge. The few that went to the front only served in the immediate frontline states and at best as couriers or in communication inside the country. This has been going on despite enormous possibilities of women being effectively deployed inside the country. Unless we doubt their capabilities we therefore suggest that: 1- they should serve in any field in our ranks especially as

[71] Discussion with Happy (from rural areas, Western Transvaal), from Botswana branch of MK, paper in preparation for National Consultative Conference, p.15.

combatants, 2- they could best serve in intelligence and reconnaisance inside the country."[72] These problems were still in full swing even after 1984, which was declared by the ANC to be, 'The Year of the Women.'. These issues of unequal deployment dropped the numbers of women who could fight inside the country even lower than the already small numbers of women involved in MK.

Many fully trained women soldiers found themselves called to serve as secretaries in various offices of the ANC and MK. Many of these had undergone further military training and most had no training as secretaries. Some of the men who had joined MK had backgrounds as clerks for businesses, and would have made better choices than women who had no opportunity to work in offices in South Africa, but the organisation still used women as the sole pool for secretaries for the offices. One remembered that she went to Luanda, and was told to work in the offices there. She wasn't totally disappointed because it was an order, and one had to be ready for whatever instruction one is given. But she recalled that she had been a student, had never worked, and just couldn't imagine herself in an office, working and being a secretary. She didn't know if she could cope with this, she had learned to be a student, and learned to be a soldier, and was now being asked to learn to be a secretary. Eventually they gave her some secretarial lessons, and she adapted quickly.[73] A paper submitted for the women's conference in 1987 noted,

> It is noticeable that a large proportion of our secretarial work in most of our offices and departments, especially those not internally oriented, is done by women, most of them MK. While we must hasten to add that this is necessary work and very important too, we wonder if this is not reminiscent of the society we come from where the best that a woman can do is become a secretary. In the West itself [Angola] duties like

[72] MHQ Lusaka, Recommendations submitted for regional preparation for the National Consultative Conference, 1985.

[73] Interview with Mavuso.

> logistics, communication, office, medical are once again predominantly done by women. We must not at all be seen to be undermining these spheres. All we are doing is to highlight where our women are to be found and where they are absent. Unfortunately they are absent where we need them most- in combat, at home.[74]

Many of the women who were deployed as secretaries had received both initial training and more advanced specialised training in military fields, and were very discouraged to find themselves relegated to offices as secretaries. The women's section report for the Kabwe conference in 1985 explained the effects this sort of discrimination had on the women involved, "When deploying us we must not be taken as females and we are taken to go and work in offices these things are demoralising because we feel that we are not fit or they do not have confidence on us. We are training as male and females doing the same course and we have similar experiences that means equality should be put into practice."[75] Many had to go on secretarial courses to learn the skills needed, when men could just as easily have been sent for this training, or men who had these skills already could have been deployed in this area. While it could be argued that the women ended up coming home with skills that would allow them better access to jobs at home, the women were there to be soldiers, and most wanted to be deployed as such.

Many of the women waited so long to be deployed that they became disillusioned and ended up working for the women's section alone. Many others were deployed to work in the women's section offices, which existed in Angola, Zambia, and Tanzania, as well as many foreign countries and some of the front line states. This focus on the women's section as a separate entity lost MK many well-trained

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[74] Second African National Congress Women's Conference, September 1987, National Preparatory Committee Papers: Paper No. 3(A)- Women in MK, p. 3.

[75] Women's section report for the National Consultative Conference of 1985, p.2.

women who could have worked effectively in an operational capacity. The women's section report for the Kabwe conference in 1985 noted, "Females are facing problems when they are called in Lusaka they find that there is nobody who cares for them they end up working in the Women's Section."[76] This movement of women away from the main army and into the women's section often effectively cut them off from active and equal participation in MK.

When it came to specialised training, women were also sometimes discriminated against. While some were sent for special training abroad or further training in Angola, many were left out of the groups that went for specialised military training and none were sent for the 'regular army' training that began as a specialisation later in the 1980s. Weziwe Ncame noted this in her honour's thesis on women in MK, "Umkhonto We Sizwe failed to prepare women for the regular army training them abroad for 3 years so as to be pilots or even to specialise in the navy before military integration."[77] The women's section report for the National Consultative Conference in 1985 remarked, "There are males who are trained as commanders and even sent to go and specialise in different military subjects. We deem it necessary also for females to go and acquire such knowledge. Women must be involved in any type of work like males and must recognise their work."[78] This lack of specialised training and training at the highest levels for women held them back from being full members of the army.

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[76] Women's section report for the National Consultative Conference of 1985; Points on how to further develop the movement, p.3.

[77] Ncame, p.24.

[78] Women's section report for the National Consultative Conference of 1985; Points on how to further develop the movement, p.2.

A very few women did manage to gain deployment to the front lines and even inside South Africa. They proved that women were just as capable as men of carrying out the tasks of MK underground. But even in this capacity, they still faced problems with their male comrades. One woman who worked for the security department, screening recruits coming through Lesotho lamented,

> It was difficult in the unit I was working with Lesotho, because I was the only woman and one thing I've realised, I don't know if its within the movement, maybe I could also say globally, its very difficult for men to take women seriously. If they don't undermine you, they're going to feel that you're being a threat and that...I didn't understand at the time, I knew I was very, very sad and at some point I would be so depressed that I'd just burst into tears for no apparent reason because of the pressure that I think I felt but I couldn't understand what exactly was wrong and that created a lot of problems... I'm looking back on it now, I'm looking at what happened, my experience and I see that this is exactly what it is. Because at that moment, you try and look within yourself, what wrong thing you are doing and there's that part of you that says you shouldn't have done it this way, you should have done it that way, the other way. And later on I realised that no, no, no, there's nothing wrong that I did...And you could see that some of the things that you're not involved in, its only men...stand there, whispers and then they're gone and you start asking yourself, why am I being left out...Well, it went on until I left Lesotho and I think one of the reasons I left Lesotho was because of that.[79]

Many times the discrimination the women felt was turned inwards, and rather than blaming the people who were treating badly, they looked within to find faults where they didn't always exist. This was very damaging to many of the women, and was largely due to the attitudes of the men they were working with.

Conclusion

Being a women in MK was often a frustrating, painful, and disappointing thing. But the women who did join MK managed to match and sometimes outshine their male comrades. They were often able to break through the typical stereotypes and attitudes

about women and find a new side of themselves that they had never before seen. During all of this, they had to deal with the prejudices of their male comrades, the difficulties of having relationships under unnatural circumstances, and the delicate balance of being a woman and being a soldier. The women of MK emerged from their experiences with much knowledge, confidence, and faith in themselves, and are emerging as some of the foremost citizens of South Africa today, women who can teach others a great deal about gender roles and equality. Despite the hardships they encountered along the way, few would exchange their pasts for other experiences if they had the chance. Many lessons about relations between men and women, and women's capabilities can be learned from their stories, and much more research should be done on issues such as these in the future.

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[79] Interview with Peter Motaung and Katleho Moloi, Interviewed by Hilda Bernstein. [quote from Moloi].

Chapter 7

Coming Home

Now that the dust has settled on the grubby roads of the townships, the battle is over. The distinctive "mellow yellow" police Casspirs have long since withdrawn and activists no longer fear the dreaded 4am Security Branch knock on the front door. Yet the war is not yet won. There are combatants who survived the armed struggle who have been unable to find a place in South Africa's new army and are still battling for some form of recognition; others are already on the slippery slope downhill. Still others have long since crumbled under the strain of unemployment.[1]

Introduction

On February 2, 1990, F W De Klerk delivered a speech that shocked the world. He announced that he would be releasing Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners, and he unbanned the ANC, PAC, and the Communist Party. Though secret negotiations had been going on for several years, this was the first most people heard of a possible negotiated solution to the struggle between liberation movements and the apartheid government. As recently as 1985, one document submitted to the leadership in Lusaka noted that people working against the liberation movement were spreading false rumours about possible negotiations and that this idea was abhorrent and would never come to pass.[2] In exile, the speech was largely unexpected, particularly for the

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[1] Fakier, Yazeed, "Jobless MK fight poverty," in *Grappling with change,* Cape Town: Idasa, Cape Times, Western Cape Education Department, 1998, p. 94.

[2] Paper submitted in preparation for the National Consultative Conference of 1985, origin unknown.

rank and file of the liberation movements. In a short period of time, circumstances changed dramatically. Within months the ANC leadership was back inside South Africa and by 1991, many ANC members returned to the country as well.

This was a period of great upheaval and change, and proved a difficult transition for many people. As time went on and people settled back inside the country, many more problems presented themselves, and the return to South Africa and the transition to a democratically elected government did not bring the expected results. Even today, many ex-MK soldiers are living in a state of abject poverty, are unemployed, and lack opportunities for further education or for the psychological and physical care they greatly need. For these people who were willing to give their lives, and who did give years of their lives for the hope of a better situation in South Africa, the return home was fraught with problems. America's experiences with the poor treatment of the veterans of the Vietnam war should have provided a clear example of the dangers of this sort of treatment. However, being home and being reunited with their friends and family was an amazing experience for many people who had lived in exile for so long.

The initial shock

F W De Klerk's speech surprised most ANC and MK cadres. Many were flat out shocked when the announcement came. Some were in the middle of training programmes when they heard, and were in countries so far away that the news did not receive much coverage. One woman remembers being in Russia when the news arrived and how little they focused on this announcement,

> I was not aware. Because what I, what was happening in Russia, it was during that time of the, the war between Iran and Iraq, so you

> know the whole world was interested in the Middle East, what was happening in the Middle East. So the only news we heard about South Africa was the question of negotiations, Mandela is out, it ends there. So I was not interested about that because that will make me homesick, the only thing we were interested was the question of the Middle East, you know, we used to, to know what was happening there. Russians were not familiar with the, the South African history and the South African news. And most of them, they went to Middle East and came back so they used to brief us what was happening over there, so we used to take sides, you know, against America and all that. So that was the feeling in Russia.[3]

Others, who were closer to home at the time, recall a great feeling of elation. One man who was in Zimbabwe when the announcement came remembered, "In February 1990 when we heard the news, none of us could believe it. We had a huge party that night."[4] Some members were a bit let down when they heard about the peaceful negotiations. After so much training and planning for taking the country by force, for some the announcement of negotiations was an anti-climax. One man expressed his expectation, which was very common, "I imagined riding into Pretoria on Russian tanks."[5] Reactions to the announcement were as varied as the people in the organisation.

Shortly after the announcement and Mandela's release, much of the leadership returned to South Africa, and set up headquarters in Johannesburg for the first time in just under thirty years. Most of the rank and file soldiers were still in exile, however, and things were sent into a state of confusion. One woman who had recently returned from training in Russia and found herself in Lusaka at this time related the problems she encountered once the leadership had moved back into South Africa:

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[3] Interview with Weziwe Ncame, Interviewed by Lynda von den Steinen.

[4] Interview with Johannes Van Vuuren, in Majodina, Zonke, *Exiles and Homecomings: The untold stories,* Johannesburg: Heinemann Publishers, 1995, p.48.

[5] Interview with Chris Vick, Interviewed by Lynda von den Steinen.

> What frustrated me, when I came back [to Lusaka], things have changed also, you find that the headquarters are in Johannesburg, and you are lost. There is nobody to report to, in fact there's nobody who is interested to know, you know? So you are having those things in mind that when you come back you must write a report to say I've done this and this how am I going to use it, I mean, there was absolutely nobody. The commanders were in Pretoria, so I stayed there in Lusaka not knowing what to do, because everybody's busy. Then I decided to, to go to school, I wanted to do, er, radio communication in aviation, the only things that they wanted was a letter from the ANC to say I've done blah blah blah blah, for them to give, for the ANC to give the Zambians certificates and all that. But there was nobody to do that, so I was frustrated and couldn't get the course.[6]

Many people ran up against this problem. Still in exile, they were unable to pursue the things they wanted to do, and yet they were not yet able to return into South Africa. Many found themselves at the end of their training programmes or assignments, with nobody left in the exile leadership to tell them where to go next.

Inside the country, things were no clearer. Many of the units inside did not know what was actually going on, whether they should continue their missions or wait to see what happened. With the focus on negotiations and figuring out what might come next, many of the units found themselves without guidance, supplies, or instructions, and yet not demobilised and still in the country illegally and underground. This period was very difficult for these units. One man remembered returning from exile for a consultative conference, and deciding simply to stay in the country instead of leaving as he was supposed to. As a former leader of the underground in the Western Cape, people there looked to him for answers. He recalled,

> When I was in Cape Town [in 1991], I connected with our under-, because at that time we still had MK units underground. When they heard that I'm around they just made a communication, I had to go and see them. Complaining, all of them, because things at that time were, were not proper, because these talks, the preparation for coming in,

[6] Interview with Ncame.

> leadership being in, involved in all these preparations. There was some confusion, units inside the country didn't know what's actually happened, there was a question of, which was a very you know hot issue, the question of the suspension of the armed struggle, because we didn't know it outside, the units inside the country didn't know it, and we heard it in Zambia on the BBC, when it was announced and papers, all of us, ay, it was a really tense and tough situation... So when I came in, they contacted, I had to go to them, to the underground units and brief them what's happening. What's happening, the confusion is what's happening inside, what are the resolutions of the conference, whilst I had to organise, well they didn't have money, I had to organise money for them through people I know.[7]

This period of confusion and disorganisation was difficult for all of the MK soldiers, both inside the country and in exile. No knowing whether to keep fighting was difficult for most, and the lack of leadership and support, whether simply for new assignments, or more importantly, material and monetary support for the units inside made life during this period of limbo a great hardship for some. Eventually, however, things became clearer, and many cadres began to make their ways home.

Coming Home

During 1991 and 1992, many MK cadres made their way back to South Africa for the first time in many years. Those who had left in the immediate aftermath of the Soweto uprisings had left the country as young, idealistic school children and were returning as adults. Some of them had lived in exile about as long as they had lived inside South Africa. But almost all were excited at the prospect of going home.

One of the worst parts of this time was waiting for the clearance to be able to return to the country. Those who had been in exile needed to receive clearance from South Africa to be able to return, and amnesty for many of their 'crimes' such as leaving the country illegally, joining the banned liberation movement, and some for more serious crimes of treason and sabotage. It would not do for the cadres to return

[7] Interview with Lerumo Kalako, Interviewed by Lynda von den Steinen.

to the country only to be arrested once they arrived there. One woman recalled waiting in Lusaka to get her clearance. She remembered that the faxes came in all the time, and every time one arrived, they would search for their names, anxious to hear that they would be able to return. Every time their names did not show up, they were greatly disappointed.[8] Once their names finally arrived, and clearance was given, people had to go through the process of returning to the country.

Returning to South Africa could be a very difficult thing. Getting on a plane in Lusaka, or Europe, or any number of other places, knowing that one would arrive in a country that held so many memories and ideas for them was incredibly exciting. However, the realisation that a year previously, if they had taken the same plane, they would likely face arrest, torture, trial and death, added tension and fear to the flight. Many people had trouble believing that they would be freely allowed into South Africa. The apartheid government had not shown itself to be trustworthy in the past, and it was hard for some to believe that this was not a trick. Some people who had gotten clearance to return still encountered difficulties entering the country. One woman recalled that upon her arrival in Johannesburg, the special branch of the police hassled her for seven hours. They told her that her clearance was not there, though it actually was. They questioned her about where she had been, what she had done, where she had come from, and whom she had seen. The person who was supposed to meet her there did not arrive, which made matters worse. Eventually, a senior person in the special branch arrived, and arranged for her to get through, but it was a difficult and frightening experience.[9] Others recall their arrival in Johannesburg as a surprisingly pleasant experience. Another woman remembered being scared of the

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[8] Interview with Tsidi Mhlambo, Interviewed by Lynda von den Steinen.

[9] Interview with Mpho (Veronica) Msimanga, Interviewed by Wolfie Kodesh.

police and informers that might be at the airport to greet her. However, upon her arrival, the white women working at the airport were very polite and even called her, "Ma'am," which would have been unheard of before.[10] This arrival home was very trying and scary for many of the comrades who returned during this period, but almost everyone agreed that it was great to be back.

Life Back at Home

Getting back to South Africa after so many years in exile was an incredible experience for most of the soldiers who returned. Setting foot on the soil of their motherland, seeing their families again, and looking forward to a new future, the returned soldiers were largely happy to be back. One man remarked, "Well, it was good to be back and be sitting in South Africa again. Well, when one was in prison, we didn't think really it will be so soon."[11] But as sweet as it was to be home, many people faced insurmountable problems upon their arrival. After years away (according to one survey, the majority of ex-MK cadres spent between 6-15 years out of the country[12]) with very little contact with home, many found their loved ones changed, and even more found them gone entirely. Conflicts with families were common, unemployment rife, and help from the ANC was rare. Added to the stress of adapting to a new way of life, figuring out modern day technology, fending for oneself rather than being supported by the organisation, and dealing with psychological and sometimes physical problems that resulted from their time in exile,

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[10] Interview with Mhlambo.

[11] Interview with Kalako (LV).

[12] Cock, Jacklyn, "The Social Integration of Demobilised Soldiers in Contemporary South Africa," in *South African Defense Review: A Working Paper Series*, Institute for Defence Policy, Issue No. 12, 1993, p.2.

being home was not easy for many. One man commented on the problems of adapting to everyday life, "When I returned I felt utterly disoriented and had no one to explain basic things such as how one finds a telephone number in a telephone book or how one opens an account."[13] Large numbers of ex-MK soldiers are still having trouble almost a decade later, and many have since succumbed to the lures of alcohol, drugs, crime, and sometimes even suicide. This is particularly tragic, as the people who joined MK were largely very dedicated, conscientious people, who could contribute a lot to South Africa and its future.

Many family reunions were happy ones. Some parents, loved ones, and friends had long since thought the soldiers dead. Most of the soldiers were unable to contact their families once they left the country, and many of their families had no idea what had happened to them. Having their loved ones return to South Africa alive and well was an answered prayer. However, the homecomings were not always so happy. Many came home to their families only to find that though they had made it through their trials, their loved ones were no longer living. One woman recalled the heartbreak of coming home to find her mother dead,

> My twin brother came to fetch me from the Spar Hotel. It was very exciting to think I would see my mother and siblings again. On the way home, I stopped at the O K Bazaars to buy my mother's favourite sweets. When we got home, I went straight to my mother's bedroom. I looked around for a long time and I knew that she had died a long time before. I was numb. All the excitement just left me. My brother said, 'Sit down, let's tell you what happened.' I was very angry and said, 'Why did you lead me on all this time?' I blame my family for not letting me know the truth. They were writing all the time saying my mother was waiting for me. Had I known, I would never have bothered to come back.[14]

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[13] Cock, Jacklyn, "The Social Integration of Demobilised Soldiers in Contemporary South Africa," in *South African Defense Review: A Working Paper Series*, Institute for Defence Policy, Issue No. 12, 1993, p.6.

[14] Interview with Johanna Matlala, Interviewed by Zonke Majodina, in Majodina, *Exiles and Homecoming: The Untold Stories*, Johannesburg: Heinemann, 1995.

Another man who spent some years in prison before leaving the country recalled that his mother died while he was in prison, though he never knew until he was released.[15] The pain of returning home only to find that their loved ones were not waiting for them was deep and horrible for those that experienced it. Those that did not find their loved ones gone, often found the return home a painful one, with their families in dire straits and their contributions not recognised. One woman recalled returning home. She had sent the child she had in exile home to live with her mother and returned home to find,

> When I arrived home, life it's the same, I have to go to the same house that I've left. Unfortunately, it was burned, so I didn't have home when I arrived, so my mother was just staying there in the township with the ... my mother was half blind, she was suffering from ulcers, so the situation have deteriorated, she was staying alone, with my child only, my sisters were scatted all over the place, there was nobody who was responsible for her. And I was pregnant again, with a second child... And I was having another contradictions with my sisters, its then I knew that I don't belong to that family, because the assumption is that its not true, that I didn't go to exile, you know, I went with boyfriends, maybe in Johannesburg or somewhere, ja, I came with many children, people are educated, I'm not educated now, and all that.[16]

So some did not find the return home a pleasant experience.

Re-adjusting to the economic realities of life in South Africa in the 1990s proved difficult for many as well. Most of the people who had been in exile as soldiers had spent their years supported by the ANC. Food, clothing, housing, and other necessities were provided for them by the organisation. Many did not see cash at all, and those that did usually only got some for extra items that were not necessities, such as furniture in an ANC provided home. Education and training were paid for, and jobs were not done for paychecks. Many of the people who left in the

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[15] Interview with Kalako (LV)

[16] Interview with Ncame.

wake of the Soweto uprisings left as school children and never knew about budgets, supporting a household, working for a paycheck, or many other things that most people take for granted. The transition to the economy of everyday life in South Africa was difficult for many. Some people found that as soon as they received any money, they would spend it, as they were not used to having to pay for necessities, but only for extras. In the townships in the early 1990s, a new slang term emerged that referred to people who spent carelessly or excessively: They were called 'exiles'.

Some people received support from the ANC upon their return to South Africa. Most soldiers who returned from exile received some sort of monetary help from their organisation. One survey found that in the sample group they interviewed, "A large number, 165 (91.6%) of those surveyed, had obtained some financial assistance from the NCCR [National Co-ordinating Committee for Refugees] or the ANC but only 100 (55.5%) had obtained amounts of R4 000 or more. The money was usually paid in installments but often involved large amounts of cash. No financial advice was provided."[17] Providing the returning soldiers with money was a nice idea, but the one off payments of small amounts of money often found their way into the family coffers and were soon depleted. Those without family obligations often simply spent the money on whatever caught their fancy and very little was left. One man commented, "The ANC gave some individuals extra money. Sometimes this was as much as R2 500; it was given to individuals as they got off the plane. On a few occasions people got drunk and had nothing the next morning."[18] Some ex-MK

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[17] Cock, Jacklyn, "The Social Integration of Demobilised Soldiers in Contemporary South Africa," in *South African Defense Review: A Working Paper Series*, Institute for Defence Policy, Issue No. 12, 1993, p.4.

[18] Cock, Jacklyn, "The Social Integration of Demobilised Soldiers in Contemporary South Africa," in *South African Defense Review: A Working Paper Series*, Institute for Defence Policy, Issue No. 12, 1993, p.7.

soldiers remember receiving help from the ANC when it came to education and employment opportunities. Some found their way into the army, politics, business, and other prominent positions with the help of the ANC. However, many more were left to fend for themselves, which caused huge problems for many of them.

Unemployment in South Africa was and is a nationwide problem. The returning MK soldiers were not guaranteed jobs and many haven't found any up until this day. The Soweto generation particularly is at a disadvantage in the job market. So many people left as school children, before even matriculating. The years in exile were largely spent in military training, and upon their return to South Africa, these dedicated people found themselves uneducated and with no skills or job experience outside of the military field. In a country in which many college graduates can't find jobs, finding employment is almost impossible for the uneducated and unskilled. Some were able to join the new South African defense force, but many were not. Those who did join the new force found problems with transition, racism, and continuation of the old ways. Many are not enjoying their time in the defense force, and some have abandoned it in the hope of a better position elsewhere. Some were able to gain positions in government, as ministers or as support staff, and some got jobs with the ANC. A few were given money from the ANC to study, though most were not. But for the majority of the MK soldiers, once the initial financial help ran out, they had to fend for themselves. In one survey, they found that only 19.4% of the sample group interviewed were in full time employment. The paper documenting the survey commented, "[The ex-MK soldiers'] job expectations were low: 'I would like any job as long as it will help me to survive and contribute at home.' Many described desperate efforts to obtain any kind of employment: 'I have tried to find a job but I have failed because I have low education, no skills and no experience of any job in

civilian life.'"[19] Unemployment and its consequences are the biggest problem facing most of the ex-MK soldiers in South Africa.

Some people were able to make their own luck, and dedicated themselves to finishing their education and obtaining skills with which to find a job. This was not always easy. One woman described her experiences in going back to school,

> So they were afraid of me, they didn't want to take me to school, because they said I'm going to corrupt their children, there was that feeling within the community. That their children can't stay with that terrorist. So it was interesting really. So I just told them no, there's nowhere that I'm going, I am going to study, your children are going to study, their own books, and things like that. Because they called a meeting, I was called, that I'm going to frustrate and corrupt their children. So I said, no you must relax, I'm just here for my, you know I'm having my own agendas, they must just forget about me. Because they knew me in 19-82, 83, I was in Port Alfred, you know, I used to come from Fort Beaufort, to organise meeting, maybe to say that nobody's going to school and all that, so they know, you know, so I just told them no, I, I'm the other person now, having another agenda. People relax, I'm not going to do anything. But I've done standard ten in 1983 and then I got my matric and it was fine, I came to Western Cape so my life just continues you know, and then I, I was forced to take a decision of demobilisation in the army, on the basis that I'm having a responsibility, because if I'm in that army, it won't be easy for me to take care of my mother. So I was forced to take those hard decisions. Which today, when I met people who were in the army, they will say that I'm lucky. Because they didn't want to go to school, you know, they wanted to go to the army because they thought that there are green pastures but it was the same spiral thing because when you go there, education first, you know, so hey. That was the situation.[20]

Those who had managed some schooling and skills training in exile were able to use that training to find jobs or to create their own businesses. One woman returned to South Africa with her family, and as she was well trained, but not satisfied with the sorts of jobs she was being offered, she got together with another woman who had

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[19] Cock, Jacklyn, "The Social Integration of Demobilised Soldiers in Contemporary South Africa," in *South African Defense Review: A Working Paper Series*, Institute for Defence Policy, Issue No. 12, 1993, p.3.

[20] Interview with Ncame.

worked for the ANC underground, and joined her business.[21] But for most, the future was bleak, and unemployment and poverty became a way of life.

The lack of money and jobs created considerable tension between ex-MK soldiers and their families. While most of the returned soldiers did not expect simply to be given work and money on a platter, many of their family members expected them to return from exile and be compensated for their work in the liberation struggle with prestigious government jobs and money. Many told tales of family conflict that ensued from this problem. One man noted, "Everyone in my family expects me to buy them a leather jacket."[22] A woman soldier remembered,

> You see I came from a family of seven, all of them useless and leading unproductive lives. What's happening now is that we are all fighting over this little four-roomed structure we call home. It was all right when I still had money and was buying groceries. When my money ran out, things turned sour. When my sister bought soap and I was having a bath, she would ask, 'How many times do you bath a day? We only bath once a day to save soap.' On top of that, my children did not get food. They would come back from school to nothing.

She eventually left her family home and struck out on her own, "It was not easy to get started. I had no money to buy a stand, to get material and to build the shack I'm living in now. I had to live like a slave with another woman while we tried to put the shack together. My children had to live with friends as I had nowhere to send them... Luckily we now live on the food parcels we get from the Red Cross."[23] One

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[21] Interview with Tsidi Mhlambo, Interviewed by Lynda von den Steinen.

[22] Cock, Jacklyn, "The Social Integration of Demobilised Soldiers in Contemporary South Africa," in *South African Defense Review: A Working Paper Series*, Institute for Defence Policy, Issue No. 12, 1993, p.5.

[23] Interview with Johanna Matlala, Interviewed by Zonke Majodina, in Majodina, *Exiles and Homecoming: The Untold Stories*, Johannesburg: Heinemann, 1995.

ex-soldier interviewed by Jacklyn Cock remarked, "My sister-in-law makes it clear that I am a burden on them."[24] Another man said,

> I live on begging. I drink and smoke. People are tired of buying me these things. They used to do it freely when I arrived back... Now they run away every time they see me. They know that I am going to ask for a smoke or a drink. I have overheard some complaining that they did not send me into exile, so I should not become their burden. Only my sisters care. How long will they care for an old man [38 years] like me? I do not know; I am scared.[25]

One more ex-soldier remarked, "For six months I didn't hear one good story. Most of my friends had been thrown out by their families once their repatriation money had run out."[26] Life for the returned soldiers was difficult enough without adding this huge stress on their family relations. Many have split from their families entirely, and others live in a constant state of war with the members of their families.

Most disheartening, however, was for the ex-soldiers to see their comrades living on the streets and losing themselves to substance abuse and psychological problems. One journalist remarked on the plight of many ex-soldiers, "You've probably already met some of them under irritating circumstances in town- guiding your car into a parking space for a few cents. Or lying sprawled across your path on the pavement."[27] One ex-soldier started tracking down the people from his neighbourhood who had been members of MK. He commented,

> By then, many of them had become *bergies* and hoboes. It was sad for me as their commander to see what was happening to the people who

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[24] Cock, Jacklyn, "The Social Integration of Demobilised Soldiers in Contemporary South Africa," in *South African Defense Review: A Working Paper Series*, Institute for Defence Policy, Issue No. 12, 1993, p.5.

[25] Cock, Jacklyn, "The Social Integration of Demobilised Soldiers in Contemporary South Africa," in *South African Defense Review: A Working Paper Series*, Institute for Defence Policy, Issue No. 12, 1993, p.4.

[26] Interview with Johannes Van Vuuren, Interviewed by Zonke Majodina, in Majodina, *Exiles and Homecoming: The Untold Stories*, Johannesburg: Heinemann, 1995.

[27] Fakier, Yazeed, , "Jobless MK battle against poverty," in *Grappling with Change*, Cape Town: Idasa, Cape Times, Western Cape Education Department, 1998, p.94.

> fought with me in the struggle. These were trained MK soldiers who had gone down the drain. They had ended up in the gutter. Some of them became addicted to drugs because there was no help after 1992 when things quietened down. They are now drug addicts, alcoholics, gangsters- in and out of jail. After the elections, people were power crazy and crazy for positions. There was totally no help from anybody...I always say the cops couldn't break me, either in interrogation or harassing my family or whatever they did, they couldn't break me. But to see guys I recruited living in the streets, being parking attendants, and at the other end seeing people integrated into the army with jobs and positions...who never lifted a finger for this new democracy- that's what breaks me personally.[28]

Another woman noted that occasionally she runs into an ex-comrade on the streets of Cape Town, begging for money or parking cars for money, destitute, demoralised and broken, and how difficult it is for her to see these people who have fallen into this state.[29] Many of the soldiers who have managed to make a life for themselves find themselves horribly depressed and demoralised upon seeing their fellow comrades in such dire conditions.

Psychological problems are also endemic to the returned MK soldiers. Many commented on this in their interviews with Jacklyn Cock. She quotes a few:

- "I sleep very badly and sometimes wake up screaming or crying. This started in the camps after our camp was bombarded."
- "I am an emotional wreck. I have twice come close to committing suicide. I stopped because of my children but I am useless- to them and to myself."
- "All my time is free. I think and think and think. I just feel like shooting everybody. I am not even allowed to do gardening at home. It could help

[28] Faried Ferhelst, quoted in Fakier, Yazeed, "Jobless MK battle against poverty," in *Grappling with Change*, Cape Town: Idasa, Cape Times, Western Cape Education Department, 1998, p.95.

[29] Interview with Nosizwe Khumalo, Interviewed by Lynda von den Steinen.

> my frustration. That is why I drink too much. One day they will wake up and find me dead."[30]

Psychological help for these soldiers has not been provided by the ANC or by society. A few managed to find ways to get counseling, such as one man who was attending a university that provided free psychological help to its students, but most had no way to get help. Money problems exacerbated this, as well as a feeling of pride, and a desire to conquer their problems alone.

There is much that can and must be done to help these people. The ANC has long recognised that this sort of help was crucial, and that it was their responsibility to provide it. In 1993, Nelson Mandela addressed an MK conference and asserted,

> The issue of welfare is not one that can be reduced to the handing out of money for services rendered. The welfare of our combatants and that of our returned exiles in general is directly linked to a commitment on the part of the ANC to recognise the incredible sacrifices and commitment to liberation by generations of our people who found their way into the ranks of the ANC and MK. Those of our people who have been denied the opportunity to lead normal lives by virtue of the commitment to the liberation of our people must be given access to pensions, health care, housing, education, skills training and employment. It is imperative that we are committed to redressing the historical injustice of apartheid and racism....I want to state unequivocally that the ANC is committed to ensuring that any future democratic government will be committed to providing the necessary means to address this issue.[31]

However, despite this public resolution, this policy has not been put into practice. The ANC is the organisation best placed and most responsible to the ex-soldiers to assist them in their re-integration into South African society. Education, skills training, job placement, and psychological and physical care are imperative to keep

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[30] Cock, Jacklyn, "The Social Integration of Demobilised Soldiers in Contemporary South Africa," in *South African Defense Review: A Working Paper Series*, Institute for Defence Policy, Issue No. 12, 1993, p.6, 7.

[31] Mandela, Nelson, *Keynote address of the President of the African National Congress- Cde. Nelson Mandela: Eastern Transvaal 3rd and 4th September 1993.*

this group of ex-MK soldiers from slipping through the cracks of South African society.

Some soldiers have taken the matter into their own hands. One group of ex-MK soldiers in Cape Town has formed an organisation in order to unite the soldiers and to work for their benefit. They have even opened a travelling museum documenting their part of the liberation struggle.[32] In Bonteheuwel in the Cape Flats, one ex-MK commander drew together many of his comrades and is working to get them therapy, and to help them create jobs for themselves.[33] Doubtless, other groups of ex-soldiers are following this path. But their efforts are not enough to combat the problems faced by the mass of ex-MK soldiers who are struggling to survive in the 'New South Africa.'

The soldiers who joined Umkhonto we Sizwe for the most part are dedicated, highly politicised, intelligent people who could do so much to make South Africa a better place. In a country with such a huge crime rate and disregard for human life among many parts of society, South Africa could only benefit by having these people as active and productive members of society. There are still so many problems that need to be combated in South Africa, such as poverty, racism, inequality, crime, and the AIDS epidemic. Ex-MK soldiers and other activists from the liberation struggle could be working on these problems, and in their contact with other people, could be inspiring them to do this as well.

The plight of veterans is nothing new in twentieth century conflicts. British veterans returning from the First World War, encouraged with the image of a 'land fit for heroes', quickly discovered the realities of unemployment attributable not only to

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[32] Conversation with ex-MK soldier involved in this organisation.

[33] Faried Ferhelst, quoted in Fakier, Yazeed, "Jobless MK battle against poverty," in *Grappling with Change*, Cape Town: Idasa, Cape Times, Western Cape Education Department, 1998.

post-war economic doldrums, but to the filling of jobs by trade union members who had not enlisted and by women. World War II veterans were more fortunate: In the United States they were greeted as heroes and compensated through the generous terms of the GI Bill which provided for them to complete their education. American veterans from the Korean War, however, while receiving GI benefits, gained few accolades. The most relevant veterans' experience, however, concerns those returning from the Vietnam conflict who, while receiving GI benefits, nevertheless frequently found themselves ostracised by those who had remained at home and opposed the war. The Vietnam veterans returned to the USA and found themselves vilified by the public. To this day, many are in prison, living in the streets, and living with immense psychological trauma and often with physical disabilities. Walking down the street in any city in American, it is common to see a homeless man holding up a sign saying "Vietnam Vet, need money, please help." or the like. All of these cases are instructive: the most productive combination includes tangible benefits and acknowledgement of the sacrifices these veterans have made.

MK's case differs from those above. While many of the veterans of each of these wars were conscripted into fighting, MK's soldiers were fighting on an entirely voluntary basis. The above mentioned wars at least adhered to nationally sanctioned policies, although massive resistance developed in the case of Vietnam. However, MK's war was an undeclared one, it was a necessary but voluntary fight against a racist and oppressive regime, taken up to gain freedom and democracy for the whole country. The MK soldiers proved themselves willing to sacrifice everything they cared for in order to right a great wrong. Their war was not about politics, economics, and territory, as most other wars are, though these issues were a part of it, but rather

about the fact that one group of people has no right to rule over another group simply on the basis of their skin colour. It would be tragic if one day, someone walking down any street in a South African city dropped their change in a cup after seeing a "MK soldier, unemployed, please help." sign.

Today, one finds that while large numbers [majority? Vast majority?] of MK's veterans do not receive pensions, are not given bursaries to continue their education, do not receive psychological or physical care, and are not given job training and/or placement. However, many of the ex-apartheid government police officers, prison guards, government officials, and military soldiers, including many who were well known for committing great atrocities on their fellow human beings, *do* receive pensions, retirement plans, sometimes even continued employment and promotion. A policy of reconciliation between the races is admirable, and is said to require an approach of giving amnesty, rather than resorting to Nuremburg-style trials. However, when the people who were dedicated to freeing South Africa from tyranny and converting it into a country for all who live in it, black or white, are left with nothing, and men who were involved with torture, murder, rape, kidnapping, and the like are happily retired and living on their generous government pension, something is wrong with the system. South Africa needs to learn from the histories of other wars, and realise that the government cannot simply forget about the soldiers of the liberation struggle but must support them, assist them, and do anything in its power to help them become well integrated members of the society.

As things stand at the moment, too many of these people who were dedicated to transformation in South Africa and have so much to give the country are sleeping in the streets, are addicted to alcohol and drugs, are struggling with their psychological problems, and are oppressed by dire poverty and unemployment.

While it is true that these people could be a great asset to the country, they could also become a dire threat. With thousands of disillusioned, demoralised, desperate and destitute men and women, who are highly trained in military and guerrilla warfare tactics, this population has the potential to hurt the country as well. Many are very bitter about the situation. One remarked, "I am not educated like other comrades. It is frustrating, especially for us who have been loyal members of MK. Others chose to go to school. We chose to fight. We suffered and are still suffering." Another said, "I am very bitter... what makes it worse is to see people who have never gone to exile, some of whom never even cared about the ANC or were interested in the revolution but today they are holding jobs in the organisation and are driving smart cars. At the same time those of us who have fought for the liberation have to start from scratch."[34] These sentiments are not unique. Many of the people who chose to give up everything to fight for liberation are now feeling betrayed by the ANC as they are being discarded by the wayside. The dangers of this practice of neglecting MK's soldiers are expressed clearly by two MK members. One said, "There must be a demobilisation scheme to ensure that they are properly integrated and can be part of civilian society. If this is not done they may resort to crime and have serious adjustment problems. Many of them in other countries have become bandits." The other asserted, "They must be looked after. Remember these are people who have been trained to kill. If they get frustrated they are going to take SA down with them."[35] A lot of damage has already been done, and it is likely that some of the ex-soldiers have slipped beyond the reach of ANC or government programs to help them.

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[34] Both quotes from Cock, Jacklyn, "The Social Integration of Demobilised Soldiers in Contemporary South Africa," in *South African Defense Review: A Working Paper Series*, Institute for Defence Policy, Issue No. 12, 1993, p.4.

But it is not yet too late. Policies such as the one professed by Nelson Mandela can still be put into effect, and must be, or a great injustice will have been perpetuated on those who gave their lives to fight another one.

[35] Cock, Jacklyn, "The Social Integration of Demobilised Soldiers in Contemporary South Africa," in *South African Defense Review: A Working Paper Series*, Institute for Defence Policy, Issue No. 12, 1993, p.7.

Conclusion

The South Africans who joined Umkhonto we Sizwe around the time of the Soweto uprisings and later were a mixed bunch. People from all walks of life, from different races, both men and women, came to the decision that the way to fight apartheid and work for the liberation of their country was to go into exile and join MK, or, for those whose circumstances allowed it, to remain inside the country and work for MK underground. The vast majority of the estimated 12,000 South Africans who joined MK over the years was young black males from urban areas. Most joined MK in exile, and far too few worked in operations inside South Africa.

The soldiers of MK came to politics and to the ANC in a number of different ways. Many were simply politicised by life, as the basic circumstances in which they found themselves led them to move against the system. Some can point to a particular incident or time when it became clear to them that something must be done to change the status quo and that they had a duty to be a part of the force for change. For many, this realisation came from participation in or observation of the Soweto uprisings. Some came from politically oriented families and found that becoming involved in politics was both natural and expected of them. A few had relatives or friends who had been jailed in the early 1960s, when MK first appeared on the scene. Others had little background in politics, and families that frowned on political participation. A very few came from very conservative families, but somehow managed to find a different route for their own lives. No single path led to political awareness, activism, and membership in MK. The rank and file of MK crossed racial, tribal, gender, class, and experiential backgrounds.

As much as the conviction to leave the country and fight for liberation was strong, the decision to follow through with the urge was a difficult. The people who

went to join MK left behind their families and friends. Some left spouses and children. Many abandoned their education, career prospects and jobs. And all left a country that, despite the oppressive nature of the government, they loved and considered their home. They didn't know when or if they would ever return, or even survive and few knew what to expect upon arrival in exile. Death in many forms was a constant possibility, whether torture and execution, death in jail at the hands of the South African police, or disease or accident in exile, assassinations, attacks from the enemy, or for some, death at the hands of their own people. They could also end up in many different places and circumstances, surrounded by strangers, and many became desperately homesick for the people and places they had left behind.

Upon arriving in exile, and going through the process of joining the army, their backgrounds were examined, their identities changed, and they had to go through many different countries to arrive at their destination, which for most was Angola and military training. The training was difficult, though terribly exciting, and plagued by sickness, poor food and living conditions, and fraught with danger in many places. But the desire to train and return to South Africa as warriors for liberation was overwhelming, and the warmth and sense of Community and brotherhood with their fellow soldiers carried them through their trials.

As the seventies ended, and the eighties dawned, life in Angola became much more difficult in many ways. Attacks by the apartheid forces on Novo Catengue camp in the south of Angola disheartened many soldiers and made clear the fact that their enemy's might was far-reaching. As the MK soldiers got deeper into the war between the Angolan army and UNITA, they faced danger and death, and disillusionment that they were fighting another country's war rather than their own. By the early 1980s many people had spent years in the camps, undergoing training,

further training, and even more training, which at times felt repetitive and stagnant. The overwhelming desire to get back to South Africa and fight was still evident, but as time went on the soldiers began to despair of ever seeing home again. With the added discovery of spy rings and the resultant spy scare, circumstances deteriorated. The tyrannical behavior of the security department worsened matters further. These years in Angola were the worst period for most MK soldiers.

Though the majority of MK's soldiers did not have the opportunity to return to South Africa and be involved in operations, some did get deployed to the front lines and inside South Africa. Conditions in the front lines differed from country to country and from year to year. In places such as Mozambique and Lesotho, the host countries strongly supported the ANC's struggle and working conditions were good. Other countries, like Zimbabwe and to some extent Botswana, dealt with the ANC with a sort of 'gentlemen's agreement,' allowing them to operate relatively freely, without harsh penalties if people were caught, but without official sanction of MK's presence and operations within their borders. Swaziland was particularly hostile to MK, and often openly co-operated with the South African government against MK. By the mid-1980s life in the neighbouring countries became much more perilous, as the South African government began to pursue a policy of destablisation of its neighbours and hit-and-run raids of suspected MK residences in other countries. Some of the front line countries then succumbed to this destabilisation and cracked down on the MK presence in their countries.

Inside South Africa, systems of communication, supply lines, and operational approaches varied considerably. Most units had a large degree of autonomy and were responsible for establishing their safe houses, deciding on targets, reconnoitering them, and carrying out the attacks. The survival rate for most units was low, and

usually arrest, death, exposure, and the need to leave the country to avoid the above results brought a premature end to the unit's operational capacity. Working inside the country was very exciting and fulfilling. The soldiers had often waited for years for this opportunity. But exciting as it was working in South Africa, as well as in the neighbouring countries, this deployment was very dangerous and taxing. Many people became burnt out before long, and many others have psychological and social problems today that stem from their time underground.

Women were a minority in Umkhonto we Sizwe, which was particularly remarkable due to the fact that they were the majority of the population in South Africa and they had a history of serious involvement in politics and the liberation struggle. But their presence in MK was significant and their contributions great. Though the ANC and MK professed a policy of non-sexism, due to the patriarchal nature of South African society and the small number of women, they met with much discrimination and abuse. Relationships in the camps were common, but caused many problems between the cadres due to the disproportionate number of men. Sexual abuse was common, and discrimination in deployment was a constant problem. Pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and problems in camp relations due to love affairs were generally blamed on women. Their presence in high profile positions, operations, and lucrative training programs was minimal due largely to the discriminatory practices of the leadership. This was particularly unfortunate as many of the women in MK were intelligent and capable and just as good or sometimes better than the men at the skills in which they were trained. Due to the patriarchal nature of South African society, women could have proved a capable pool of operatives who were unexpected soldiers, allowing them to be free of suspicion and to accomplish great things.

With the release of many high profile political prisoners, such as Nelson Mandela, and the unbanning of the ANC and subsequent negotiations, the situation changed for those who were part of the liberation struggle. Suspicion of the negotiating process and the apartheid government's degree of sincerity was mixed with excitement and joy at the idea of ending the struggle, attaining the goals they had been working towards, and returning home. For months, life in exile was in a chaotic state, as the leadership moved back to Johannesburg, but the rank and file remained outside of the country. Chaos also ruled inside, as units operating underground didn't know whether to continue as usual or to suspend the armed struggle, which was exacerbated by collapsed communication and supply lines.

Eventually, most of the MK soldiers living in exile returned to South Africa. In 1991 and 1992, many boarded planes in whatever country in which they lived, and got on to a nail-biting plane ride to land back in a country they had left long ago, with much fear about what would happen upon their arrivals. The re-entry to the country was nerve-wracking for some, who didn't really know whether the amnesty they were promised would be upheld. Some were hassled the second they got off of the plane, but others remember their treatment at the airport as wonderful. Upon arrival, they usually received some money from the ANC, either a one-off payment or a few installments, but few received much money and the money they received ran out quickly. Without experience in a cash economy, or knowledge of the changes in technology that had happened in their absence, many had trouble adapting to being home.

Some ex-MK soldiers managed to organise education, jobs, or training, often with the help of the ANC. Most, however, were left to fend for themselves, and many did not manage well. Unemployment has plagued the ex-MK soldiers, and brought

with it poverty and family conflict. Many have psychological and physical problems that are not being dealt with. Others need education and skills training in order to get a job. However, little or no help is being provided for these people, and many are slowly slipping into oblivion. Educational bursaries, job training and placement, and psychological and physical care need to be provided to the ex-MK soldiers in order for them to have the opportunity to become viable citizens of the 'new' South Africa.

The soldiers of MK, for the most part, are intelligent, dedicated people, who were committed to working for change of an unjust system. They have wide-ranging experience with foreign countries and people, and are very disciplined. The benefits they could bring to a democratic and changing South Africa are immeasurable. While the country has passed out of the reign of apartheid, and now subscribes to the one man, one vote ideal, there is still a lot of work and change that needs to be undertaken. Poverty, lack of services, racism, crime, AIDS, and many other problems still plague the society. And yet these dedicated people are not involved in fighting these problems.

One option that would help to solve the unemployment, lack of training, and poverty of many ex-MK soldiers would be a public service corps, which could work to battle these problems. In the United States during Franklin Delano Roosevelt's presidency a 'new deal' programme was introduced to fight problems of poverty and unemployment during the depression. One arm of this policy involved hiring unemployed people to work on public roads, buildings, parks and the like. A programme like this could be introduced in South Africa, drawing on government coffers as well as donations from big businesses and foreign donors. This would provide jobs for the ex-MK soldiers and on-the-job training which would give them skills to find other positions. It would also provide public service and help to combat

the problems of SOUth Africa. Educational programmes working towards the understanding and prevention of AIDS would be one option. Public works programmes could be instituted to bring electricity, water, school, community centres, and housing to the more impoverished rural areas and urban informal settlements. The ex-soldiers, particularly those active in the township revolts of the mid-1980s, could work to organise street committees and community watches and patrols in order to battle crime. The possibilities are endless, and the benefits to both the ex-soldiers and the country would be immense. This plan could also go beyond helping the ex-MK soldiers and extend to the unemployment problem of the whole of South Africa. The MK soldiers have proven their dedication and discipline in fighting injustice, and would have the opportunity to keep working for change in South Africa.

Another possibility would be putting the soldiers to work in museums and schools, combined with outreach programmes. Museums celebrating the liberation struggle and teaching about the way of life under apartheid rule would be instructive for both South Africans and tourists. While it is difficult to imagine people not knowing about these things today, as time goes on and there are more and more people who did not live their lives under apartheid rule, the memories and understanding will become remote. As one character in a book explained to his grandson when asked why he had to fight in Zimbabwe's liberation struggle, "We fought because life wasn't worth living as it was. We fought so we could look each other in the eyes, heads high. We fought so that you would never, never, understand why we fought."[1] One day, the children of South Africa will have trouble understanding what their grandparents went through, and while that is a wonderful thing, it is necessary to teach them about what happened in the past. As the old adage

[1] Moore-King, Bruce, *White Man, Black War*, Harare: Baobab Books, 1988, p.85-86.

says, Those who do not study history are doomed to repeat it. While this sounds cliched, it is patently true, and an understanding of the past is essential to a bright future. Just as they do at Robben Island Museum, where ex-political prisoners serve as teachers and tour guides who add their own experiences to the history of the island, MK soldiers and other activists could be employed in museums and schools, to teach people about what they went through. This would give employment opportunities to the soldiers and also work to educate and inform the public. Personal accounts always add a human side to history that cannot be attained simply with books and overall views of history. South African society can only benefit by learning from the experiences of people who sacrificed all they had in order to fight circumstances they knew were wrong.

If these options are unfeasible at the moment, due to organisational difficulties or money problems, job training and placement are still a possibility. Mentoring programmes could be introduced, allowing the ex-soldiers to receive on-the-job training at businesses so that they would have the skills and experience necessary to find employment. Publicly funded psychological counseling and medical care for those who need it would not be terribly expensive, and would reap huge benefits for the society. There are many options available in reintegrating these soldiers into society, and, as seen in the last chapter, are desperately needed in order to keep this group from slipping between the cracks, falling into substance abuse, crime, and poverty. When some of the most notorious police officers, soldiers and public servants of the apartheid regime who were responsible for large scale human rights violations are receiving pensions, retaining their jobs, and even gaining promotions, it is unconscionable for these liberation soldiers to be neglected.

The history of the liberation struggle has focused on the leaders, politics, strategies and tactics, and details of the struggle. While this is all important, it is also necessary to approach the history from other angles. Social history and oral history have become more mainstream, and have proven to be very valuable ways to look at the past. Newspapers have always appreciated the impact of personal experiences. An article about thousands dying in an earthquake can often slip through the mind easily, as numbers and statistics are difficult to grasp as reality. So the newspapers usually include the story of one person and what they went through during the same earthquake which captures the imagination of the readers, reaches out to them on a human level, and makes the tragedy much more real to them. History is the same way. While one can read about thousands of school children leaving South Africa in the wake of the Soweto uprisings and joining MK, plain statistics cannot give one an understanding of these people's experiences. However, with the use of oral history, much deeper understanding of the people who were involved is possible. Hearing about a great leader like Nelson Mandela is important, but most people see his life as exceptional, and not something attainable for themselves. By hearing from ordinary people who made the effort to change the society they lived in, learning that they were not much different from others and still committed their lives to the liberation struggle, people can see that dedication and sacrifice are inherent in all of them, and that, in the face of great injustice, not only great leaders who rise to fight, but ordinary people, like themselves.

Oral interviews with MK soldiers and other members of the liberation struggle do exist in South Africa. However, much more extensive work needs to be done in this area. Most of the interviews were conducted even before De Klerk's speech in 1990 or in the next couple of years following it. With several years to think back on

their experiences and come to terms with their lives, interviews conducted today could provide much more information than those that came before. Most of the ex-MK soldiers in South Africa today are still young, and their memories are in the recent past. Furthermore, now that negotiations have ended and a new government has been elected, worries about exposure, incrimination, and security are not longer valid. Much more information, particularly about the operational side of their experiences can now come to light. The more people who are interviewed, more information can be correlated with other interviews and more common threads can be found. It will then be possible to paint a complete picture of the lives and experiences of MK's soldiers. At present, this material does not exist, and this study provides simply a starting point for others to follow. The experiences related in this thesis will add to the history of MK, but are incomplete, and more work does need to be done. Most of the interviews done with MK soldiers and liberation struggle activists have been conducted in English, but if people with skills in vernacular languages were to interview the soldiers, the interviewees would be able to express themselves in whatever language they are most comfortable speaking. In this way, much more detail and greater accuracy could come to light.

Also important to this process of collecting people's stories is the issue of secrecy. Many MK soldiers still feel that they cannot talk about many aspects of their experiences. They are afraid of retaliation by others if they say negative things. Their deeply seeded sense of the need for security leads them to remain close mouthed about many subjects, particularly the operational side of their experiences. These sorts of barriers need to be removed before people can be completely open and honest about their experiences. The ANC and MK leadership knew how important it was to be able to study the experiences of other armies all over the world. MK trainees

learned about the Russian Revolution, Vietnamese soldiers in the Vietnam war, Cuba's revolution, and the liberation struggles of many African countries. Similarly, in the future, much can be learned from MK's history. For this to occur, as much information as possible needs to be collected, and total openness and honesty will have to be subscribed to. While the MK soldiers were an incredible group of people, and their struggle a just one, there were many mistakes along the way. Being honest about these mistakes now and evaluating them could keep others from falling into the same traps.

Oral interviews are now an accepted form of historical enquiry, and their worth is widely acknowledged. Collections of oral history are being compiled all over the world, in order to preserve people's stories long past their lifetimes. Steven Spielburg, together with the Simon Wiesenthal Center is now undertaking to record as many interviews as possible with survivors of the Holocaust. This project is almost too late, as the remaining survivors are few and very old. However in South Africa, there is still time to get people's experiences recorded while the memories are still fresh in their minds and most are still around to tell their stories. A project like this would allow the memories to be recorded now and used anytime in the future. South Africa has the unique experience of being able to re-write its history. The official history during the period of apartheid rule was based largely in the African Nationalist tradition, neglecting and demonising the experiences of other people. Official ANC histories necessarily had to support the organisation and gloss over its problems while emphasising their good points. Today, the chance exists to change the face of South African history. More objective and critical accounts can emerge of both sides of the story. Different approaches and methods can be adopted in order to add to the bigger picture.

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