The turn to armed struggle

BERNARD MAGUBANE, PHILIP BONNER, JABULANI SITHOLE, PETER DELIUS, JANET CHERRY, PAT GIBBS AND THOZAMA APRIL

Who will deny that 30 years of my life have been spent knocking in vain, patiently, moderately and modestly, on a closed and barred door? What have been the fruits of many years of moderation from the government be it National or United Party? No! On the contrary, the past 30 years have seen the greatest number of laws restricting our rights and progress, until today we have reached a stage where we have almost no rights at all.

ALBERT LUTHULI

A freedom fighter learns the hard way that it is the oppressor who defines the nature of the struggle, and the oppressed is often left no resource but to use the methods that mirror those of the oppressor. At a certain point, one can only fight fire with fire.

NELSON MANDELA

The ANC’s institutional commitment to non-violence was deep-seated and long lasting. For some, this amounted to little more than the pragmatic acknowledgement that resorting to armed struggle under prevailing circumstances was simply impracticable. For many ANC members, however, non-violence was elevated to the status of a principle. All too often, the two viewpoints blurred into one, and it took repeated outrage and numerous shocks before the resulting axiomatic non-violent consensus was reached.

Among some, it took an equal measure of shock and outrage before a collective decision to engage in a still relatively muted and restrained form of armed struggle was taken in the second half of 1961. Pressure to move in that direction had been mounting since the Sharpeville massacre and the banning

---

of the ANC and the PAC in April 1960. In June 1961, the balance was tipped in favour of violent resistance by the bloody repression of ANC-led stay-aways.

However, expectations that some form of armed struggle might ultimately be necessary had been gestating in the minds of individual Congress members and some outside its ranks for several years prior to that fateful decision. Walter Sisulu and Nelson Mandela were among the first in the ANC’s top leadership to contemplate and privately espouse such an option. According to Sisulu, the M-Plan (which envisaged organising street committees) was devised at the time of the Defiance Campaign in 1952-3, in anticipation of the ANC being driven underground. At that early stage, he recalled, alternatives to non-violent measures were being considered.

In 1953, Sisulu, Duma Nokwe and Henry Makgothi (also known as Squire) were among those invited to attend the World Federation of Democratic Youth Congress in Bucharest (Romania). From there, they went on to Warsaw, the Soviet Union and China. Before his departure, Sisulu ‘had a conversation with Nelson [on] the question of the revolution starting in South Africa’. Upon arrival in Peking, Sisulu ‘got a very powerful group (of the Chinese Communist Party’s Central Committee) to discuss the question of assistance in anticipation of the revolution’.3

Sisulu was admonished rather than encouraged by his hosts, being told that ‘it’s not a point to play with. You have to do it when the conditions are right. You have to be very careful when you do it’.

His initial reaction was: ‘Well, they are reluctant, but thereafter I realised they were right.’ When Sisulu returned to South Africa, he reported back on these exchanges to Mandela. From this point on, for Mandela and Sisulu at least, the issue of armed struggle was not a question of whether, but when. Occasionally, these closet sentiments slipped out into the public sphere, as when Mandela addressed a meeting in Sophiatown, in western Johannesburg, in 1953 – one of many gatherings called in protest of the Sophiatown removals. ‘As I spoke,’ he recalled, ‘I grew more and more indignant ... I stepped across the line: I said that the time for passive resistance had ended. That non-violence was a useless strategy and could never overthrow a white minority regime bent on retaining power.’

Mandela was subsequently reprimanded by the ANC executive for the speech but, as he confided in his autobiography, he had indeed privately crossed the line, and remained firm in the view that ‘the policies of the Nationalists would soon make non-violence an even more limited and ineffective policy’.4

These sentiments struck a chord among a growing sector of the youth. The crowd’s response to Mandela’s speech, he recorded, was ecstatic. Joe

---

3 Interview with Walter Sisulu, conducted by Philip Bonner and Barbara Harmel, Shell House, Johannesburg, 21 May 1993, Wits History Workshop. The Bonner/Delius/Harmel interviews were originally undertaken for a study of the same subject as this chapter in the 1991-2 period.
4 Mandela, 1994, pp 184-5.
Matthews likewise recalled ‘the general feeling [after the 1952 Defiance Campaign] that sooner or later the organisation would be banned’, and the growing realisation that other methods would have to be used in the face of ‘a steady illegalisation of our activities ... step by step ... banning’.

Matthews and others recalled wide circulation of communist guerrilla literature in South African political circles, and ‘the undercurrent of admiration for the Vietnam and Algerian struggle’. He particularly remembered one day in 1954 at a political rally at Veeplaas in Port Elizabeth, when the crowd took up ANC Eastern Cape leader Milner Ntsangane’s chant of ‘Dien Bien Phu’ after the climactic defeat of the French by the Viet Cong in a battle of the same name a short while before. Raymond Mhlaba (also of Port Elizabeth) remembered reading Mao (Tse Tung) and later Cuba; Sisulu read Mao and Liu and Elias Motsoaledi also absorbed Mao. Joe Matthews’ library was packed ‘full of guerrilla literature’ when he was detained in 1960. It was from his collection that Mandela famously copied How to be a Good Communist, the subject of a subsequent court appearance.

Matthews made the obvious but easily overlooked point that Communist Party members sympathised with communist-led guerrilla struggles elsewhere in the world. He then offered the remarkable aside that at the first Africa Asia Conference at Bandung in 1955, ANC representatives sided with Algeria on the issue of armed struggle; and that at the All African People’s Conference in Accra in 1958, it again endorsed the same principle, in a motion that Matthews and Sisulu had drafted and which, Matthews claimed, all other African countries opposed.

From the mid-1950s a steady hardening of attitudes can be discerned in several leading ANC figures. There were many different individual roads to Damascus. Andrew Mlangeni remembered ‘mounting pressure to move away from the non-violent struggle from the mid-1950s, especially after women’s passes’. Sisulu recalled youthful semi-gangster elements, such as Joe Modise, who were involved in opposing the Sophiatown removals, urging armed resistance on the ANC leaders during the Treason Trial that started in 1956.

Wilton Mkwayi from Port Elizabeth cast his mind back to the same trial: ‘Sometimes when things get hot, that will come, especially among Transvalers, that ele-

---

5 Interview with Joe Matthews, conducted by Philip Bonner, 120 Plein Street, Cape Town, 18 August 1994, Wits History Workshop.
6 Interview with Raymond Mhlaba, conducted by Philip Bonner and Barbara Harmel, Standard House, Port Elizabeth, 27 October 1993; interview with Walter Sisulu; interview with Elias Motsoaledi, conducted by Peter Delius, Wits History Workshop.
8 Interview with Andrew Mlangeni, conducted by Philip Bonner, Shell House, 2 March 1994, Wits History Workshop.
9 Interview with Walter Sisulu.
ment of tsotsis. We said, “you can’t do that tsotsi-style”. Patrick Molaoa was the head of it. Modise was hot-headed.”

Raymond Mhlaba, the Port Elizabeth ANC and Communist Party leader, observed: ‘By 1958 I was one of those advocating armed struggle. Most of the others didn’t agree. The Nationalist Party was becoming ruthless. I know I got a pain in my heart when there was a stay-away in 1958 when they started calling on soldiers to kick us out of our homes. [I thought] let us fight it out. I started advocating it in all forums. Even in 1958, the majority of ANC leaders thought I was mad.’

**Rural resistance**

Urban confrontations were probably less significant than collisions in the countryside in prompting a rethink of attitudes towards violence, but general pressure was mounting that would force many to reassess their positions.

Rural resistance, which flickered in the 1940s, flared in the 1950s and culminated in major uprisings in Zeerust, Sekhukhuneland and Mpondoland. Less well known, but no less significant, were struggles in Natal and Zululand and elsewhere. Each of these revolts had its own complex and localised history, but they share a number of similarities.

Intensified state intervention in the reserves, particularly through policies of betterment, passes for women and Bantu Authorities, was seen as a threat to residual elements of economic, political and cultural autonomy such as chieftainship and access to land and cattle, which enjoyed strong popular support. While the ANC and the Communist Party were not in control of these events, their activists and members were involved to varying degrees with migrant workers, and thus played a critical role in linking organisations and spanning town and countryside. Growing resistance and heightened repression and state violence resulted in attacks on the person and properties of individuals – including chiefs – who were seen as collaborators. In some communities, these attacks were generally spontaneous, but in others – notably in Sekhukhuneland and Mpondoland – organisations were created or invoked that opted for violent strategies. At the height of the revolt in Sekhukhuniland, for example, Pedi regiments were mobilised, while the young militants of the Khudutamaga decided to kill leading supporters of the Bantu Authorities. In Mpondoland, the most sustained rebellion saw Ntaba rebels burning down the houses of collaborating councillors and murdering a number of them.

Numerous interviewees stressed the significance – albeit to varying degrees – of these events in influencing thinking about violence within the Communist

10 Interview with Wilton Mkwayi, conducted by Philip Bonner and Barbara Harmel, Shell House, Johannesburg, 22 October 1993, Wits History Workshop.
11 Interview with Raymond Mhlaba.
Party and the ANC. Some individuals see the revolts as one factor among many, while others attribute decisive significance to them. Denis Goldberg, for example, recalled ‘Natal dipping tanks, Mpondoland ... now all those peasant uprisings, I think, were the signal for the ripeness of this situation for a classic, rural-based struggle’.13

Asked in 1993 to explain the formation of Umkhonto we Sizwe, Elias Motsoaledi began his account with the battle against betterment and Bantu Authorities in the Northern Transvaal:

They started to remove all the chiefs who did not agree with them. Now remember, they had touched a sore part of African culture. They introduced this promulgation of the law which says they must slaughter their cattle because there isn’t enough land for them ... they touched the wrong button. Then the resistance comes ... You remember that towards the end of the 50s there was the Mpondo Revolt and ... in Sekhukhuneland there was that revolt also. These unpopular chiefs were being killed ... Then at the same time here is the organisation, the liberation movement that has been telling the people to resist. Now, but they have a non-violent method of resistance which is passive. Now this is what was putting them at a disadvantage.14

Beyond sensational and often inaccurate news reports, the diverse networks that connected the national political movements to these events ensured that the willingness of rural communities to contemplate, and even endorse violent action, became a significant source of wider discussion. They provided a powerful reminder to individuals, for whom non-violence had long been axiomatic, of the existence of an alternative political tradition that stretched back to independent kingdoms and the wars of resistance. Africans might have been stripped of their firearms after 1900, but a military capacity and ethos had not been entirely extinguished. In many areas, the socialisation of young men continued to emphasise the military arts, the formation of regiments and the defence of communities. In these quarters, the decision to take up arms was not weighed down by the ideological drag of pacifism. Rural communities that had previously been regarded as an uncertain support base, now presented themselves as a significant reservoir of militant anti-apartheid struggle. And the events of the late 1950s strengthened arguments that some leaders with strong rural connections had been making since early in the decade.

In the aftermath of the 1952 Defiance Campaign, migrant workers from Sekhukhuneland, like Flag Boshielo and John Kgoana Nkadimeng, had already started to discuss ‘... the idea of fighting back. Now the question was, if you fight back how would you do it? So people like Flag analysed this question, especially after 1953, with the Mau Mau revolt ... everybody was talking about

14 Interview with Elias Motsoaledi.
it. And we had discussion groups where we talked about this guerrilla warfare, you know. We really cherished the idea that one day we would be able to fight back.”

Boshielo, who was a member of the underground Communist Party and of the ANC, and the driving force behind the Sebatakengom movement, which played a catalytic role in the Sekhukhuniland revolt, was particularly taken with the issue of armed resistance, and devoured all the literature he could find on Mau Mau. He went to Sekhukhuniland in the early 1950s to train as a herbalist and to explore the possibilities for rural-based armed resistance. On his return, he argued even more strongly for serious consideration of armed struggle.

The Mau Mau revolt was not often cited as a source of inspiration by interviewees, but for some individuals, events in the South African countryside may have merged with earlier insurgency in East Africa to underscore the possibilities of rural-based armed struggle.

Beyond these wider reflections, the ANC in the late 1950s and early 1960s found itself facing demands not only for political support, but also for military assistance. First the Sekhukhuniland rebels and then their Mpondoland counterparts asked the ANC leadership for guns so that they could pursue their struggles more effectively. Interviewees were particularly eloquent in relation to the events in Mpondoland. Denis Goldberg emphasised: ‘There were some real turning points [on the road to armed struggle]. I think the Mountain Committees of Mpondoland, they were decisive. You know there was a sense in the jargon, these were soviets, these were a people prepared to take responsibility for their own future. They were levying taxes, they were setting up an embryonic state and embryonic armed forces were able to function.’

Bernstein recalled: ‘The question of arms came up in the Mpondo revolt. That was pre-emergency. I know the chaps in Mpondoland were pressing the ANC leadership, when we were in the Treason Trial, but I don’t remember a serious suggestion of a change in tactics.’

Harry Gwala remembered Mpondo emissaries pleading with the ANC leadership in Natal, ‘we advise them legally and they say we want your guns. These same ideas came up strongly before [in] Natal.’

Billy Nair likewise recollected:

Some members of the Hill Committee came, Chief Madiketse and Innocent Khanyile, who wanted weapons to deal with the government. They

15 Interview with John Nkadimeng and J Phala, conducted by Peter Delius, 17 June 1993, Wits History Workshop.
16 Ibid.
17 Interview with Denis Goldberg.
18 Interview with Rusty Bernstein, conducted by Philip Bonner, Berea, Johannesburg, 29 March 1994, Wits History Workshop.
19 Interview with Harry Gwala, conducted by Philip Bonner, Pietermaritzburg, 15 July 1993, Wits History Workshop.
were putting the movement under pressure here. We could only advise
them to go to Swaziland – late ’58, throughout ’59, battles were going on
in Natal in practically every rural area. Fantastic. One woman holds up a
Saracen with a flag. The ANC had to call a conference in early 1960
before the Emergency was declared. Natal-wide chiefs were to stop vio-
lent reaction. It brought the whole Bantu Authority system down. Even
Buthelezi.20

Curnick Ndlovu made the same point, observing, ‘we as leaders were becom-
ing irrelevant in the face of these rural explosions’.

Early in 1960, the National Executive of the ANC sent Thomas Nkobi to
investigate the Mpondo uprising in the Transkei. He went, he recalled:

… to go and find out exactly what was happening there. Those people
took me … into their hands, and at about half past seven we started mov-
ing towards the place where the meeting was going to take place. It took
us from half past seven to about eleven or half past eleven to reach that
destination. Meanwhile they were asking me questions [when we were]
moving, going there, and I was answering these questions until I realise
that ‘no, no, no, what is happening?’ I mean, we have been walking now
for hours. Why can’t we reach this place? They simply said to me: ‘No,
you hear where those dogs are barking? It is the place we are going to.’
Eventually we reached there. The house was quite full of people wearing
blankets. I saw then that I was going to speak to a rural area people who
don’t understand English. I was speaking in English because I was not
quite well versed in Xhosa. I spoke … we discussed the whole night until
eight o’clock [in the morning], the problem of the reason why people
were revolting against the government. At the end of it all, at about eight,
I then asked them: ‘What message do you give me [to deliver] to the lead-
ership?’ They said to me, ‘You have heard the problems’. They described
to me how the army and the police were really killing the people there.
Then somebody sitting somewhere there just gave a sign, and I asked the
interpreter: ‘What does that sign mean?’ Somebody said it means the
headquarters must supply them with guns. Then he said: ‘It’s not me who
is saying it; it’s that chap.’ I could then realise that the question of securi-
ty was very high. When I went to the National Executive where I met the
leaders – leaders like Sisulu, Govan Mbeki, Moses Kotane, JB Marks –
they said to me, ‘No man, you didn’t understand them’. I said: ‘My friend, I
understand them. They were clear and loud that they want the National
Executive to assist them to obtain guns so that they can defend them-
selves when the army comes to hunt them in the mountains’. They sent
Govan Mbeki to go and find out exactly what was happening. The first

20 Interview with Billy Nair, conducted by Philip Bonner, Durban, 13 June 1994, Wits History
Workshop.

21 Interviews conducted by Philip Bonner with Curnick Ndlovu, KwaMashu, 13 June 1994, Wits
History Workshop, and Jabulani Sithole, KwaMashu, 9 and 13 October 2001, SADET Oral His-
tory Project.
thing they asked Mbeki was to say: ‘You sent somebody – what they call in Xhosa inkukuzi – the national organiser. We discussed with the national organiser the whole night and we gave him the message. We are not prepared to give you the message; you must go back and ask that man whom you sent to us to tell you what the message was’. They couldn’t tell him – he came back and said: ‘Those people want those things there’. I said no, very nice. Myself I was pleased, because for a very long time I had only been agitated that people cannot go on like this talking nice language when actually the army and the police are killing us. When I got that message I was really excited that there are some people who are ready to fight. But the leadership at that time was not ready.22

Govan Mbeki visited Mpondoland twice in 1960, in each instance posing as Port Elizabeth communist (and factory owner) Tolley Bennun’s chauffeur. He came back hugely impressed. Nearly 10 years earlier, at a meeting called to support the Defiance Campaign, a peasant had told him that the Africans had lost the frontier wars of dispossession because their weapons did not match those of the conquerors. Unless that imbalance was corrected, there was no point in embarking on a defiance of unjust laws. Any talk of non-violence in such a campaign was merely to ‘tickle the beard of the Boers’ (Niyawa-nyambuza Amabhulu le ea on Tsikinyesta Ma Buru).

Now Mbeki found the spirit of resistance had returned, and in a much more powerful form than he had seen in the towns. He soon sought to apply the lessons he learned on these trips more broadly within the ANC.23

While the ANC was unable to meet the demand for guns, it was able to put the Mpondoland rebels in touch with key leaders of the Sekhukhuniland revolt.24 In the longer term, once MK was formed, some of the areas still smarting from the rural uprisings of the late 1950s and with strong links to the ANC and the Communist Party, provided a rich source of recruits. John Phala recalled the early days of recruitment:

Organising the volunteers to MK was simple and easy because Sebatakgomo was strong … In the Sekhukhuniland area we would just call the people [in a village] to a mass meeting and say, ‘The ANC wants soldiers, the ANC wants soldiers’. Then everybody was rushing to call his or her son to come and join MK. Here in the [Jane Furse] hospital [in Sekhukhuniland] was the headquarters for the recruiting for the ANC. Godfrey Sekukhuni [a leading figure in the Sekhukhuniland Revolt] was a male nurse at the hospital. So when we organised the volunteers to join MK we

---

22 Interview with Thomas Nkobi, conducted by Philip Bonner, Shell House, Johannesburg, 24 November 1993, Wits History Workshop. Nkobi makes the same point, even more forcefully, in Episode 3 of Hold Up the Sun: The Documentary History of the ANC.

23 Interview with Govan Mbeki, conducted by Sifiso Ndlovu and Greg Houston, 18 November 2000, Port Elizabeth, SADET Oral History Project.

24 Interview with Leonard Mdingi, conducted by Helen Bradford, 20 September 1990, Wits History Workshop.
used the ambulance. So Motsoaledi was coming to collect people here at
the hospital, because they had been collected in an ambulance from all
over our villages.  

Rural networks and revolts clearly contributed both to the decision to pursue
armed struggle and to the supply of recruits for MK once it was launched.

Similar pressures were building up in Natal, where a wave of protest surged
through the countryside during 1959 and 1960, centred on betterment
schemes, new forestry regulations, the extension of passes and taxes to
women and wives, the threat of forced removal from so-called black spots,
control and culling of livestock and compulsory cattle dipping. These came to
bear on the ANC leadership of this province far more directly than was the
case with any of the rural uprisings elsewhere in the country, and a number of
middle or junior ranking ANC leaders became involved.

Women embarked on a series of protests from 1958 to 1960. At Hlokozi in
Highflats, the community disrupted a meeting convened by the local chief,
Charles Mkhize, and state officials to discuss betterment schemes. Mkhize fled
the area and the local ANC leader, Johannes ‘Passfour’ Phungula, was arrested
and charged with inciting the community to overthrow their chief.  

Women also broke up a meeting in the Harding area on 29 July 1959, and many of them
were subsequently arrested. Other women, supported by men, demanded their
immediate release. When the state refused to comply the protestors responded
by burning sugar cane fields and wattle plantations, and by blocking the railway
line between Port Shepstone and Harding. On the same day, about 500
women demanded the abolition of pass and influx control laws at Umzinto, a
rural town south of Durban.

The biggest protest action took place at Ixopo in October 1959, when more
than 20 000 women marched on the local magistrate’s court demanding the
appointment of a native commissioner for women’s affairs. The magistrate
refused to talk to them, saying they had no right to talk to government officials
except through their husbands and izinduna. He ordered their arrest and
some 366 women were detained and sentenced to prison terms or fined.

Women also took part in the anti-dipping campaigns, which saw some 75% of
the cattle dipping tanks in Natal destroyed.

25 Interview with Nkadimeng and Phala.
26 Interview with Johannes Phungula, conducted by Jabulani Sithole, Durban, 11 November
‘Confrontation and Social Change: Natal and the Forging of Apartheid, 1949-1972’, in Morrell,
R (ed), *Political Economy and Identities in KwaZulu-Natal: Historical and Social Perspec-
29 Ibid; interview with Johannes Phungula.
30 Freund, 1996, pp 129-30; interview with Anton Xaba, conducted by Jabulani Sithole, Sobantu,
11 September 2001; interview with Johannes Phungula.
It is not clear to what extent the local ANC was involved in inspiring or directing these protests, but the close proximity of the reserve areas to Durban and the personal backgrounds of many ANC leaders would suggest such facilitation. As Eric Mtshali observed:

There is no doubt in my mind that we were successful, because if you take comrades like David Ndawonde, Phungula and many others whose roots were in the rural areas, and there were others like Mangethe, you realise that we had succeeded not only in transforming the ANC from the elitist movement it was during the 1940s and early 1950s, but we had transformed it to include both the urban and rural constituencies. This was made possible by the fact that we had successfully shown workers the dual nature of the struggle, so that when they lost their jobs and were forced to return to the countryside, they left the cities equipped with the working class theory. Moses Mabhida and Dorothy Nyembe, although Dorothy was not a trade unionist she became very close to SACTU, did a marvellous job of organising workers with rural backgrounds. Moses Mabhida was very fond of organising rural workers. Both him and Dorothy became very close when they organised workers. Their efforts produced tremendous results. If you look at the delegates who attended the ANC conferences during the late 1950s, you will notice that they were mainly rural people, something that does not happen now. The influx of the rural people into the ranks of the ANC was not spontaneous. It was a result of the efforts of the dedicated cadres of the movement. When we went to the 1958 ANC conference that was held here in Durban, half of the delegates were from the rural areas. Some old men arrived wearing their izicoco (headrings), women were wearing izidwaba (women’s leather skirts), and young men were wearing amabheshu (men’s girdles). These were people with their roots in the countryside who were employed here in Durban.31

Dissatisfaction with the policy of non-violence was also growing among younger members of the ANC and the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU). Mtshali recalled that at one of the meetings to discuss this matter with the leadership, Chief Albert Luthuli called for patience and advised the younger members of the ANC to consider all options carefully before embarking on any dangerous course.32

In some instances, local ANC members were unquestionably involved in more violent action. Justice Mpanza, popularly known as Gizenga, described pre-Umkhonto acts of sabotage, the burning of sugar cane farms in Natal and an unsuccessful plan to launch an attack on white spectators attending the July Handicap race meeting at Greyville in 1959.

31 Interview with Eric Mtshali, conducted by Jabulani Sithole, 23 December 2001, Clermont, SADET Oral History Project.
32 Ibid.
Around ’55, ’56, I heard a lot of stories about action, people wanted action and all that. Hence, I think it was around 1957 [it actually began in 1960] when the revolt began in Mpondoland at eNgquza Hill, truly I heard that Anderson (not Andrew) Ganyile was at Lakhani Chambers. He told people about the events and I was also informed about the Mpondoland revolt. I felt like going there to join the battle immediately. But others discouraged me and said that the amaMpondo would not allow that to happen. Moreover, this was their battle. I replied and said even though this is the case we must also do something, we are tired of folding our arms. Passfour was also present. He was in the forefront. He was the instigator and he also used to conduct some of our political classes. There was also another boy whose name was Bafana Duma. He passed away in Swaziland. Duma also supported me and said to me, action should commence immediately, because we are tired of the ongoing talk-shop, listening to old men. We then decided to take action on our own. It was suggested that we should adopt a position that will highlight our anger and simultaneously support the revolt in Mpondoland. That is how we began our action by burning sugar cane. This was during 1957 [actually in 1959].

The extensive burning of cane fields and government forests elicited a huge outcry among farmers, which in turn forced the ANC leadership to send Walter Sisulu to Natal to restore calm. Sisulu warned young ANC members of the dangers of carrying out acts of violence that had not been sanctioned by the organisation. According to Mpanza:

The concerted action to burn the sugar cane proceeded relentlessly. I remember that others went to burn forests at kwaNgubonumaya at Harding. Others went to kwaNongoma, cutting down the fence that was demarcating Cyprian’s place. It was during the time when the land was divided into bantustans. Cyprian [Bhekezulu] was against the formation of bantustans. He seemed to support our action of destroying the fence. It is then that we realised that we were doing the correct thing. We proceeded burning the sugar cane. We burned the sugar cane from 1957, 1958 until 1959 when Sisulu was brought down to stop the action in Natal. He asked us why sugar cane was being destroyed on such a large scale and said: ‘We suspect that the people behind this act are organised.’ When I arrived [at the meeting] the word had been leaked that I was among those who were burning the sugar cane fields. Duma had leaked the story to Chief Luthuli. This is why Sisulu came, because sugar cane was being destroyed in large quantities. It also happened that when we started burning the sugar cane fields, Regina Dludla, the woman I married in 1960, carried some of the things like candles during her visits to my place. For example, I could no longer carry candles with me. Somebody had to carry the candles so as to avoid being caught red-handed. This was her contribution to the struggle.

---

33 Interview with Justice Mpanza, conducted by Ben Magubane and Jabulani Sithole, Groutville, 12 October 2001, SADET Oral History Project.
34 Ibid.
On the subject of the plan to attack white horseracing fans at Greyville in Durban, Mpanza had the following to say:

We were asked to stop this action, and I do not know how we complied with this instruction because our plans were at an advanced stage. We had a single gun. It was owned by one of us and some of us had never seen a gun before. But we also had never seen the gun that was said to belong to one of us. It was always intimated that it is readily available. We were about 30 as amabutho and prepared to storm the July Handicap event. We had told ourselves we were going to harm white people who attended the event so as to precipitate war. We wanted war to begin. We saw this as one of the methods of beginning a war. We had agreed among ourselves, and we were all armed with spears and other things. Some of our weapons were kept at Vilakazi’s place. We were waiting for the actual day of the event. The day before the race, first [of] July we went to our office and congregated there. We wanted to find out how are we going to gain entrance at the racecourse. We had realised that there were sufficient numbers of people who were to join us. Then it was said we are going to discuss this issue because the race was going to take place during the following day. But while we were discussing the strategy I noticed that, as the meeting progressed, our numbers were whittling down. Ultimately, only a few of us remained behind. People were disappearing one by one until we realised that only a few of us were left in the office. Nobody had given the people the order to leave. They just left, one by one. Then Duma suggested that we should adjourn the meeting and reconvene the following day, very early in the morning. We indeed returned the next morning. But when we arrived there were no people around. There were only about six of us.35

The Pan Africanist secession

From 1957, Africanist criticism of the multiracialism embodied in the Freedom Charter and the Congress Alliance grew increasingly shrill. Africanists were especially hostile to white and Indian communists, whom they saw as importing and implanting a foreign ideology and a non-indigenous leadership into the nationalist movement. The influence of communists had in fact been growing steadily, if clandestinely, since the end of the Defiance Campaign in 1953, which made a showdown between the two factions ever more likely. Walter Sisulu joined the SACP after his return from Eastern Europe and China in 1955, as did Duma Nokwe.36 Henry Makgothi, who had travelled with them to Bucharest, and who would shortly be elected president of the ANC Youth

35 Ibid.
League, followed suit. The Treason Trial further consolidated communist influence, and in Sisulu’s opinion, the arrest of 150 ANC leaders in 1956 ‘helped a great deal. It created great unity in the top leadership and this consolidated the whole struggle’. Sisulu offered a particularly illuminating view on this consolidation:

Men like Luthuli who have been far removed from headquarters [and] will always have [the] suspicion [that] communists are doing something, began to look at the situation differently. They developed friends. The friendship between Moses Kotane for instance with Luthuli was even better than friendships I had with Luthuli as Secretary General. Chief Luthuli said, ‘Does Moses Kotane know about this?’ He was never happy till he knows that he knows. Chief Luthuli gained confidence in the communist leadership in that [trial] because he came into contact with Bram, Rusty, Joe and thought, well, these people mean well.

In Rusty Bernstein’s view, the Treason Trial ‘is the great underestimated factor in the history of the South African movement. Up to that point the movement had never really been united. I mean the ANC used to have a national conference once a year; between those once-a-year things, it operated on a purely provincial or local basis. They never even met each other. They operated in isolated pockets and the whites were even more isolated. [Then] suddenly in a matter of a year it was transformed and so were the relationships on the political left, the whites, the Indians, the Africans, it became a working relationship’.

During the course of the Treason Trial, other key leaders were recruited into the ranks of the SACP, including Joe Matthews, Andrew Mlangeni, Thomas Nkobi and Archie Sibeko. This development in itself would have been enough to further alienate the Africanists, but the Treason Trial had additional repercussions which deepened their estrangement.

In 1957, to the outrage of the Africanist wing of the ANC, the Transvaal provincial body suspended leadership elections in solidarity with those who were on trial. Africanists who had been contemplating challenging mainstream incumbents, found themselves peremptorily blocked. The newfound unity of an increasingly left-leaning ANC also found expression in another major development in the same year, namely the adoption of a new constitution by the ANC at its annual conference in December. The new constitution, dubbed the Tambo Constitution after the head of the committee that had drafted it, further

37 Interview with Henry Makgothi, conducted by Philip Bonner, Shell House, Johannesburg, 22 February 1994, Wits History Workshop.
38 Interview with Walter Sisulu.
40 Interview with Rusty Bernstein. See also Rusty Bernstein, Memory Against Forgetting, Viking Press, London, 1999, pp 177-81.
clipped the wings of the provinces and ‘streamlined the powers of the centre’, with the Johannesburg-based executive assuming a dominant position.\textsuperscript{41} Chief Luthuli, his fears allayed at the role of communists and others at the centre, readily acquiesced. As Sisulu put it, ‘he was an intelligent man, he was no yes-man, he was completely different from Moroka. So that he could lead. He was not a small man. He didn’t resent that the direction was from Johannesburg’.\textsuperscript{42}

Inevitably, the Africanists had an entirely different reaction, and the rift between them and the mainstream grew steadily wider. In this way, the constellation of forces that would give birth to the armed struggle, as well as to the PAC, gradually became aligned. Only one component was still lacking: a charismatic and self-sacrificing leader. In late 1958, the hiatus was filled when Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, who had been groomed for some time to assume the ANC’s highest office, assumed effective leadership in the pivotal province of the Transvaal.\textsuperscript{43}

Everyone in the ANC of those days agreed that the formation of the PAC was part of the political chemistry that would produce the armed struggle, though opinions differ over the precise nature of its contribution. Some limit the PAC’s role to its hijacking of the ANC’s anti-pass campaign and its precipitation of the Sharpeville massacre. Others perceive it as forcing the ANC to contemplate more radical forms of action, including the anti-pass campaign itself. In his autobiography, Joe Slovo was openly contemptuous of the PAC as being compromised and opportunistic. The PAC, he wrote, ‘was founded at a meeting held in the United States Information Library in Johannesburg where Potlako Leballo, one of the leaders of this group, was employed. The PAC’s first contribution to militant revolutionary action was to launch a “status campaign” designed to obtain polite treatment for African consumers from shopkeepers, bankers, government officials, etc. Predictably this campaign turned out to be the dampest of squibs. [Its only consistent aim was to] displace the ANC as the primary liberation organisation in South Africa. In order to do this, it was always ready to accommodate itself to any political posture even if it meant a complete somersault on a previously held position’.

The hijacking of the ANC’s anti-pass campaign was, in Slovo’s view, a classic example of this political style.\textsuperscript{44} Walter Sisulu was likewise dismissive of PAC pretensions, pointing out that ‘they didn’t have support at all. They were unable to attract any of the leaders, any leading members of the executive. Others were just young chaps who were not important, who had no influence whatsoever. Their break did not do any harm to the organisation. That’s why we said well, good riddance’.\textsuperscript{45}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{42} Interview with Walter Sisulu.
\bibitem{43} Ibid.
\bibitem{45} Interview with Walter Sisulu.
\end{thebibliography}
But others active at the time turn this proposition on its head, among them Ben Turok, who was both Secretary to the Congress Alliance and a kind of personal secretary to Sisulu. In his view, 'the PAC grew alarmingly – a cancer – and what worried me wasn't just that it was growing [but] because they were attracting very interesting young people, and educated people, high school people, intellectuals and so on, and they were getting the people we weren't getting. This occurred largely in the Cape Town and Pretoria townships, but was very limited in other parts of the country.'

For Thomas Nkobi and Andrew Mlangeni, the attraction of the youth to the PAC in the Transvaal and the Western Cape was equally worrying 'because an organisation that did not have the support of youth could not survive.'

The pressure exerted by 'hot-headed youth', whether PAC aligned or not, was almost certainly one of the factors that prodded the ANC in a more militant direction. 'We knew we had to do something,' according to Turok, 'so we thought we must do something dramatic, and I suspect it was Walter who proposed another Defiance Campaign. Walter was very close to the masses. [Passes were] the jugular. It's a matter of the right moment and the right issue.'

Sisulu offered his own perspective on the subject:

We were building the anti-pass to reach a climax. We knew that once we reached a climax we were going to create a situation in which you have to use new methods. We were planning a gigantic anti-pass campaign, commemorating the 1921 campaign [in fact 1919], we wanted to take the whole anti-pass campaign to reach a climax.

For Bernstein, the anti-pass campaign

... was not a new idea. It had been tried without much success several times before, and now felt old and second-hand though it might be a way out of the doldrums of the Treason Trial years. Burning of passes would be a declaration of resistance to a whole panoply of oppressive laws which depend on them. To have more than a momentary effect it would have to be done on a grand scale right across the country. The ANC believes that the people are ready for it; I am not so sure. Pass-burning is a high-risk strategy. It can lead directly to eviction from municipal housing, loss of employment, and 'endorsement out' or banishment from the cities for all who take part. The state reaction will be fierce and unrestrained. Many leading Party members share my doubts about success,

46 Interview with Ben Turok, conducted by Philip Bonner and Barbara Harmel, Braamfontein, Johannesburg, 20 April 1993, Wits History Workshop.
47 Interview with Thomas Nkobi. Andrew Mlangeni makes the same point in an interview conducted on 2 May 1994, Wits History Workshop.
48 Interview with Ben Turok.
49 Interview with Walter Sisulu.
but the decision is not ours but that of the ANC. Once they decide to go ahead, we will do whatever we can to help.50

The ANC held its national conference in Durban in December 1959, preceded by a mass rally attended by an estimated 58 000 people. Natal was the scene of something close to a rural uprising at the time, and the spirit was infectious. Delegates to the conference called on the movement for ‘bolder action’ and chided the ANC executive for its ‘cautious leadership’. The conference decided that an anti-pass campaign would take place on the 41st anniversary of the Johannesburg anti-pass campaign of 31 March 1919. When the PAC’s National Executive Committee convened in Bloemfontein a week after the ANC conference, it proposed an anti-pass campaign for ratification at its first annual conference.

At the time, the PAC’s membership was below expectations and it required a bold initiative to draw people into the organisation. Prior to the conference, the PAC headquarters had announced that plans for ‘positive action’ would be drawn up, and at the conference PAC president Robert Sobukwe requested a mandate to launch an anti-pass campaign. The call was unanimously supported, and the PAC decided to launch its campaign on 21 March, 10 days before the scheduled launch of the ANC’s campaign, under the slogan ‘No bail, no defence, no fine’. Sobukwe invited the ANC to join in the PAC’s campaign, but the ANC’s secretary-general, Duma Nokwe, declined, saying that the plan had no reasonable prospect of success. Similarly, Mandela felt that the PAC’s pre-emption of the ANC’s anti-pass campaign was the desperate plan of a ‘leadership in search of followers’. He wrote:

The PAC at the time appeared lost: they were a leadership in search of followers, and they had yet to initiate any action that put them on the political map. They knew of the ANC’s anti-pass campaign and had been invited to join, but instead of linking arms with the Congress movement, they sought to sabotage us … No conference had been held by them to discuss the date, no organisational work of any significance had been undertaken. It was a blatant case of opportunism. Their actions were motivated more by a desire to eclipse the ANC than to defeat the enemy.51

State of emergency and the move underground

The events leading up to the Sharpeville massacre have been well enough documented not to require more than a summary outline here. The exact date for the launch of the PAC anti-pass campaign had been left for Sobukwe to set. Early in March 1960, he fixed upon the date of the 21st. This was only publicly announced on 18 March, but to the extent that the timing was designed to pre-

---

50 Bernstein, 1999, p 189.
empt the ANC’s own better planned campaign, which was scheduled to begin on 31 March, the PAC did hijack the exercise.

When 21 March dawned, the PAC received a mixed public response. In Johannesburg, a meagre 150 volunteers followed the executive in presenting themselves for arrest at Orlando police station. In the Vereeniging, Vanderbijlpark and Evaton area, however, support was much stronger. At Vanderbijlpark, two protestors were shot dead. At Sharpeville, police fired on an angry crowd outside the location police station without warning, killing 67 people and wounding another 186, including women and children. In the Cape townships of Nyanga and Langa, mass protests, strikes and marches occurred between 20 and 30 March, culminating in a spectacular march on Cape Town by 30 000 protesters. In Johannesburg, Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Duma Nokwe and Joe Slovo held an all-night meeting to plan a response to the Sharpeville massacre. Mandela wrote:

We conveyed our plans to Chief Luthuli, and he readily accepted them. On 26 March in Pretoria, chief publicly burned his pass, calling on others to do the same. He announced a nationwide stay-at-home on 28 March, a national day of mourning and protest for the atrocities at Sharpeville. In Orlando, Duma Nokwe and I then burned our passes before hundreds of people and dozens of press photographers.52

Huge numbers heeded the call to protest, which was accompanied by rioting on the part of Johannesburg’s ‘hot-headed youth’. Towards the end of the day, Bernstein recalled, ‘there were a lot of clashes with the police and a lot of people were killed in various parts of Alexandra and Soweto and other places all over.’53

Michael Dingake, at that point a resident of Alexandra, recorded: ‘PUTCO buses, symbols of inefficiency and exploitation, became popular targets of Molotov cocktail hurlers. Arsonists attempted to burn down one of the two Dutch Reformed Churches. One appreciated the hatred against the Dutch Reformed Churches.’54

Bernstein later observed: ‘I think that everyone was being driven to the conclusion that the non-violent struggle had run its course ... any minute now the people are not going to heed our call and come out on general strike because the people are not bloody stupid ... We can’t carry on forever using unarmed people against armed police.’55

On 30 March, the government declared a state of emergency and began detaining more than 2 000 political activists. Over the following days, outbreaks of violence and pass burning flared up in Durban, Port Elizabeth, Bloemfontein and other centres. On 8 April the government announced the banning of the ANC and PAC under the newly passed Unlawful Organisations

53 Interview with Rusty Bernstein.
55 Interview with Rusty Bernstein.
Act.56 As Dingake wrote: ‘Overnight, membership of the ANC and the PAC had become a felony, punishable by jail term and a fine. The penalty was imprisonment for up to 10 years. From now on, non-violent protests under the auspices of the liberation movement became illegal.’57 The transition from semi-legality to illegality was complete.

No one was fully prepared for this situation. Three days before the three-day stay-away to mourn the Sharpeville victims, and shortly before the state of emergency was declared, the ANC’s national executive, anticipating that the regime would ban the organisation, drew up a new structure that would enable the organisation to operate in conditions of illegality. This involved the total dissolution of provincial structures, the replacement of elected branch executives with an appointed seven-member ad hoc committee and the dissolution of the Youth League and Women’s League and their replacement by five-person advisory committees working directly under the ad hoc branch committees. In due course, these changes would meet with fierce resistance, but the ANC had no opportunity to implement them before the axe fell.58

The organisation’s immediate response was to issue a statement on 1 April declaring that it would ‘continue to give leadership and organisation to the people until freedom has been won’, but in reality, the ANC was able to do little more than confirm its continued existence through the issuing of occasional clandestine bulletins.59

The SACP was equally unprepared. A large number of those detained without trial were released in late June, but it was not until the end of August, when the state of emergency was lifted, that the rest of the detainees, including the most important members, were set free.60 The six-month pause offered a space for reflection and reappraisal and marked another defining phase in the move towards armed struggle. In the view of most leaders active at that time, the banning of the African political organisations rendered former methods of opposition both redundant and untenable. Alfred Nzo remarked: ‘After the bannings it became clear that the era of peaceful struggle had come to a close. As Chief Luthuli put it, “for many years we have been knocking at a closed door, for many years, banging at the door of white racism”.’61

Different people, however, have different views as to how and when the decision to embark on armed struggle occurred. Walter Sisulu was adamant

60 Ibid.
61 Interview with Alfred Nzo, conducted by Philip Bonner, Shell House, Johannesburg, 14 March 1994, Wits History Workshop.
that discussion took place and some sort of collective understanding on the need to embark on armed struggle was reached among a section of the leadership while in detention between March and August 1960.

We were discussing the question even in jail, Nelson, Duma Nokwe, myself, Joe Slovo, Rusty Bernstein. I think already we had decided it in jail, but the actual, no I think it was crystallised when we came out. What we were planning, for instance, in jail, is the question of mobilising the entire country. But side by side a small group was working on this question of armed struggle. One meeting took place in jail – quite a big meeting – to discuss the situation. We even got whites who found a way of getting the whites who were separated from us. That group was for armed struggle. We had also discussed just before that mass mobilisation.62

Much the same discussion was taking place in the same context in Port Elizabeth. According to Wilton Mkwayi, ‘even this one of armed struggle was decided during the state of emergency – 1960. In jail, [it] then come out to spread this before it was agreed’.63 As elsewhere, different individuals engaged in debate in different manner and degree. Henry Fazzie recalled:

We once discussed it while we were still in jail, in detention ... Of course it was not extensively discussed. Some of us said, no, it would be better for us to leave and go out of the country ... It was left like that, without taking a decision that we would be going for military training or that the ANC must take up the decision now. I can say everyone who was there was in favour, yes. This thing of military training was something which was common to everybody, although we didn’t know where to go for military training, whom one can approach, does the executive know about this, are they in favour of this, can they approve of this if we take this to them ...64

Harry Gwala, likewise, remembered talk in Natal ‘about killing, about armed struggle’ while still in prison.65

The circle in which these sensitive issues were discussed was nevertheless circumscribed. Bernstein, whom Sisulu regarded as ‘another very cautious man, even more cautious than his wife Hilda’, may not have been included, although he was part of the subterfuge that allowed white detainees to speak to their incarcerated African counterparts during the state of emergency. As he recalled: ‘Some of our people were in the Treason Trial and were going to

62 Interview with Walter Sisulu.
63 Interview with Wilton Mkwayi.
64 Interview with Henry Fazzie, conducted by Philip Bonner and Barbara Harmel, Johannesburg, 25 October 1993, Wits History Workshop.
65 Interview with Harry Gwala, conducted by Philip Bonner, Pietermaritzburg, 15 July 1993, Wits History Workshop.
court every day. They demanded a consultation with us [in detention]. I recall
us having a meeting with Mandela and the others in the Pretoria prison where
we discussed tactics, but I cannot recall armed struggle."66

Others excluded from these discussions were Nzo, Makgothi and Nkobi.67

The magic circle remained small.

The second major event that occurred during the state of emergency was
public disclosure of its existence by the underground Communist Party. A
debate had raged for some time within the Party as to how and when this
should happen. According to Bernstein, ‘a controversy began to arise in the
late 1950s as to why we didn’t proclaim ourselves and start operating and issu-
ing propaganda in our own name. And this was really where the distinction
between the pure communists and the communists in the national movement
began to arise’.

On the one side stood those like Michael Harmel, who asked: ‘Isn’t it funda-
mental to the concept of a Communist Party that it must be speaking in its
own name independently of the mass movement?’

And as soon as that situation arose, said Bernstein, ‘then of course contro-
versy and division arose in the ranks ... because people could justifiably quote
the classics and all the precepts of Communist Party organisation and say the
Party’s nothing if it is not an independent body. It’s fundamental to the concept
of a Communist Party, it’s a matter of principle if you like of the Communist
Party, and let’s operate in the public arena’.

Ranged against proponents of disclosure were a number of African commu-
nists, who ‘thought first of all that it would act against the interests of the ANC,
because the government would be able to claim that the ANC was a cover for a
secret communist conspiracy’.

The banning of the ANC nullified that argument, ‘but there still remained the
fear that it would undermine the status of our people in the liberation move-
ment, who would then know they were subject to a second authority. They
would be taking their instructions – as well as from the ANC – they would be
taking their instructions from elsewhere and that would undermine the status
of the ANC’.

These elements insisted that ‘if you proclaim the Party in the present time,
this is going to lead to problems in the national movement because at the
moment we’re all accepted on an absolutely 100 per cent equal footing. You’re
going to make our position there difficult, you’re going to give an opportunity
to the anti-communist elements in the national movement to start witch hunt-
ing against [us]. So it’s not quite as simple as you think. It’s not just a question
of right or wrong. It’s not an abstract moral question, it’s a question of political
tactics’.68

66 Interview with Rusty Bernstein.
67 Interviews with Alfred Nzo, Henry Makgothi, Thomas Nkobi.
68 Interview with Rusty Bernstein.
At a Central Committee meeting in 1958 or 1959, Bernstein brokered a compromise position, which allowed for the African Communist to be published, but for the purists, this was not nearly enough.69

It was not so much the state of emergency itself that tipped the balance on this issue, but the coincidence of whom it swept up in its net. Ben Turok recalled:

So then came the emergency, and I knew something was coming, because the police were hyperactive ... I had already laid on a safe house ... so I drove off ... to Ralph ... knock on the door, Ralph said, 'Hello, I was half expecting you ...'. A lot of other people were warned but didn’t take it seriously. All sorts of people said, oh well, we’ve heard that before, and turned over and went to sleep again, except Mike [Harmel] and Moses [Kotane] who did duck, like me. So that night the raids were huge, thousands – Rusty, Joe, all sorts of people. And so I sat, and ... listened to the news. The whole world is collapsed.70

Turok telephoned Harmel and Kotane and they met at Turok’s safe haven in Mons Road, Johannesburg. They were followed by Ruth First, Yusuf Dadoo and Jack Hodgson. ‘And this bloody house,’ Turok exclaimed, ‘was turned into a headquarters’. In an effort to build up viable external support, Dadoo and Hodgson were sent out of the country, leaving Harmel, Kotane, Turok, Slovo, Bernstein, Ruth First, Bram Fischer, JB Marks and others as the leadership of the Party.

This group moved 10 times over the next five months. From one of their havens they decided to call a meeting of what remained of the Central Committee. Joe Matthews, who had also escaped the net by dint of his wife’s sharp comprehension that the actual document declaring the state of emergency had not yet been ferried to Durban by air, remembered being summoned to the meeting.71 What followed remained etched in Turok’s memory.

Six of us ... Joe Matthews, Bob Hepple, Bram. Mick made a very strong speech – about the coming out of the Party at the meeting. All of us got an absolute shock. Because there we were, absolutely panicking and living in fear ... feeling a huge responsibility, because ... the other two were the most senior people [not arrested] in the whole movement.

However, Kotane opposed the proposal. ‘Look,’ he said, ‘when you throw a stone at people they are going to come back and break your windows, just think about what you are going to do. Are we in a strong enough position to hold it? Are we going to be able to survive? The backlash will be fantastic. The police will go mad.’

69 Ibid.
70 Interview with Ben Turok.
71 Interview with Joe Matthews.
Kotane also expressed concern about the small and unrepresentative nature of the group, most of the Central Committee still being in prison, but Harmel was unrelenting, according to Turok.

The argument was: if we don’t come out now, we will never come out. The Party cannot continue forever as a clandestine group. It must announce socialism to the people of South Africa. Because socialism was not being advocated ... socialism was not on the agenda. They said if we don’t put it on the agenda now, when are we going to? And we have the opportunity and the country is in deep crisis, and the country is looking for leaders. It was very hard to refuse. It was a question of survival – it was a technical question and a question of judgment – could we survive? And Mick was right. We did survive.72

With Kotane dissenting, the committee agreed, and a leaflet was prepared announcing the Party’s existence.

We produced I don’t know how many thousands – it was distributed in all the main centres – clandestine– quite a big way and it made a helluva impact. The Party emerged. Jeez, the chaps in jail went mad. Some in favour, some against.73

The announcement did indeed provoke contradictory reactions. In prison, Central Committee member Walter Sisulu recalled, ‘There was unhappiness about it both in the Party as well as the ANC. Some in the ANC regarded it as a betrayal. Within the Party a debate was going on that it was also not [divided]. In fact they also regarded it as a betrayal of the ANC’.74

Others felt more personally wounded, among them Helen Joseph. Said Turok: ‘She did not know I was in the Party, in fact she thought I was not. When she discovered that I was, she was furious, because we had lived together under a false relationship. I always felt very bad about that afterwards.’

However, Turok was probably correct to conclude that, in broad political terms, the group ‘got away with it, quite easily in the end’.75 Bernstein concurred. ‘As far as I am aware, the repercussions of the decision were nil, except that the Party was now open and from then on could conduct propaganda in its own name’.76

Bernstein’s innocuous statement nevertheless conveys little of the momentous significance of the decision, namely that the Party had the freedom to act and take autonomous liberation initiatives. This would have incalculable significance in the move to armed struggle.

72 Interview with Ben Turok.
73 Ibid.
74 Interview with Walter Sisulu.
75 Interview with Ben Turok.
76 Interview with Rusty Bernstein.
Once the detainees were released in late August 1960, energies were channelled in two directions: rebuilding the ANC underground and laying the foundation for mass mobilisation, and preparing for armed struggle. To begin with, the majority of those who remained politically active were engaged in the first area of activity. The ANC’s National Executive held its first formal underground meeting in September. Among the decisions it took was the creation of new structures to coordinate actions with unbanned congress organisations and to dissolve the Youth and Women’s Leagues. Both decisions provoked serious opposition among leaders and members who had absolutely no idea what was required to operate as an underground organisation. According to Elias Motsoaledi, the Youth League leadership refused point-blank to dissolve, its Secretary General Peter Ntithe fearing that ‘the ANC would swallow us’. It took months for this instruction to be obeyed.

Another aspect of organisational streamlining that was rejected in some instances was the paring of provincial and local executive committees from 25 to seven members each. Walter Sisulu offered a ‘typical’ example of the reactions this produced.

In Port Elizabeth Nelson went there to settle disputes. He finds the main complaint is that the underground decision is not known to the [executive] ... These were the problems that [happened]. The executive had to be thinned out to the seven instead of the big executive of 25. So members of the executive who were not part of that said, ‘Where does this come from?’ Those were the problems that arose.

Alfred Nzo, who had begun working full time for the ANC in 1959 and like so many others had been detained during the state of emergency, remembered re-establishing an underground head office for the ANC at Makhosa House in Johannesburg’s Commissioner Street, where it intersects with Bezuidenhout. ‘I had such a small office with Walter which was head office – not this huge building [Shell House] that you are seeing now – it was small ... which we tried to camouflage as a place where people could deposit their dry cleaning. But it never was that, nobody brought any clothes there.’

Nzo devoted himself exclusively to ANC underground work, even after the formation of Umkhonto we Sizwe in the second half of 1961. There was, Nzo said, ‘a strict separation’ between the two. ‘Head office personnel played a role in organising some demonstrations as well as in “calming” certain problems, but most efforts were directed towards rebuilding the underground structure

---

77 According to Essop Pahad, rank and file members of the other congresses would soon play an important role, for example producing and distributing leaflets for the banned ANC. Interview with Essop Pahad, conducted by Ben Magubane and Sifiso Ndlovu, 1 September 2003, Pretoria, SADET Oral History Project.
78 Interview with Elias Motsoaledi.
79 Interview with Walter Sisulu. See also N Mandela, 1995, p 301.
80 Interview with Alfred Nzo.
of the organisation'. In this endeavour, Nzo and Sisulu were aided by two full-time members of head office staff, Duma Nokwe and Thomas Nkobi.81

Nkobi’s recollections of Makhosa House and of his underground activities are graphic:

I organised some Indian fellows, some friends, who will sign my pass to show that I am not a loafer, I’m working. But still I was really working for the movement. I remember one day I was sitting in the office with Alfred Nzo and Moosa Moola. You know, we were sitting on the benches and they were facing the door, and Moosa Moola was telling us how the Vietnamese are beating up the Americans. But when he was telling us that, some Special Branch were standing behind them, he didn’t see them! He was going on, going on, and he couldn’t realise … he couldn’t notice that there was something wrong – our reaction, without telling him that – there are police behind you. He noticed that there was something wrong. When he turned, he saw that Meneer Duiker was standing there … says no, continue! He ran away! And then Duiker and the … say, yes, you chaps, we know that you are not registered under the ANC, but you are registered under some companies. We know that. We shall get hold of you one of these days. And he then said that, I think it was just a joke, and he said that, well, you have received some money from the Soviet Union. You will be in a position now to get your pay. I was shocked by that. When a police tells me that at least you have now received money from the Soviet Union. How did he know that? But my friend, a few weeks after that, we got our pay.

Outside of head office, countless others set to work rebuilding the ANC underground. Ruth Mompati, who had helped launch the Federation of South African Women in 1954, and was involved in organising both the 1955 Congress of the People and the 1956 women’s march on Pretoria, was directed by Walter Sisulu to help set up underground structures in Soweto. Her unit included Henry Makgothi, John Mavuso and Bartholomew Hlapane, who later turned traitor. They printed pamphlets, which were distributed in Soweto and other areas.

In addition, Mompati organised tea groups as a front for the banned ANC Women’s League, which extended as far as her hometown of Vryburg. To escape the security police, Mompati was forced to flee South Africa in 1962 in the company of Themba Mqotha (Alfred Kgokong) and Flag Boshielo.82

Nzo, Nokwe and Nkobi were involved in the organisation of an All-In African Conference at Pietermaritzburg on 25 and 26 March 1961. This grew out of a consultative conference initially sponsored by the Interdenominational African Ministers Conference, held on 16 and 17 December 1960 at Orlando.

81 Interview with Thomas Nkobi.
82 Interview with Ruth Mompati, conducted by Sifiso Ndlovu and Ben Magubane, Vryburg, 15 August 2001, SADET Oral History Project.
and which was attended by members of the ANC and PAC, Jordan Ngubane of the Liberal Party and a sprinkling of African professionals.

The All-In African Conference was arranged with a view to cementing unity between African political organisations, and to demand that a national convention, representing all of South Africa’s people, be called. Nokwe and Nzo served on an ANC-dominated committee charged with planning the All-In African Conference, from which the PAC gradually withdrew.

Despite police harassment, the conference duly took place and was attended by 1,400 delegates, mainly ANC-aligned. The highlight was an appearance by Nelson Mandela, whose banning order had elapsed 11 days earlier, and had not been renewed, due to some bureaucratic oversight.83

Successive bannings had restricted Mandela from speaking on public platforms since 1952, but in a dramatic opening speech at Pietermaritzburg, he demanded that the regime reverse its unilateral decision to declare South Africa a republic, and called for a national convention of all the people of South Africa armed with ‘sovereign powers’ to draw up a new constitution. If this demand was not met by 31 May 1961, the day South Africa was due to become a republic, militant counter-demonstrations would be staged.84 Mandela was elected Secretary of the National Action Council, which would oversee these actions, and Sisulu believed that the Pietermaritzburg conference was crucial in cementing Mandela’s authority as the key ANC leader.85

The day before leaving for Pietermaritzburg, Mandela attended a secret meeting of the ANC’s National Working Committee, which had previously adopted a strategy of underground organisation along the lines of the M-Plan. It was at this meeting that the decision was taken that Mandela would go underground if he was acquitted when judgment in the Treason Trial was handed down on 29 March. Within hours of being pronounced ‘not guilty’, Mandela slipped away to assume the persona of ‘The Black Pimpernel’.86

While Mandela became absorbed in planning the 29 May stay-away, head office staff like Nzo and Nkobi continued their efforts to establish functioning underground structures and sustain the profile of the ANC. This took Thomas Nkobi all over the country. On one such trip, from Johannesburg to Bloemfontein, he was ‘accompanying’ three suitcases full of illegal pamphlets.

But when I reached Bloemfontein, I could see, I could smell that there was something wrong. The movement of the people there. I didn’t take those … I went to our people in Bloemfontein – Botshabelo – to say I’ve got these illegal leaflets, but I’m afraid the police are aware of it. But don’t go and fetch them. The young fellows, they say, ah no, we are going

---

84 Interview with Walter Sisulu.
86 Ibid, p 318.
to fetch them. And indeed, when they fetched them, they were arrested. And then told them that at least I brought these leaflets. The police, the whole day, they were looking for me. They only got hold of me at half past seven. They interrogated me there. One – who brought the leaflets? I said, ‘No, I didn’t bring the leaflets’. Two – where is Mandela? I said, ‘No, I don’t know’. They said, ‘No, you are lying. The national organiser who would not know where Mandela is tells us a lot of lies’. In spite of the fact that they beat me up. This suit, at a certain stage I didn’t know where I was. I didn’t have the trousers, I didn’t have the jacket, the shirt. The only thing remaining with me was the underwear and the tie. At about one o’clock am, they took me on top of the building which was their headquarters. I could see the whole of Bloemfontein. The policeman took up his gun. He says, ‘You see, Bloemfontein is quiet. All the natives are asleep and contented. You are from Johannesburg to come and poison these people here’. He took up his gun and hit me on the head. He says, ‘I can shoot you and throw you down and say the native was running away from custody. Nothing will happen. Walter Sisulu will bark for two weeks, Duma Nokwe will bark for two weeks, and it’s finished’. I made a mistake and said, ‘Yes, who am I? You have killed greater sons of South Africa’. They hit me here, I fell there. But when I woke up, I said, ah, I’m still alive! I thought I was already gone now. From there they took me to a place called Waterbo where they put me, they’ve got then – 29 ex communicado – 29 days without washing. I used to use this finger to eat my porridge. I became in love with a fly. When the fly comes in there, it flies, I will follow it, follow it. I will say to myself, I am sure this fly might have gone to my home. When the sun set, there used to be a kind of a small hole in the door. I used to look until the sun sets. For 29 days without washing. Dirt was not something. I mean if you don’t wash, you know, you just eat. Then the same day, a policeman comes to me and says, ‘Now look, these people are going to kill you. What have you done?’ I said, ‘No, I haven’t done anything’. So I was a bit aggressive. I said, ‘Why are you asking me that? Go away’. He said, ‘No, I’m just working here. I don’t approve what they are going to do’. I said, ‘Go away, you are not a friend, you are a friend of those people who have incarcerated me here’. He left me. At eleven o’clock he came back again. Says, ‘Please could you give me the name of anyone whom you know so that I can inform them that you are here. Because nobody knows where you are’. And then afterwards, I said, hau, let me give him the name of Mfundi, of a priest. I gave him the name of a priest – Bloemfontein. It was eleven o’clock. And when the priest got the information that I was in this Waterbo police station, he contacted lawyers. The lawyers then applied this law of habeas corpus – that I must be produced, dead or alive, in court. At five o’clock I was produced. But the most interesting thing was this. When I left that police station, this policeman says to me, ‘I hope you will remember me when you also take over in power’. You know, that chap knocked me out! I said, ‘Well, I don’t think we will have any government that will treat other
human beings like this’. And I left. When I came back, I looked for him [the policeman] but I was told, ‘No, he has died’.

Around the middle of May 1961, the National Action Council declared that the protest against South Africa leaving the Commonwealth would take the form of a three-day strike from Monday, 29 May to Wednesday, 31 May. The government responded by banning all meetings during this period, allowing for arrest without bail for 12 days, and duly arrested close on 10 000 Africans. The unprecedented scale of the repression was captured by Mandela in his autobiography. Two days before the stay-at-home, he wrote, ‘the government staged the biggest peace-time show of force in South African history. The military exercised its largest call-up since the war. Police holidays were cancelled. Military units were stationed at the entrances and exits of the townships. While Saracen tanks rumbled through the streets of the townships, helicopters hovered overhead, swooping down on any gatherings. At night the helicopters trained searchlights on houses’.

On the last weekend in May, a mimeographed leaflet was issued in Port Elizabeth under the name of the PAC. Headed ‘Poqo, Poqo, Poqo’, it urged people to go to work. A further 25 000 leaflets were supposed to have been distributed in Johannesburg. It was never clear whether these were the handiwork of the police or not, but when 29 May dawned, up to 50% of Johannesburg’s work force stayed at home. In Port Elizabeth, the other major centre to observe the stay-away, support was more fragmented. From his safe house in Southend, Govan Mbeki

... started calling various points in the township, and was told it was good here, and not so good there, and so on. I sent a report to Jo’burg, and to this young woman ... I sent her to send the press telegrams. Then in the evening, about early evening, the National Executive in Johannesburg came with a statement to say this is called off, because what did the press do? All reports from the press came out to say the stay-away is a flop, and the National Executive in Johannesburg took those reports from the media seriously. The stay-away is a flop. Then they called it off, and the people refused. Now what then is it that happened here? The bus owners said, the thing is called off, let the buses go to the roads and take people to work. And the employers said the thing is off. The National Executive has called it off. And then early in the morning, the buses were loading, and the volunteers who had petrol bombs – for the first time, our people used petrol bombs. Buses drove back into the terminals and people were afraid. That stopped it. The organisation here said this is going to last three days. Now in Johannesburg, Sophiatown, people were

87 Interview with Thomas Nkobi.
89 Ibid.
descending heavily on the National Executive: ‘Why did you call it off, because it was not a failure in Sophiatown?’ Then Nelson, who had disappeared that day, because we were sending him abroad earlier on, came out with a statement that ... the government had not heeded what the ANC had said, the ANC was going to turn a new leaf of non-cooperation.90

In his autobiography, Mandela offered the following accounts of events: ‘That morning in a flat in a white suburb I met various members of the foreign press. I did not mask the fact that I felt a new day was dawning. I said, “If the government reaction is to crush by naked force our non-violent struggle we will have to reconsider our tactics. In my mind we are closing a chapter on this question of a non-violent policy”. It was a grave declaration and I knew it.’91

According to Karis and Carter, his precise words were: ‘If peaceful protests like these are to be put down by the mobilisation of the army and police, then the people might be forced to use other methods of struggle.’92

Mandela’s statement was unauthorised – but it nevertheless represented another significant step on the road towards armed struggle.

The formation of MK

Personal recollections of this period, and of the decision to espouse an armed struggle, are often noticeably coy about who first took this decision – the SACP or the ANC? A common ploy is to aver that both did so ‘at about the same time’. Joe Slovo, for example, observed in his autobiography that, ‘by June 1961 the Central Committee of the Party and the Johannesburg Working Group of the ANC had reached consensus on the need to form a military wing and to prepare for its initial phase of armed struggle’.93 However, a good deal of evidence suggests that the Party made this momentous decision not only separately, but first. In neither case was the decision easy or uncontested. According to Slovo: ‘There was perhaps no other period in our history when the Party played such a seminal role in the unfolding of the struggle as in the years between 1960 and 1963. The ANC had just been outlawed. Its structures as a mass organisation made it more difficult for it to swing into underground activity at the grassroots level.’94

The SACP stood tested and ready to take the lead. One direction in which the Party, unencumbered by its former ‘non-existence’, now moved, was towards armed struggle. While in detention, leading Party members, including Slovo, had been involved in discussions that came close to formal decisions

90 Interview with Govan Mbeki.
94 Ibid.
about the desirability of armed struggle. Once free, they began to actively promote this position.

As early as August 1960, Michael Harmel wrote and circulated among SACP Central Committee members a position paper on the subject of ‘South Africa: What Next’, which raised the question of whether the time had come to go beyond non-violent means of struggle. A special resolution at the Party conference that followed at the end of the year addressed the same question, noting with some caution that ‘the use of armed forces against the state, directed by the leading organisations of the people, is a part of the tactics of the revolutionary struggle, and is a necessary complement of the mass political agitation in such situations as that now developing [but not yet developed] in South Africa’.

Privately, many leading Party members were arguing for armed struggle with less qualification.

Shortly before the state of emergency was lifted at the end of August 1960, Joe Matthews and Michael Harmel were sent abroad to attend the international meeting of the Communist and Workers Parties in Moscow in July 1960. According to Shubin, Yusuf Dadoo headed the delegation, which included Vella Pillay. Matthews recalled ‘putting forward the policy of armed struggle already’ at this meeting, and ‘asking for the support of communist parties for that policy’.

Because already we were anticipating ... Already within our ranks, you see, the question was, what do you say in an international meeting of communists? So we went there with Michael Harmel and we said that we anticipated that sooner or later we would have to come back to them with the armed struggle as an option ... And when we went to China, we put it there to Dang Tsia Ping. And of course we raised and we even suggested that they should help us train people, and in fact the first guerrillas went there. As a result of that Mhla, Mlangeni, Motsoaledi [incorrect], Mkwayi, and a fifth [were] sent to train.

In the SACP’s case, the subject of race seriously complicated the issue of turning to armed struggle. Raymond Mhlaba remembered ‘very well in 1960 when people like Rusty and others said, man, why is it we as communists are ashamed to handle this matter of armed struggle? Why are we so hesitant? But you know what makes our people to be hesitant – they are convinced, really convinced that it is going to be racialistic. That is what makes them worried. It’s going to be white man versus black. They said how are you going to handle this in South Africa? It’s going to be racial war’.

96 Interview with Joe Matthews.
98 Interview with Joe Matthews. The six who were sent out of the country were Raymond Mhla, Steven Naidoo, Wilton Mkwayi, Andrew Mlangeni, Joe Gqabi and Patrick Mthembu.
There was another occasion that stood out particularly clearly in Mhlaba’s mind: ‘Bram Fischer called me aside one day, said, “Man, it’s going to be racist, racial war. Because I am white you must kill me? I’m a comrade. How are you going to handle this situation?” Finally he agreed it must be done. That is why, if you recall, in MK we talk about the selection of targets.”99

Walter Sisulu remembered other objections. ‘You know, the most cautious men in all these situations were Bram Fischer and Moses Kotane. The most cautious in opposing the ideas Bram considered adventurist. He says, “Look man, your organisation has got a policy of non-violence. To simply come up with the idea, military – how are you going to get the masses of people?” But he did not oppose it. He would discuss and show, to try and make you steady about your ideas. Moses and Bram.’100

Even the leading Leninist theoretician, Mick Harmel, raised questions about the policy’s putschist implications.

Recollections vary as to the exact timing of the decision, but there is a common drift in all of the accounts. Motsoaledi set it against the backdrop of rural revolt and state repression in the late 1950s. ‘That is when the underground Communist Party starting discussing in all the units that now this is the time. If we are not to suffer from this, this is the time to lead the people with active resistance. Now the only way to do this was to organise guerrilla warfare. Now this was debated in March in the ... Party units and we came to the conclusion that in any case ... [there] would be the banning of the National Liberation Movement.’101

There is broad consensus that the SACP took a formal decision to embark on armed struggle well before the ANC did so. Essop Pahad suggested that it would have been easier for the Party than for the ANC to take a formal decision, because it was a smaller grouping. The ANC was a mass movement with a layer of leadership spread across the country.102 Eric Mtshali went to some lengths to make the point that the Party reached the decision first.

When the matter was first introduced to the Party cells by 1960 it had become very clear that we could not fight the apartheid regime with bare hands. You could not convince the Boers to change because they were not prepared to change. The matter was then discussed at the upper echelons of the Party. It was subsequently agreed that there was a great need for the adoption of the armed struggle. The challenge was to introduce the matter to the ANC. This is one part of our history that is not known ... that is that the South African Communist Party arrived at the decision ahead of the ANC.103

99 Interview with Raymond Mhlaba.
100 Interview with Walter Sisulu.
101 Interview with Elias Motsoaledi.
102 Interview with Essop Pahad.
103 Interview with Eric Mtshali.
Such a decision could only be taken at an SACP conference. Andrew Mlangeni placed this at July 1961, but Rusty Bernstein may have been more accurate in pinpointing December 1960.

It must have been approximately the end of 1960, yes I think. The sabotage started in 1961. It must have been around the end of 1960... eh, Michael Harmel had gone abroad to the big Party conference, which was taking place in Moscow. I think it was the first time [the dispute] between the Soviet Union and China came out into open discussion... He had gone abroad to that conference. He was not at this national conference that I am talking about—that's how I date it. Because at the national conference we had heard of... we had no knowledge, and it was at that conference the decision was taken that the Party should start preparing. I can’t remember what preparations— but making preparations for building... of sabotage, or guerrillas, or whatever. In other words... I suspect that must have been in December 1960, because it would have been more or less simultaneous with the Moscow conference...

Wilton Mkwayi’s memory of the precise date was also fuzzy, but he had another important event around which to fix it. Wilton ‘heard about the decision around armed struggle before I left [the country] in May’ [1961]. Mkwayi initially left the country on SACTU business, and was informed two months after the African Trade Union Federation meeting in May 1961 that ‘I should go for military training in China’.

Rusty Bernstein’s recollected that, ‘the Party started developing an embryo... [early] in 1961, perhaps as early as the beginning of 1961... an embryo from amongst its own ranks, a core of people who volunteered to participate in... violent activity... and we even started some very primitive, basic training, how you handle explosives, or something like that.’

It thus seems likely that the SACP took the decision to embark on armed struggle first. Such was the overlap of the SACP Central Committee and the Johannesburg-based executive of the ANC, however, that this would have little long-term significance (as Sisulu put it, ‘they were the same groups who had been discussing it in a different way’). The Party certainly started operationalising its decisions well before the launch of MK. Party military units were formed in July 1961. Andrew Mlangeni recalled: ‘We had already started sabotage operations before we left for China... in 1961 August we started our first operations.’

104 Interview with Andrew Mlangeni.
105 In an interview with Peter Delius, Bernstein gave the same date for the decision, but Harmel’s presence at the conference is recorded in his autobiography (1999), pp 225-7.
106 Interview with Wilton Mkwayi.
107 Interview with Rusty Bernstein.
108 Interview with Walter Sisulu.
109 Interview with Andrew Mlangeni.
Motsoaledi made the same point. 'Both the Party and the ANC had their own units. When Mlangeni, along with Raymond Mhlaba, Joe Gqabi, Mthembu and ... were sent out of the country for training in China on 31 October, it was not Umkhonto at the time ... it was another group.'110

Overlapping executive membership apart, formal communication between the two undergrounds, and more particularly between their internal and external wings, was improvised and faulty, leaving scope for misunderstanding. Mhlaba, for example, in his interview with Thembeka Mufamadi, recorded arriving in Johannesburg to join the SACP group en route for training in China, and being met by Rusty Bernstein at Park Station. Bernstein drove him to Liliesleaf Farm where he met Nelson Mandela, who encouraged him to study Mao Tse Tung’s writings on guerrilla warfare. Mandela corroborates this meeting in his autobiography.111

Mandela himself would leave South Africa in January 1962 to drum up external support for armed struggle. Just how much the ANC leadership as a body knew of this initiative is, however, unclear. But in Pahad’s view, very few of the leaders would have known about the proposed military training.112 Elsewhere, Mhlaba recalled, ‘It nearly caused a misunderstanding ... with Oliver Tambo, in particular, because he did not know because he was out of the country. He did not know about this particular group of ours. But when we came back we had a chat, the two of us, one night. I had to apologise on behalf of the Party on my own ... He was offended because he was in charge of the External Mission ... Once the Party accepted the principle of armed struggle it decided to send our people to reconnoitre, to train. We sent out a person from here to find out whether we could get explosives in Czechoslovakia ... He was Goldreich.’113

Similar ambiguity surrounds the source of Wilton Mkwayi’s instruction to proceed to China for training. Mkwayi had already left on SACTU business for Europe and in July 1961 he was informed by Tennyson Makiwane that ‘someone in London will be joining you for military training’. Mkwayi identified Makiwane as ‘a representative of the ANC’, but what hat Makiwane was wearing at that point, however, is unclear, since he was also a member of the SACP.114

Andrew Mlangeni was responsible for acquiring the travel papers for the South African contingent. Patrick Mthembu and Joe Gqabi left first. Mhlaba and Mlangeni left later by car, driven by John Nkadimeng. Mlangeni remem-

110 Interview with Elias Motsoaledi.
112 Interview with Essop Pahad.
113 Interview with Raymond Mhlaba.
114 Interview with Wilton Mkwayi.
bered sitting in the Lobatse Hotel on the evening of their arrival, where they were accosted by a Bechuanaland Special Branch policeman named McCabe.

We had to tell him who we were, but we gave him false names of course. I was travelling under the name of Percy Mokwena, Ray had some other name – Petrus somebody. He then asked us to accompany him to the police station. We got there and he interrogated us for hours and hours, went through our luggage and found I had two letters, one addressed to Gqabi, who had already left before me, and the other to Mthembu. These were from their wives, from their families, and he opened them. I remember on one occasion during the interview or the interrogation Raymond said he was going out to the toilet; he went out, came back and just out of the blue he said, ‘Yes, we are leaving the country’, because we had been saying we were going to Francistown, we were interested in buying cattle there, etc, but when he came back from the toilet just out of the blue he said, ‘Yes, we are leaving the country, we are going to Ghana, so what?’ Gee, I fantasised the ground to be open underneath my feet and I could go in. We could not understand the attitude of Ray – you know, [so] suddenly. Later on he said he was just fed up. We had been kept there for so many hours, repeating the same denials over and over again and this fellow’s asking the same questions. To our surprise, he says, ‘Gentlemen, why didn’t you tell me this a long time ago? I would have released you’. He says, ‘Take your stuff’, and we said to him, ‘Look, it’s now late’. I think it was after eleven o’clock, we had nowhere to sleep, and we said, ‘We are now your responsibility, you have got to find us accommodation’. He said to me, ‘I am a policeman’. We said to him, ‘We don’t care, we know you are a policeman’. We changed our attitude now towards him, we became more aggressive, ‘We want accommodation from you’. He said, ‘Well, I’ll do my best’. You know he took us to his house. He was married too, he was British, he was married to a pretty woman from Asia, I’ve forgotten now, I think Malaysia. He gave us dinner and we slept there, and he said, ‘Gentlemen please, tomorrow morning very early I don’t want people to see you leave my house’. The plane was already waiting for us the following day to take us out to Tanganyika. Then, at half past four or five o’clock in the morning we had our coffee, and out we went from his house, and we went to an airstrip and we found our plane there, that’s how we left.115

To an even greater extent than the SACP, the ANC was split on the issue of moving to armed struggle. ‘It was difficult,’ Motsoaledi recalled, ‘to go and organise these people to tell them that now we are embracing active resistance, because time and time again they would say to me that this is not the position of the organisation. The organisation is non-violent, and therefore you can’t come and tell us about that. So much that even when the Party took this idea to the top leadership of the ANC, it was difficult to convince them. To

115 Interview with Andrew Mlangeni.
such an extent that eventually they said ... this being the case we shall not dis-
cipline any of our members who join this armed struggle.116

The ANC was thus not split by the decision to turn to armed struggle. The
points made by Motsoaledi also demonstrate the discipline, loyalty and con-
sciousness of ANC members.117 There was nevertheless a core group in the
Johannesburg-based ANC executive whose thoughts were moving rapidly in
the same direction. According to Sisulu, debates on this issue were taking
place from the time of the state of emergency onwards. A group emerged early
in 1961 which ‘already put forward a concrete, consistent line’ on armed strug-
gle. It was ‘mainly based in Johannesburg’, and consisted of Slovo, Mandela,
Nokwe, Bernstein and Sisulu. This group overlapped substantially with both
the core group of the SACP Central Committee and the ANC’s slimmed down
Johannesburg executive. As Sisulu remarked: ‘You see Nelson, Moses and
myself and Duma constituted the key men on this small executive.’ Sisulu
thought Mbeki and Mhlaba might also have been members.

More or less the same individuals were thus pressing the decision for armed
struggle in the ANC and SACP. ‘They were,’ as Sisulu succinctly put it, ‘the
same groups who had been discussing in different ways’.118 Bernstein
observed that ‘it wasn’t a joint process, it was a parallel process, each body
considering what it was going to do’. At the same time, ‘because our member-
ship was interchangeable at certain levels ... there was nothing we did that the
ANC didn’t know about, and nothing the ANC did that we didn’t know
about’.119 At some time during this period, this core leadership learned ‘that
there was a third force that was beginning to function ... who we had been in
touch with, who were beginning to develop their own little nucleus of an
armed core. At that stage the discussion started, I didn’t know where, whether
the Party or the ANC, or both – I can’t recall – saying look, we are moving
towards a situation, the end result of which is going to be two or three sepa-
rate revolutionary armies in this country, and this is the one thing we cannot
afford. Our movement is not strong enough. This is the road to disaster. We
must get together and combine.’120

In fact, there were third, fourth and fifth forces in the process of, or consid-
ering formation (cf Chapters 5, 6 and 7). Besides the PAC’s armed wing of
Poqo, Walter Sisulu also remembered ‘Monty Berman – of course he was a
communist – talking to me, coming with their ideas of forming units’. Besides
that, ‘there were people who were not in the top leadership [of the ANC] who
were thinking along these lines. I won’t remember the names, but Segale had
some group. You see, the leadership of the Youth League when we went under-

116 Interview with Elias Motsoaledi.
117 Interview with Essop Pahad.
118 Interview with Walter Sisulu.
119 Interview with Rusty Bernstein.
120 Ibid.
ground was in the hands of Patrick Mulawa, who fell at Jantjiestad. Segale and Mohobo were leading a particular section. (Motsoaledi claimed it was Ntithe.)

Joe Modise provided what is possibly another perspective of the same events:

We acted even earlier than the actual launching of MK. With the declaration of the racist republic in May 1961, people were organised to strike. We felt that in order to strengthen this call we should act also independently, but in a different way, no longer in a passive and peaceful way. So the late Joe Gqabi, myself and a number of other comrades decided to stop the trains that ran between Soweto and Johannesburg. We consulted technician friends who told us that if we threw a wire over the mains that supply power to the electric trains, this would bring about a short-circuit and there would be no power generated onto the line to enable the trains to move.

In many other parts of the country, similar attitudes prevailed. In distant Alice, Andrew Masondo, who in 1994 became a general in the South African National Defence Force, recalled that ‘people began to question the concept of non-violent struggle. There began sporadic acts of violence ... I remember that a group of us at Fort Hare actually formed a group to prepare for the eventuality of an armed struggle taking place ... When Umkhonto we Sizwe announced itself, for me it was something I received with enthusiasm and envy because I was not a member of the founding group. I promised myself that I shall join Umkhonto we Sizwe as soon as I could find out how.

At least some of these initiatives preceded the ANC’s decision to form an armed wing. Indeed Mandela, among others, suggests that they contributed to that decision being taken. Convincing the mother body was, however, no easy task. Mandela described in his autobiography how this happened.

We [Walter Sisulu and myself] decided that I should raise the issue of the armed struggle within the Working Committee and I did so in a meeting of June of 1961. I had barely commenced my proposal when Moses Kotane, the Secretary of the Communist Party and one of the most powerful figures in the ANC executive, staged a counter-assault, accusing me of not having thought out the proposal carefully enough. He said that I had been outmanoeuvred and paralysed by the government’s actions, and now in desperation I was resorting to revolutionary language. ‘There is still room,’ he stressed, ‘for the old methods if we are imaginative and determined enough. If we embark on the course Mandela is suggesting, we will be exposing innocent people to massacres by the enemy.’

121 Interview with Walter Sisulu.
spoke persuasively and I could see that he had defeated my proposal. Even Walter did not speak on my behalf, and I backed down. Afterwards I spoke with Walter and voiced my frustration, chiding him for not coming to my aid. He laughed and said it would have been as foolish as attempting to fight a pride of angry lions. Walter is a diplomat and extremely resourceful. ‘Let me arrange for Moses to come and see you privately,’ he said, ‘and you can make your case that way.’ I was underground, but Walter managed to put the two of us together in a house in the township.  

Kotane’s position in these discussions is difficult to reconcile with the decision taken some while earlier by the SACP to embark on an armed struggle. This requires further investigation – but presumably reflects not only Kotane’s personal predispositions, but also the different roles Kotane accorded to the Party and to the Congress.

Mandela and Kotane debated the issue for an entire day. Mandela argued that the textbook conditions Kotane wanted would never occur and that ‘his mind was stuck in the old mould of the ANC being a legal organisation. People were running ahead of them and forming military units of their own’. When they parted, Kotane promised nothing, but Mandela had won the day.  

The debate passed through two further stages, one at the National Executive in Durban and the other at a meeting of the joint Congress executives, which was scheduled for the next day in July 1961. There is disagreement over the role played by the ANC president, Albert Luthuli, in these decisions. Both Moses Kotane (in interviews with Brian Bunting, which eventually appeared in his biography) and Joe Slovo claimed that Luthuli was never present at any meetings endorsing the move to armed struggle, and that it was only after armed operations began that Kotane was despatched by the ANC to explain the decision. In his autobiography, Nelson Mandela disagreed, as did leading members of the ANC in Natal, insisting that Luthuli attended the meetings of both the National Executive and the joint Congress representatives. Addressing the National Executive, Mandela argued that ‘it was wrong and immoral to subject our people to armed attacks by the state without offering some kind of alternative. I mentioned once again that people on their own had taken up arms – if we did not take the lead now, I said, we would become latecomers and followers in a movement we did not control’.

Luthuli initially opposed Mandela’s argument and proposal, but eventually caved in, settling for sabotage, which would minimise danger to life, together with an independent military wing. Matthews believed Luthuli was morally and temperamentally against this course of action, but that ‘he didn’t have a

125 Ibid, p 321.
126 Bunting, 1975, pp 268-9; Slovo, 1995, p 150.
128 Ibid.
practical answer to the bannings, to the massive way in which the 1961 strike had been put down – and none of the people who were opposed to the armed struggle had a real answer to the argument [as] to what is the alternative’.129

Curnick Ndlovu agreed. ‘Luthuli believed unquestionably in non-violent struggle. [But] when these discussions took place he was not a leader who believed in dictating. He believed in one thing. The ANC had stood the test of time because of collective leadership.’130

During the debate that followed the next night with the joint Congress executives at the Indian sugar baron Bodasingh’s beach house in Stanger, passions ran high. Steeped as the Natal and Transvaal Indian Congress was in the Gandhian tradition of non-violence, the majority of the leadership opposed the proposal, notably JN Singh, Yusuf Cachalia and Dr Monty Naicker. Ismail Meer recalled:

We were contemplating a shift to violence as an easy way out of the hard task of mobilising the people in the face of repression. Would resorting to violence lead to the neglect of orthodox forms of mobilisation? JN Singh put the matter crisply: ‘Non-violence has not failed, we have failed non-violence.’ It was a vigorous debate. By turning to armed violence, would we not be giving the regime the excuse to come down on us even more heavily? Would we not be sacrificing the legal space that the Indian Congress, SACTU and the CPC still enjoyed? On the other hand, if we did not shift to violent means, would we not be failing our people by not harnessing their rising militancy and providing them with the leadership needed?132

Congress of Democrats communist Rowley Arenstein was particularly vociferous in opposing the move to armed struggle. Curnick Ndlovu recalls Moses Kotane turning on Arenstein and silencing him with the words: ‘Keep quiet now. I am not being a racist, but you are a white man and we are Africans.’133 Eventually, after much heated discussion, Mandela and his group were given a qualified mandate to set up a military wing to engage in tightly controlled violence and avoid injury towards persons at all cost, and to keep it strictly separate and distinct from the ANC.134

It is unlikely that Luthuli ever fully reconciled himself with the decision. It returned to haunt him in December 1961, a few days after he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, when a number of acts of sabotage were carried out and the existence of Umkhonto we Sizwe was disclosed. The timing could not have

129 Interview with Joe Matthews.
130 Interview with Curnick Ndlovu.
132 Ibid.
133 Interview with Curnick Ndlovu.
been more embarrassing for Luthuli, and some have argued from his reaction
to seeing the first leaflet that he never endorsed the eschewal of non-violence. 
However, this has been refuted by Curnick Ndlovu, who acted as a courier
between the ANC and Luthuli: ‘I was sent by the people at Rivonia at that time
to go to him. The only thing he raised was that he was not aware that the
leaflet was coming out that day. He was not opposed to it. He said he could not
oppose the feeling.’

Later though, his memory failing, Luthuli complained to Mandela that he
had never been consulted about the formation of MK.

The decision was also opposed by Oliver Tambo, head of the ANC’s external
mission. Tambo had slipped out of South Africa just before the state of emer-
gency was declared in 1960, with instructions to organise an international soli-
darity campaign. Once abroad, he helped form a South Africa United Front
composed of representatives of the ANC, PAC, SAIC, and the South West
African National Union (SWANU).

According to Matthews,

Tambo was very upset by the decision to embark on armed struggle
because he started off in 1960 abroad and the organisation was still on
the non-violent struggle. The South Africa United Front which he had
established ... was based of course on non-violence. He accompanied
Chief Luthuli to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. So to get this news of vio-

tent struggle and armed struggle ... was totally contradictory to what he
had been preaching abroad ... And I think he actually wrote a letter ... to
the leadership inside the country ... questioning this approach ... It’s only
when Mandela toured and met Tambo outside the country that ... the
strategy eventually was accepted by Tambo.

**MK regional commands**

Once the decision was taken to form MK (so named, according to Joe
Matthews, by Mandela), an organisational structure had to be set up and vari-
ous splinter groups consolidated into a single military body.

A National High Command was formed consisting of Mandela, Sisulu, Slovo
and Mhlaba. Two striking features of this inaugural command are that it was
multiracial, and overwhelmingly staffed by members of the underground
SACP. The same applied to regional high commands based in Johannesburg,
Port Elizabeth, Cape Town and Durban.

The National High Command determined tactics and targets, and was in
charge of training and finance. Regional structures were responsible for direct-
ing local sabotage groups in their areas.

135 Interview with Curnick Ndlovu.
137 Interview with Joe Matthews.
138 Ibid.
Since the most prominent splinter groups were located in the Witwatersrand area, the task of unifying them fell to the Transvaal Regional Command, and specifically to Elias Motsoaledi. The equally important mobilisation of external support was assigned to Mandela, who left South Africa in January 1962. He was replaced by Sisulu, who was appointed as Political Commissar of the High Command, a job that involved liaison between the ANC’s political and military wings.

The National High Command operated from Johannesburg, though in the initial phase, the Transvaal saboteurs were far less active than those in Natal, the Western and the Eastern Cape. However, High Command members devoted substantial time and energy to creating an underground human railroad through Lobatse and Mozambique, while regional activity was largely dictated by local dynamics.

The Transvaal

Elias Motsoaledi and Jack Hodgson were the main cogs in the northern regional command. Hodgson had fought in South Africa’s army during the Second World War and was familiar with explosives. Almost as soon as MK was formed he assumed the role of its explosives expert. Motsoaledi was one of the earliest recruits – ‘It was not yet Umkhonto,’ he recalled – and Hodgson was both his contact and his tutor in the manufacture of explosives.139

Motsoaledi’s first task was to locate the ‘sporadic underground movements’ (armed splinter groups) that had sprung up in Johannesburg since 1960, and draw them together under a single umbrella. It remains far from clear how quickly this process of amalgamation took place, but according to Motsoaledi: ‘Now it was quite clear that we could not merge in two minutes, so we had to decide a logical stance to the underground units of the Party and the underground units of the ANC, to say that we are going to form one organisation and therefore we should have the name of this organisation we form.’140

Without the ANC’s knowledge, the SACP sent its own contingent to China for guerrilla training. This was apparently under the direction of Motsoaledi, who claimed responsibility for ‘sending even the first batch out – those five or six’.141

One group that gave Motsoaledi special problems was the ANC’s own Youth League, which had not disbanded, despite orders from the underground leadership to do so. After MK’s existence was formally acknowledged on 16 December 1961, Ed Dube was one of the first operatives to die when he blew himself up on the first night of sabotage in Soweto. Still the Youth League’s leadership refused to enter the fold. Motsoaledi’s initial overtures evoked the

139 Interview with Elias Motsoaledi.
140 Ibid.
141 Ibid.
response: ‘You can think of that thing as an organisation that kills its members.’

His argument was ‘… that it has started. You haven’t started. You have been theorising for a long time, and now this one has started … can’t you ... organise them together so that they do not injure one another?’

Eventually, but still without Youth League president Ntite’s agreement, the organisation was won over.\(^{142}\)

The Transvaal Regional Command was composed of Hodgson, Motsoaledi and Patrick Mthembu.\(^{143}\) On 16 December, Dube led one of the first attacks and Motsoaledi the other. In both cases, bombs went off prematurely because the detonators were faulty. Motsoaledi recalled:

We used timing devices that were operated by glycerine. When the glycerine came into contact with chemicals, it would ignite. What happened was that these timing devices were not always tested, so they leaked and resulted in many casualties. If the police forces were alert at the time, they could have arrested the lot of us, because some of the bombs that were hidden in the bonnets of the cars started leaking while they were driving and exploded. I was fortunate because immediately after I heard the sound of a bomb going off in Dube township, I was able to say, ‘No, this is untimely. Something must be wrong with the primers’. I then said to my unit, ‘Leave this bomb here’. I took the primer to the street lamp to examine it. It was fortunate because about 10 paces after I had left the bomb, it went off. So we scattered all over and ran away.

After that it was decided that Motsoaledi should take charge of the African units, so that he could instruct them in their own language. Thenceforth, Motsoaledi would assume an increasingly central role.

I did the training. Even people from the Transkei. They had to come in. Even from Natal. I was doing it on behalf of the High Command. When the 90-day law was promulgated, Hodgson had to go out. Then I had to take responsibility. I even went to Cape Town to organise MK there.\(^{144}\)

The Johannesburg units did not carry out many acts of sabotage. Lodge identifies 31 incidents in total and Feit’s chronology shows clusters of attacks in 1961 and 1963.\(^{145}\)

Besides undertaking intermittent acts of sabotage and training saboteurs from other regions, the Transvaal Regional Command was responsible for

---

\(^{142}\) Ibid.

\(^{143}\) University of the Witwatersrand, Historical and Literary Papers, AD 1901, Box 29: statements, judges’ remarks on passing sentence, annexures and list of exhibits (statement by AM Mthembu).

\(^{144}\) Interview with Elias Motsoaledi.

establishing and maintaining the routes used by MK members to leave South Africa secretly and go abroad for military training. Operatives were transported mainly to Bechuanaland, and occasionally to Mozambique. The scale of this operation was huge. Henry Makgothi, one of those who went to Bechuanaland from Johannesburg in 1962, recalled:

Recruits came from all over the country. The contingents came from the Eastern Cape, and there was another one from Natal ... And they’d be kept in secret while the preparations were going on, and then when everything was ready, we’d be conveyed by, well mostly it was motor cars. The crossing place to Botswana [sic] at the time was relatively easy because there were really no immigration formalities.\(^\text{146}\)

Two particularly large contingents were despatched from Cape Town to Johannesburg in the course of 1962 and 1963. Christopher Mrabalala’s Party left in February 1962, making the first leg of their journey to Johannesburg by train, which they were ordered to board at Bellville. He recalled:

Then when we get into Bellville, the police were there. There were some of us, we were a big contingent of people. Others had to go and climb in the train in Brackenfell, Kraaifontein, just like that being dropped until we were all in the train. But I went through ... in Bellville, I went through because I was still wearing a Bridge Motors overall. I think the other thing that time, the colour was mostly as if one looks at now he is a coloured boy this one, don’t worry about him, so I went through and didn’t get bothered on the train. I ... the other comrades they found them on the train up to Jo’burg. Then there was a big problem now in Jo’burg to drop off from the station, coming out from the station. But at the station ... the train we could see the people that are waiting for us. They are in a kombi at the street. But it was hard now to come out. Because those cops at the gate there, everyone has to produce ... Now the other thing, now three-quarters of the people we were with they couldn’t speak the other language except Xhosa. And me I was speaking Afrikaans, Xhosa, Sotho and Tswana. That is my mother’s languages, I was speaking those languages. So I had a bit access to the police there, talk to them. When I went to them and I talk to them no, this and this ... Oh yes, they said ja, we are such people, so please let these guys go through. He said no, with Sotho language now. Then they released them to go through. So we had to go through. But now when we are now getting to the kombi, then the police said, ‘No, you guys you must come back, you are the wrong guys’. But it was too late for them. We had to force ourselves, 16 in that small kombi, force others on top of others and drove up to Orlando West. That’s where we were kept. We were kept there for almost three weeks ... We were now shifted from Jo’burg to Bechuanaland ... When we reached Bechuanaland we were now almost 70 something, the contin-

\(^{146}\) Interview with Henry Makgothi.
gent was now almost 70 something ... proper ... And we met other people waiting for us ... we cross the border ... not at the border post but somewhere on the wires we crossed. Then we met those people.

When Alfred Willie’s group left in January 1963, arrangements at the Johannesburg station again went awry:

So we then sent somebody to go and get to Sisulu’s place, the old man. And say, ‘We are here and how do we get up there now?’ So those guys went and as they went they managed to get the ... and he could ... that they were lenient towards us. And then they gave us taxis and they took us up there. By then Sisulu was under house arrest. And it was not going to be easy for us to get into his house ... we were to sleep because Sisulu’s house is just situated near the football ground. And it was the right time because it was Sunday and these guys were busy playing at the football ground. Now while the information … has already ... know what to say and what to do. So he told us to go to the ... and mix up with those guys. Otherwise the guys … his boys they were there just after five minutes before we came in ... boys they were there monitoring whether he is alone in his house or whatever. Then we went into it. Then he showed that his sons, that they will come when the football is out, then few of us will be taken and few of us will be going into his house. Then obviously his boys, one of his boys, Zwelakhe, he is going to take us home. But when the crowd is dispersing then they do it because nobody could notice a group of people going in there. We must go as the crowd is moving out. So this is exactly what we did and we spent only one night there. In the middle of the night we left because ... the place was not safe for us to be there. So we were taken to a place, I think two weeks or so ... During that time the kombis were organised, then we were taken away and crossing with the kombis. We ride through to Lourenco Marques.

The Western Cape

This region features only peripherally in most accounts of MK. The attention of commentators and scholars alike has been drawn instead to the more spectacular high-profile activities of the PAC, most notably the march on Cape Town led by Philip Kgosana on 30 March 1960, and the Paarl insurrection of November 1962.

Yet ANC and MK activity in the Western Cape was a great deal more conspicuous than historical amnesia suggests. Cape Town was the scene of 35 MK attacks in the brief period of 1961 and 1962, the highest in the country after the

147 Interview with Christopher Mrabalala, conducted by Thozama April, 8 November 2001, SADET Oral History Project.
148 Interview with Alfred Willie, conducted by Thozama April, October 2000, SADET Oral History Project.
149 For an excellent discussion of the struggles in the Western Cape, see Yvonne Muthien, State and Resistance in South Africa, 1939-1965, Avebury, Aldershot, 1994, Ch 5, 6.
Eastern Cape. Many of those arrested in connection with these acts resided in the township of Nyanga.  

In common with cities all over South Africa, African migrants swamped Cape Town during the Second World War. Over that six-year period, the number of Africans working in industry alone climbed by 110%. By 1944, the African population of Cape Town and environs stood at 60,000, with housing available for less than one-third of that number (16,000). Since the passage of the 1937 Native Laws Amendment Act, which granted local authorities the power to repatriate unemployed or illegally housed urban Africans, the majority of the new arrivals had taken up accommodation in numerous squatter camps that sprang up on the Cape Flats such as Phillippi, Sakkiesdorp, Elsies River, Kraaifontein and Cooks Bush. Between 1948 and 1950, the number of these so-called black spots grew from 22 to 30, while the number of Africans housed there doubled.  

In the early 1950s the National Party government declared war on these informal settlements. An ‘emergency’ or transit camp was set up at Nyanga in 1954, and removal of ‘black spots’ began in earnest in 1956. Between 1953 and 1958, 16,000 families were forcibly removed from the Cape Flats to the transit camp at Nyanga. Large numbers of people who had not lived in the area for the statutory 10 years were drafted into hostels in Langa and Nyanga, and thousands of women were expelled to their rural places of origin.  

By 1958, 4,000 African women were being moved from the Flats annually. In 1959, all shack settlements on the Cape Flats were levelled, and more than 60% of Nyanga’s population comprised those evicted from their shanty homes. A brief reprieve had been granted to some illegals in the form of squatter shacks within the city limits, but in 1959 the municipal authorities finally acquired the legal powers to demolish those as well, with inhabitants being moved to a transit camp at Gugulethu, or simply expelled.  

As houses were gradually built at Nyanga and Gugulethu, those dumped on shantytown site and service plots were transferred into them. This gave rise to a whole new set of problems, however.  

In 1954, a rental system was imposed on houses built with government subsidies. In some cases, this more than doubled the amount residents had to pay for a roof over their heads and in Cape Town, as elsewhere, the increases were challenged in court by residents’ associations, stalling payment of the higher rentals until 1958. Adding to the burden of Africans in the Western Cape was a situation unique to the region, namely the government’s Coloured Labour Preference Policy. From 1957, this not only rendered the implementation of influx control on Africans more vicious and invasive than elsewhere, but also sought to exclude them from semi-skilled jobs.  

Felinyaniso Njamela’s experience was shared by a host of other aspiring African school leavers:

151 Ibid, pp 98-245.
No, you know ... I had to terminate my studies in 1955 because of financial constraints. I started working in a warehouse – delivering beverages. I then worked for Murray & Stewart as a timekeeper ... but because of the Cape Coloured Labour Preference Policy ... preference was given to coloureds to do clerical jobs ... this was in 1958. I decided to leave. I was already driven by politics now.\textsuperscript{152}

By 1959, Cape Town’s African population was seething with anger and frustration. Threatened with removal, shantytown residents, who had previously stood impervious to the political message of the ANC and were cocooned by the relatively parochial and conservative control of migrant elders, became receptive on an unprecedented scale.

Christopher Mrabalala’s family was removed from Kraaifontein to Nyanga in this period. His mother was arrested for leading resistance to removals from Kraaifontein and Christopher was forced to abscond. But his recently deceased father had left the family with horses and carts, and he recalled:

So it was the only family who could transport now the people to Nyanga. So my mother had to call me back after she was released to transport the people. It was a way of fundraising, making funds from the people transporting, because it was almost £15 from Kraaifontein to Nyanga, a trip of that ... all goods. So now I was doing that work transporting people, that was 1955. From ’55 up to 1958 ... to transport these people to Nyanga from Kraaifontein, and Elsies River, Parow, Brackenfell, Stellenbosch, and what is this other place next to Bellville, but behind, Durbanville.

The experience of removal politicised Mrabalala and he proved a willing recruit into the Nyanga ANC.

And during that time, I was doing all this work, transporting these people from these different areas to Nyanga. I was still doing part of the work of the struggle, delivering the documents, the messages which are supposed ... getting from people, leaders who were like comrade Looksmart Ngudle, comrade Mountain Qumbela, comrade Archie Sibeko. Whenever I go to Stellenbosch, there is something that I have to take it to ... there’s somebody I’m going to meet there, deliver all that I’m supposed to be delivering. But at the same time the people were taking care of me, maintaining me, eating also, changing the clothing. For example, if I get to Durbanville then I came back with different clothing. Sometimes I become an old man, putting ... head and other ... of beards, such things. Now when I come back cops at the roadblocks they just see me, oh this old man.\textsuperscript{153}

\textsuperscript{152} Interview with Felinyaniso Njamela, conducted by Thozama April, 4 April 2002, SADET Oral History Project.

\textsuperscript{153} Interview with Christopher Mrabalala, conducted by Thozama April, 8 November 2001, SADET Oral History Project.
Established and new residents of townships like Nyanga banded together under the banner of the ANC to mount boycotts against economic rentals. The change in the political mood was intense and abrupt. Whereas the ANC-mounted stay-away in April 1958 drew scant support in Nyanga, the 1959 Potato Boycott\textsuperscript{154} elicited a massive popular response, in which women were especially prominent. With hindsight, it is clear the region was about to explode.

Lodge suggests that the political upheaval experienced in Cape Town in March/April 1960 was the biggest challenge the National Party government had faced since the Defiance Campaign in 1952.\textsuperscript{155} Both he and other commentators generally credit this to the initiative of the PAC. Such a judgment is accurate, but oversimplified.

Soon after it was founded in 1959, the PAC established branches in various Cape Town townships. In May, the Nyanga branch was set up, and quickly dominated by youth vehemently opposed to the pass laws. An anti-pass meeting in February 1960 attracted an audience of 500. On 21 March, Nyanga and Langa were among the few places in the country where major anti-pass demonstrations took place. Nine days later, residents of the two townships also staged the celebrated PAC-led march on Cape Town, and launched an extraordinarily protracted stay-away that lasted nearly three weeks.\textsuperscript{156}

What is rarely disclosed in accounts of these hectic days are the modulation of response in Langa and Nyanga, and the varying degree of ANC involvement. In 1960, politics in Langa were dominated by the PAC, which attracted an especially formidable following from the hostels for migrant workers. The PAC also had significant support in Nyanga, but that township nevertheless remained an ANC stronghold.\textsuperscript{157}

This position was consolidated following the declaration of the state of emergency. Partly due to the shortage of school places – 3 000 pupils between the ages of six and 16 were denied access to schools in Nyanga – and partly due to difficulties of securing passes (and hence employment), many young men gravitated towards gangs. Crime rates consequently soared and residents reacted by establishing street committees.

Socio-economic need coincided, intersected with or superimposed itself on an entirely separate and independent political initiative, namely the ANC’s decision to extend the M-Plan to Cape Town and reform itself underground. Significant progress had been made in this direction before the state of emergency was declared, and, in 1959, Elijah Loza was given the task of forming a grid of street committees throughout the Western Cape. Archie Sibeko well

\textsuperscript{154} Fast, 1996, pp 212-3. The Potato Boycott was called in response to the degrading conditions that farmers were subjected to.

\textsuperscript{155} Lodge, 1983, p 223.

\textsuperscript{156} Ibid, pp 214-23.

\textsuperscript{157} Interviews with Alfred Willie, Sipheto Quina, Mr Tsholobe, conducted by Thozama April, SADET Oral History Project.
remembered Thomas Nkobi’s surprise when he arrived in Cape Town unexpectedly on his way to the Eastern Cape. ‘He had very little time, but said he would like to meet as many as possible of the leadership in one township. We asked him to give us half an hour and then led him to the bush nearby and he was very surprised to find no less than 200 comrades, branch, zone and ward leaders.’

When the state of emergency was lifted, this fledgling network was extended and refined. Each branch was controlled by a seven-man committee; and each branch in turn furnished one representative to a seven-man regional committee composed of Chris (then known as Martin) Hani, Leonard Huna, Elijah Loza, Zollie Malindi, Looksmart Ngudle and Sidney Skweyiya. A substantial number of these underground cadres would later be drawn into the leadership and ranks of the Western Cape’s MK.

Branches were divided into wards, zones, and cells. Streets formed committees of approximately 10 people, with a leader who met and organised things in the underground cells. In the strike organised for May 1961, for example, the cells were charged with the task of distributing pamphlets containing information about the labour action. Street committees were grouped into zones, which were in turn divided into wards. Door-to-door visits were made to recruit people into underground structures.

The Western Cape, like other areas of the country, experienced a slow but insistent drift towards more violent forms of struggle from 1960 to 1961. One catalyst was competition with the PAC. Goldberg recalls violent clashes between the ANC and PAC at this time. Alfred Willie, who would soon become a leading figure in the regional MK, at this point lived in Nyanga West, and remembered the obstacles this presented to recruiting in Langa.

There was a problem in Langa ... I was working a bit in Nyanga West, but part of my time was to come and assist here in Langa ... We were getting door-to-door organising people, but we are now getting problems. People were asking, ‘Which organisation do you belong to?’ We tell them, ‘No, we belong to the ANC’. They say, ‘Ah, ANC, what is it to do? When was the ANC formed?’ They say, ‘Ah, do you think there is anything they would ever do?’ ... People are saying, ‘For how long do you think you are going to be doing this? You need people who are active.’ Now we are getting all the reports ... all what the people are saying, take it back to our branches and highlight what we are being told by people. I think people are tired of being ill-treated by the Boers ... they need anybody who can ... confront the guys physically if needs be.

159 Interview with Felinyaniso Njamela, conducted by Thozama April, 3 April 2002, SADET Oral History Project.
160 Interview with Alfred Willie.
161 Interview with Denis Goldberg.
162 Interview with Alfred Willie.
Patrick Mabanjana, who would later fight at Wankie, offered an example of this kind of response. At the time of the Sharpeville massacre he was still at school, and not a member of any political organisation.

I was just an ordinary boy in the township ... I had heard about ... these organisations. But to me they were just meaningless. I didn't take notice of it. But then this action [the Sharpeville massacre] came in front of me; that's when I changed. That was my turning point. I had to go all the way and look for a knife to say that I am going to stab each and every white person in front of me, as a young boy, because I am so angry.\textsuperscript{163}

His opportunity came during the anti-republic demonstrations in May 1961, when he succeeded in wounding a soldier with his knife, but escaped a heavy sentence because of his age. It was then that he was taken under the wing of Chris Hani, who recruited him into the ranks of MK.

For Goldberg, too, it was the May 1961 strike that was decisive. Two moments stood out in his memory. The first was his reluctant veto against a plan by the Manenburg branch of the Coloured People's Congress to petrol-bomb the Golden Arrow Bus Garage in Klipfontein Road. The second was his clandestine visit to carry strike materials to the ANC branch committee in Worcester.

Goldberg regarded Worcester as 'the best organised township in the Western Cape'.\textsuperscript{164} Archie Sibeko recorded how he had smuggled himself into the Worcester location in April 1960 to find 'chaos reigning' with not only passes burnt but 'schools, the pass office and more'.\textsuperscript{165} When Goldberg first arrived more than a year later, he found the Worcester branch in a far more subdued mood.

They said they would not call the people out on strike because they took such a hammering in 1960, when comrades lost their jobs and have been replaced by coloured workers and are still unemployed. That unless the ANC or the movement could protect the people from the violence of the police or the army ... there was no way that the strike would take place.\textsuperscript{166}

The realisation that other methods of struggle were necessary was dawning all over South Africa. In September, Mandela visited Cape Town as part of his countrywide tour. According to Goldberg, besides himself, Sisulu, Sibeko, Looksmart Ngudle and a dozen others were there. Sibeko records that the seven-man ANC regional committee was present.\textsuperscript{167} Felinyaniso Njamela, who also attended the meeting, recalled:

\textsuperscript{163} Interview with Patrick Mabanjana, conducted by Thozama April, 5 May 2002, SADET Oral History Project.
\textsuperscript{164} Interview with Denis Goldberg.
\textsuperscript{165} Sibeko, 1996, p 51.
\textsuperscript{166} Interview with Denis Goldberg.
\textsuperscript{167} Sibeko, 1996, pp 54-5.
Mandela visited us during the time of Rivonia, while they were still working from Rivonia. We met him in a house in Athlone, in Gayika's house, he had a big bungalow there, that is where we met. Gayika was one of the respected members of the ANC in the area of Cape Town. He was a traditional healer. In the meeting, Mandela explained to us that the struggle was now taking a different direction as the state intensified repression. This in turn meant that we had to be prepared to face the consequences of whatever actions we engaged in. His inspiring speech created strong emotional feelings and tension in the house. I was the youngest in the meeting. Pointing to me, Mandela said, 'Young man as you are, you must know that the Boers are prepared to deprive you of the opportunity to grow a normal life'. He made it clear that my involvement in MK could have a disastrous outcome such as detention and years of imprisonment.168

A regional command was then formed, consisting of Gayika Tshawe, Solwandle (Looksmart) Ngudle, Elijah Loza, Mountain Qumbela and Felinyaniso Njamela.169 The original composition changed over time, however – Qumbela remembered Goldberg, Solwandle, Loza, Matthews Huna, McDonald Mgothini, and himself.170

Eleven separate MK units were now formed in the Western Cape, including Nyanga West, Nyanga East, Langa, Retreat (two), Maitland, Cape Town Central and Kraaifontein.171 Goldberg recalled his own induction into MK.

I can't tell you the exact date, towards the end of 1961, probably September, when Fred Carneson asked me to meet him in the gardens of Top Street, near the art gallery, feeding peanuts [to the pigeons]. He asked me to consider participating in the armed struggle. They needed me as a technical officer in the Western Cape ... He said, 'You've got to think about this'; and I said, 'Yes, what's the necessity to think about?' He said, 'You can't take a decision like that'. And I said, 'I've been arguing for the armed struggle the whole year. So I can't argue for the correctness of the decision and then say no. That will be absurd'.172

Goldberg made some bombs for the 16 December launch of Umkhonto. He also exported his knowledge.

I taught the technique to Tolley Bennun (in Port Elizabeth). Fred Carneson and I think it was Archie Sibeko and myself had driven to Port Eliza-

168 Interview with Felinyaniso Njamela.
169 Sibeko, 1996, pp 54-5; interviews with Felinyaniso Njamela, Denis Goldberg.
170 Interview with Mountain Qumbela, conducted by Thozama April, SADET Oral History Project.
172 Interview with Denis Goldberg.
beth where we had ... gone to Tolley’s flat. And there was Jock Strachan ... who showed us how to make timing devices using glycerine which would drip into permanganate of potash, which would set off a mixture of aluminium powder and permanganate of potash, and in fact create a very powerful high explosive. Tolley told me he had discovered this working through the texts on World War Two explosives in the library of the University of Cape Town. And you could convert this into napalm using soap and oil and petrol and various other things. You could turn it into metal cutting and cutting railway lines or pylons using an iron oxide mixture. If you want to know where you get aluminium powder, it’s used in the roofing paint used, you know, on flat roofs and so, mixed with bitumen. So you can buy it in any paint store. I had one interesting experience, you see. I bought a bottle of glycerine and the pharmacist, it was actually in Adderley Street in Cape Town, showed me a little bottle and I said, ’No, I want a big bottle’. He said, ’What are you making, explosives?’ I nearly fell on my back, you see. I don’t know why he thought that. But there it is.

Goldberg indicated that there had been some discussion about him going overseas as a guerrilla even before that.173

At different times over the following months, Elias Motsoaledi and Andrew Mlangeni from the National High Command visited the regional command.174

At some point, probably in early 1962, Goldberg hired a farm at Mamre on which the regional command could carry out various kinds of training. Christopher Mrabalala recalled:

Unfortunately, what happened during the time we were training, the owner of the farm, he knew about our presence there. It was agreed to Reggie September and other top leaders, Sachs and others and Goldberg. He left the farm for holidays. He went to Johannesburg. He left his workers there. Now we don’t know whether he informed his workers about us or not. We don’t know that, but the leadership knew. But what we discovered during the time we were in training, the workers discovered that at the orchard next to the river, they’ve seen some fire, smoke. So they had to come down and they discovered that it’s us. But we couldn’t see them. They saw us. Then they feared or they didn’t know what to do. They couldn’t report to the owner first. They just called the police. So when the police came they found us there, with the leadership as I’ve ... comrade Chris Hani, comrade Teddie Nqapayi, Alfred Willie, comrade Sachs and Goldberg, Albie Sachs were there. Then now the senior officer of Cape Town which is a detective, he asked Albie Sachs, ’What do you want here being a European? And what about your presence here ...?’ Then he explained to them these people they have hired us to teach them skills

---

174 Interviews with Elias Motsoaledi and Mountain Qumbela.
about mechanics. And we did have engines, which were there, put for the other type of training. So that maybe you have to go to somewhere and there’s a car, you could know how to connect that car through wires, whatever, and dash out. Now if it’s broken again you could fix it up. All those things. We were given that little knowledge which was more of if one is more interested he could continue being a qualified mechanic. But the CID refused ... ‘No, Albie, I know you are a politician’. He quoted all the guys ... our leaders ... all of them they ... He even mentioned Chris Hani and Sibeko that you both you are politicians. ‘I know you. You know very well that I know. But you are not going to tell me that you are here also to come and train to be a mechanic.’ But they insisted to say, ‘No, we are there just for this. And these people they are paying us’. In other words we are paying Denis, we are paying Albie Sachs all these ... So that they said, ‘Now okay, if that is the case then why specifically Europeans? Why can’t they be trained by other Africans? Why you Europeans? Why there are no other Europeans among these people who are being trained?’ ... So he said then, ‘Okay, I understand but I need you all to report at Mamre police station right away’. So the helicopter was there dropping soldiers and cops. Now we had a river where we had to cross. Now that river when we are inside we shift our bridge so that the person who comes wouldn’t have the way to cross over. So now we shifted the bridge, a bridge of tree, so we put it there. Now as we were crossing they are counting us; we were 36. They were counting us. Now I slipped because comrade Chris Hani and Sibeko said to me, ‘I wouldn’t like you to go to the police station because I know your position, you might be arrested ... So please do something that you don’t have to reach’. So as we were crossing now, I slipped to the river. It’s a tree, then I just slipped down deep in the water so these soldiers couldn’t see me. Then I slipped and I put my nose above the water. And I could see them at the end of the water. Now they were counting. They found that it’s 35. Now the senior person said, ‘These people were 36’. Then Albie said, ‘No you made a mistake. We were 35. There have never been 36, where do you get that number?’ He said, ‘No, I counted you’. He said, ‘No, we are 35 and these are the people that I know who were here, that 35’. That guy counted more than ten times, arguing that we were 36. And really at the end they had to go. They were loaded in the trucks and they went off. So I came out. I went in the ... I could see them – there they go to the police station at Mamre. So I went back to collect all the armaments, hide them, do everything, prepare food for them, cooking, make fire and all those things. At about 7.30 pm then they were brought back. They found me. Now before they released them to cross, the police had to come first to the camp. And that time I was already off from the camp, only ... taking a cover where I could see them. Then they searched the place. They couldn’t find anything. Because they were interested, they wanted to find any document of the ANC, political document or weapons, something like that. And that is
the thing which was the first to me that I had to remove those armaments. And I had to remove them and put them somewhere next to the river there. So then they came back, they were cross. They went back, they cross our people, then our people are singing freedom songs. Then that head CID said, 'I told you that these people are not students, why do they sing freedom songs'. Then Albie said, 'No, freedom songs don’t mean they’re sung by people who are involved in the struggle or are ANC people who sing only songs. Freedom songs can be sang by any person. If he’s got a liking of the song he’s got the right to sing it'. So that CID, 'Now every one of you on Monday has to report at the police station. And you are going to evacuate by tomorrow from that farm'. Now the owner of the farm was contacted by the police. And the owner of the farm said, 'No, I have no agreement with anybody that has to be at my farm. And if there are people there, please I will appeal that they should evacuate immediately before I come'.

Perhaps not surprisingly, each regional command had its own views on how to conduct the armed struggle. Goldberg remembered a degree of tension between the regional and high commands over the sending of guerrillas for training overseas: 'The pressure from Johannesburg was stiff. Everyone went out of the country for training. The Western Cape resisted, insisting on the need to put political cadres in place. We are not going to put everyone in the military. We will select people.'

Ultimately, it was the arrest of two recruits who were being smuggled out of the country that led to the arrest of Mountain Qumbela, and then the entire regional command, in 1963.

**Natal**

The move to violence in Natal followed its own distinct path. Indeed, there are grounds for claiming that in the immediate prelude to Sharpeville, Natal was the most violent province in South Africa.

An important component of this upsurge was rural, but a further element centred on the urban periphery. Significant numbers of African residents of Durban and smaller towns were migrant workers with strong roots in the nearest rural areas. From the mid-1950s, many were recruited into the various affiliates of the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) and thence into the ANC. Among these new recruits were Louis Mkhize, Japhet Ndlovu, David Ndawonde, Justice Mpanza, Cletus Mzimela, Matthews Meyiwa, Leonard Mdingi, Zakhele Mdlatlose, Cleopas Ndlovu, Jethro Ndlovu, Russel Maphanga, Queeneth Dladla and many others. Gwala and Mabula recruited activists like Anthony Xaba, William Khanyile and Joel Kunene in the Pieter-

---

175 Interview with Christopher Mrabalala, SADET Oral History Project.
176 Interview with Denis Goldberg.
maritzburg area. Many of them later also joined the SACP.\textsuperscript{177} Squatter camps such as Cato Manor or Umkhumbane served as a residential haven for such workers and it was there that some of the most serious conflicts in apartheid South Africa occurred, the last and most explosive of which erupted only a month before the Sharpeville massacre.

At the end of 1950, 29 000 Africans were living in Umkhumbane. By the end of the decade, this figure had topped 100 000. In June 1958, the Durban municipality published a Group Areas Declaration, in terms of which roughly 50\% of the city's Indians were to be relocated to Chatsworth, and about 70\% of Africans to KwaMashu. The municipality maintained that the moves were an essential element of its attempts to deal with Durban's African housing crisis. A coalition of Indian political and religious organisations called a series of protest meetings, including one at Currie's Fountain on 26 June 1958, which was attended by 20 000 people.

While Indian protest was not sustained beyond the initial meetings,\textsuperscript{178} African opposition was more enduring. Many African women faced expulsion from Durban if the removals went ahead, and were in a combustible mood. The ANC Women's League obtained a court interdict to halt the removals, using the reprieve as a delaying tactic while a more comprehensive strategy was worked out. The Durban municipality quickly overturned the interdict, and began demolishing shacks.

In February 1959, the Women's League led large crowds of Cato Manor women on a march to the city centre.\textsuperscript{179} They headed for KwaMuhle, the Native Administration offices in Ordnance Road and surrounded the building for two days while demanding to meet the mayor of Durban. During the standoff a scuffle broke out, and the shirt of a city official named Bourquin was torn. The crowd then moved into his office and refused to leave until they had spoken to the mayor. Having secured a meeting with him at the city hall, the women told the mayor how they felt about the destruction of their homes. The removals and demolition of shacks were suspended in order to calm the situation.

However, an outbreak of typhoid provided the authorities with an excuse to intervene once again in Cato Manor. In late May, they moved in and began to overturn and puncture liquor containers, citing hygiene as their pretext. African policemen directed by white colleagues spilled beer in broad daylight

\textsuperscript{177} K Lackhardt and B Wall, Organise … or Starve! The History of the South African Congress of Trade Unions, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1980, pp 254-5.
against the protests of women brewers. The monopoly on brewing exercised by different municipalities had been a contentious issue since the Natal parliament passed the Native Beer Act in 1908. The system was designed to provide local authorities with revenue from the Native Beer Administration Fund, which was used to establish locations, schools, hospitals and other facilities for African urban dwellers.

Proceeds of the beer sales were also used to build more hostels for African migrant workers and to finance the Native Administration departments in Durban and Pietermaritzburg.

Conflict between African women and the authorities over the question of beer brewing existed long before June 1959. In 1929, one episode forced the Union government to offer concessions in Natal. In 1938, the government allowed African residents of a 'Native village' that lay within an urban area to brew and use 'kaffir beer' (utshwala), provided each household did not produce more than four gallons at any given time. Pressure by the various local authorities resulted in the differential application of this provision so that in some areas, domestic brewing was permitted while in others it was not.

The attack on beer brewers in 1959 saw the local 'shebeen queens' and petty brewers join Cato Manor's campaign against the Durban municipality. On the afternoon of Wednesday, 17 June, between 50 and 100 women invaded the beer hall in Cato Manor and assaulted the male patrons. By evening, the number of protesters had grown to 300 and by the next morning, to 1,000. On Thursday afternoon, some 2,000 women targeted municipal beer halls throughout the city of Durban, assaulting patrons, spilling beer and destroying the municipal distillery. Over the next few weeks they fought running battles with the police.

Early in 1960, an angry mob attacked and killed nine municipal policemen during one of their many beer raids at Umkhumbane. Over the next few months, there were regular clashes between the municipality and the residents of Cato Manor, who targeted beer halls in the city centre. Dorothy Nyembe, Ruth Shabane and Gladys Manzi played leading roles in the campaign and

185 Walker, 1982, p 230; interview with Curnick Ndlovu.
Chief Luthuli said afterwards that Natal had seen much activity, ‘most of it in keeping with the Congress spirit’, though it was largely ‘spontaneous rather than organised’.187

Partly because of the shock caused by the killing of the nine municipal policemen and the subsequent ruthless reaction by the authorities, the campaign against proposed relocation to KwaMashu dissipated. The protests nevertheless represented the biggest challenge to the apartheid state prior to the Langa and Nyanga disturbances in Cape Town in March–April 1960, which were triggered by the Sharpeville massacre. In fact, at the subsequent commission of enquiry, the police tried to justify their undisciplined shooting on the crowd at Sharpeville by claiming demonstrators were chanting ‘Cato Manor, Cato Manor’.188

Many of the workers that congregated in Umkhumbane were members of SACTU, which was growing more rapidly in Natal than anywhere else. Eric Mtshali attributed the transformation of the ANC in Natal to a mass-based organisation to the work of SACTU. SACTU office bearers in Natal were predominantly members of the SACP. It was the SACP and SACTU that served as the prime vehicle for the ANC’s organisation underground, and ultimately for the formation of MK’s Natal Regional High Command.

SACTU and the SACP were conspicuous for their capacity not only to mobilise, but also to organise, which they did to great effect. Contrary to the widely held view that the M-Plan was a dismal failure in Natal, the close working relationship between these components of the alliance facilitated its successful implementation in 1960 and 1961. Mtshali observed:

> When Milner Ntsangane, who was sent from Port Elizabeth by the NEC to help us implement the Mandela Plan, arrived here, he wanted us to emulate the way they had implemented the plan in PE down to the last detail. We said to him, ‘Milner, we accept the principle of the M-Plan. We are convinced that it is correct, but you should realise that the conditions of PE are different from those of Natal. We are going to adapt the M-Plan to local conditions’. He didn’t like our suggestion, and there was some misunderstanding. Then they claimed that the communists had hijacked the ANC and the M-Plan in Natal. They went as far as reporting the matter to Sisulu. He came down to Natal to make enquiries. We told him that the communists had not hijacked the ANC. Sisulu understood everything we told him. But I can say that our approach to the M-Plan was the main reason for the success of the strikes and stay-aways of the early 1960s. We used the same approach that we had adopted when we established clandestine factory committees that brought workers from the neighbouring factories together. Here in Clermont, for example, we divided the various areas into blocks. We created a network of cells. There were seven mem-

188 Ladlau, 1975, p 116.
bers in each cell. Several cells existed on the same street, depending on the length of the street. Members of different cells didn’t know one another. Only the block leaders knew the leaders of the various cells within the block. They did not know the actual membership of each cell, though. This approach made us very effective. It also enabled the ANC in Natal to exercise tight control over the townships. The system not only helped to strengthen the ANC, it also strengthened the Communist Party underground in areas like Clermont.

Mtshali’s observations are corroborated by Lambert who recorded how the combination of factory committees and clandestine organisation in the townships, built around the M-Plan, helped forge the kind of organisation that could survive the repressive response of the state. The success of the Natal approach was evident in 1960 when workers from Cato Manor went out on strike for 10 days. As they constituted about 20% of the total workforce in Durban, the action caused substantial disruption to industry and commerce. When the first strike ended, workers from Clermont and SJ Smith hostel in Lamontville were called out, and they, in turn, went on strike for a similar period. According to Freund, the strikes were 85% to 90% effective, with the greatest support coming from migrant workers. Natal staged another successful strike in 1961, as recorded by Mtshali:

I was organising workers in the Pinetown area at the time. We had 100% response here in Pinetown. The strike was planned for three days. The third day came and went, the fourth day came, the fifth day came and so on … workers were simply staying away. We woke up every day and went to the bus rank here in Clermont. We used to hear people shouting from all corners saying: ‘azikhwelwa’ (we are not taking any transport). If you understand that workers’ participation in the strikes and stay-aways meant lost income, you will realise that it took someone who had developed a very sophisticated level of political understanding and consciousness to remain on strike for prolonged periods of time. Our organisational efforts were bearing fruit at last.

Once again, the duration of the strike revealed the readiness and the capacity of workers to engage in prolonged strike action.

Once the decision was taken to form MK, a regional command was quickly set up in Natal. Ndlovu recalled being recruited by MP Naicker: ‘He recruited

189 Interview with Eric Mtshali.
191 Ibid, p 441.
193 Interview with Eric Mtshali.
me, and then I think other people. He only told me I was going to lead. There were five of us ... Ronnie Kasrils, Bruno Mtolo, who sold us out, Eric Mtshali and Billy Nair."195

Kasrils was approached in similar fashion during July 1961. "MP Naicker took me for a walk along the beachfront. He confided that the movement was about to change its strategy. The government’s repressive policies had convinced the leadership that non-violent struggle alone could not bring change. We were forced to answer the regime’s violence with revolutionary violence. "I’ve been asked to approach you," he said, above the roar of the surf smashing against the rocks, “to sound you out. Are you willing to get involved?” I became a member of the Natal Regional Command of Umkhonto we Sizwe ..."196

Mtshali was summoned to the New Age offices at Lodson House, and when I got there, I found MP and Steve. They told me that the Party had decided to form a military wing and I had been earmarked for membership of this organisation. They told me not to tell anyone, whether I accepted the invitation or not. They also told me that someone would come to town to train us in the handling of explosives and on sabotage. I never thought twice about it. I must add that I did not know that I was talking to the Durban district leadership of the Party. I got to know later, very late, long after I had been in exile, that Steve, MP, and this Jerry were serving in the District Committee of the Communist Party. It was only then that I got to know that although Steve was employed as a secretary of the Textile Workers Union, that was merely his legal position. His primary task was to organise the Communist Party underground in the Durban district."197

Seemingly, the trade union/SACP connection applied to almost all the regional commands of MK.198 However, as a member of SACTU, the Party and the ANC, Steve Dlamini was a pivotal figure, together with Moses Mabhida, in encouraging workers to take out ANC membership, and galvanising ANC members to join trade unions. The result was that many of the best cadres who would later join MK were both ANC and trade union members.

Once the Natal group was assembled they were visited by a representative from the National High Command. According to Ndlovu, Jack Hodgson instructed them in the use of explosives. Shortly afterwards, Nair said, Harold Strachan was brought in to instruct them in the manufacture of bombs. The group was divided into sections, with specific responsibility for the South Coast, North Coast and Midlands. These expanded to a point where in 1962

195 Interview with Curnick Ndlovu.
197 Interview with Eric Mtshali.
'we had between 50 and 60 – Durban ... 40 or 50 in Pietermaritzburg and Ham-marsdale and a smaller grouping in Northern Natal'.

The move towards armed struggle presented the Natal Regional Command with a unique set of problems. Most members of the ANC's Regional Executive Committee (REC) were not recruited into MK's regional command, and when it became apparent that a regional command had been formed, the REC demanded explanations. They believed MK to be a parallel structure to the REC, since newspaper reports had identified MK as the ANC's armed wing, and the REC was supposed to be in control of the organisation. The dispute intensified between members of the ANC with nationalist tendencies and those who were aligned to the Communist Party and the trade unions. In Durban, George Mbele, Dorothy Nyembe, Elias Kunene and others featured prominently in the nationalist bloc. According to Natoo Babenia, these ANC members ‘were often very racist towards whites and Indians and took issue with SACTU people over the role of the working class. They certainly did not like the Party ... they got angry with Party people who put their all into it’. Curnick Ndlovu had his own problems with the same group. They resented his influence and were opposed to SACTU and Party organisers who were seen to be taking the lead. They were therefore not necessarily racist, as Babe-nia claims, but conservative. George Mbele, Selbourne Maponya and Elias Kunene once confronted Curnick, demanding that he divulge the names of the members of MK. Ndlovu said he was simply a SACTU official and ANC member, and had no way of knowing who had joined MK. He was then allegedly given a long list of people believed to be leading figures in MK.

Most MK units were manned by trade unionists, including Justice Mpanza, Cletus Mzimela, David Ndawonde, Abolani Duma, Kay Moonsamy, Natrival Babenia, George Naicker, Ebrahim Ismail Ebrahim, Billy Nair, Bruno Mtolo, Solomon Mbanjwa, Alfred Duma, Bernard Nkosi and Queeneth Dladla. In the Pietermaritzburg area, Harry Gwala had organised units that included Anthony Xaba, John Mabulala Nene and David Mkhize. Riot Mkhwanazi maintained links between the Durban-based units and those on the North Coast. MP Naicker served as the main link between the Natal Regional Command and the National High Command. Ebrahim Ismail Ebrahim and Solomon Mbanjwa were co-opted into the regional command to bolster the Natal structures, while David Ndawonde, Stephen Mtshali and Abolani Duma served as members of the reserve command in Natal.

Between 1963 and 1965, Cleopas Ndlovu, Jethro Ndlovu and James Ngwenya emerged as the second-tier leadership. Units were formed in

---

199 Interviews with Billy Nair and Curnick Ndlovu.
200 Babenia, 1995, p 75.
201 Ibid, pp 75-6.
202 Interview with Eric Mtshali.
204 Interviews conducted by Jabulani Sithole with Cleopas Ndlovu, Clermont, 11 October 2001; and Jethro Ndlovu, Inchanga, 27 October 2001, SADET Oral History Project.
several parts of Natal. Some operated from Hammarsdale under the leadership of Solomon Mbanjwa, while others were based in Pietermaritzburg, Ladysmith, Clermont, Tongaat and Stanger. MK members received their initial training internally. According to Mtshali, members of the high command received training in the handling of explosives and sabotage from Jack Hodgson. This was confirmed by Kasrils, who recollected that within a month, Billy Nair told him that they were going to receive their first training from one of the most outstanding comrades in the movement.

He told me that our visitor had fought the Germans in North Africa and his nickname was the Desert Rat. We drove to a small sugar cane farm outside Durban, and gathered in an outhouse. Billy ushered in a man in an open-necked shirt and sports jacket. Although a code name was used for introductory purposes, I recognised our visitor from a Treason Trial photograph. It was Jack Hodgson.

Mtolo, on the other hand, claimed that Harold Strachan trained him, a point that Babenia confirmed. Frederick Dube, holder of a black belt in karate, trained other members of MK physically.

In the period immediately following the formation of MK in 1961, the Natal region carried out more than 30 acts of sabotage in and around Durban. Mpanza served in Kasrils' first unit along with Cletus Mzimela, before the latter was moved elsewhere. Also in the unit was Elinor Kasrils and, Mpanza thought, Jacob Zuma, who was present at certain meetings in Durban.

My first sabotage was conducted together with Ronnie’s wife, Elinor. She was our driver. We went to blow up a pylon in Westville. Durban was cast into total darkness – including KwaMashu township. After the blast she drove and dropped me home at KwaMashu, and returned to her home. She drove fast and police arrived at my place hardly minutes after her departure, probably they used different routes. The cops came to my place and knocked and they found me sleeping. They demanded to know what I was wearing during the day. I showed them clothes that I was wearing. They thoroughly examined the shoes and soon gave up their search and left. I then sat up and my wife asked me, ‘What is happening?’ I said to her, ‘The police are just suspecting me’. The Special Branch had been to my place on countless occasions. This went on until I got information that Zulu (Special Branch) had told Charles Mpanza, the CID, that ‘your son (meaning Gizenga because they shared the same surname) is...

205 Interview with Eric Mtshali.
208 Interview with Johannes Phungula.
Matthews Meyiwa, who was recruited around the same time, said cadres had begun to realise that ‘the apartheid system was no different from Hitler’s Nazism’.

We felt that it was necessary to select and handpick a few disciplined cadres of the Congress for Umkhonto we Sizwe. We did not know who exactly was going to do the handpicking. We were simply approached quietly and secretly. Solomon Mbanjwa, who later defected to the enemy camp, recruited me. We were sworn to secrecy. We were not supposed to divulge our membership even to our closest friends, not even to our wives. My wife only got to know things that were happening at that time, the day before yesterday when the team of interviewers from Cape Town came here. We were organised into units. We were given crash courses in the handling of explosives and in sabotage. There were five of us in our unit. Normally this number was too large for a unit, but we were told that we should remain together because it was going to be safer and effective. Mbanjwa was our commander. Other members were Joshua Zulu, my best friend who was also a teacher, Bernard Nkosi, Alpheus Mdlalose and myself. Our area of operation was from Cato Ridge where we are today, and went all the way to Cliffdale. We were responsible for reconnaissance, and for identifying suitable targets for sabotage in the area. We targeted pylons, railway signals and even railway lines. We also broke into stores that kept dynamite. We raided and kept sufficient supplies for our sabotage campaign. We divided ourselves up and allocated the smaller groups different responsibilities. For example, Bernard and Alpheus, who lived in Georgedale, were responsible for cutting signals so that goods trains could find it difficult to run. We knew and accepted that there would be derailments. We therefore targeted goods trains. This required extreme caution on our part and careful reconnaissance, because the order from the leadership was very clear. We had to avoid human casualties at all cost. We often, but not always, put the target under surveillance for several days before we launched any strike. If we intended to derail a goods train we had to be absolutely certain that no passenger train would go through around that time. Our commanders, Ronnie Kasrils and Ebrahim Ismail Ebrahim, gave us numerous targets to blow up in our area. I do remember that on 16 December 1961, our units were expected to strike simultaneously throughout the country in order to register the birth of the people’s army, Umkhonto we Sizwe. The target that had been
identified for our unit here in Hammarsdale was a railway line. We went to the railway line and placed our bomb carefully. We timed it very well and then retreated to the hills overlooking the railway line. We kept a safe distance. We had ensured that nothing would go wrong. We lay in the bushes waiting anxiously for the goods train to come through. Two things left us breathless. The first was a drunken man who came from the direction of Georgedale singing at the top of his voice. He was walking on the railway tracks. We said, ‘Gosh, how could we make such a fatal mistake with our first strike?’ There was nothing we could do. We realised that he would reach our bomb just as it went off. The second shock was that a passenger train showed up from the direction of the Georgedale station instead of a goods train. ‘How can it be?’ we asked. We had placed the railway line under surveillance for several days. We knew that a goods train went through the area every day around that time. But on that day we had a short passenger train instead. Both the train and the man in drunken stupor were heading for our thing. We lay there breathless. The man ran out of the railway line when he saw the train. As the train approached the bomb we anticipated a huge explosion. But to our surprise the train went over the bomb into the tunnel and there was dead silence. Just as we thought our bomb had failed to go off we heard a deafening sound. It was a sound that had never been heard before in that area. We looked at each other in great excitement. We had done it! Our first act of sabotage had been a success. I knew there and then that I was a saboteur, a guerrilla, and freedom fighter. We fled in different directions as soon as the bomb went off. The police were very swift. As we approached the area where the township is situated now, a car showed up. We dived for cover. It drove by and we continued with our flight home. I reached home just before eleven at night. I had left my expecting wife at a critical stage of her pregnancy. The baby could come any time. I had requested neighbours to keep an eye on her. They agreed but they suspected that I was cheating on her, and that I had probably gone to see another woman. What they didn’t know was that I had committed myself to a course that would free all of us, including the unborn baby.211

Many cadres were ordered to leave the country and undergo military training abroad. Among them were Eric Mtshali, Cletus Mzimela and Justice Mpanza. Mzimela left the country in 1963, and recalled:

I had joined the ANC in 1952 after attending a meeting that was addressed by Chief Albert Luthuli. When political repression intensified in 1960, many people withdrew from active politics. Only Passfour Phungula and a few others who were older than us remained in the trenches of the struggle. Young comrades like Linus Dlamini, Edwin Dlamini and many others remained. Things had gone from bad to worse after the state

211 Interview with Matthews Meyiwa, conducted by Jabulani Sithole, Cato Ridge, 10 October 2001, SADET Oral History Project.
had passed the Sabotage Act. Many of our comrades were detained. Edwin was also detained. I was working an overtime shift on Saturday, 11 May 1963, when a young boy came to me and said I was needed somewhere urgently. At that time we had developed a habit of asking few questions. We followed the need-to-know principle. I followed this boy to Albert Park in Durban. There I met my comrades who had gone into hiding. They were wearing some disguise. They informed me that I was one of those cadres who had been chosen to go out of the country to receive military training. That is how I left for Johannesburg, where I stayed for about a week before leaving the country. It was on 18 May 1963.212

Although Umkhonto we Sizwe was a non-racial organisation, conditions on the ground forced the units to operate along racial lines. The curfews that were imposed on African people in Durban and Pietermaritzburg made it difficult for mixed units to operate without attracting undesirable attention. Where they were forced to work and stay together, sound excuses had to be found. For example, when Ndawonde, Mtolo, Ebrahim Ismail Ebrahim and others were forced to live in Kloof together with the Kasrils, they claimed that they all worked for the family. This was acceptable to white neighbours because, after all, white people hired African labour.213 Although the sabotage campaign began officially on 16 December 1961, there were several other incidents in which the various units tested their skills.

Between 1961 and 1963 the state succeeded in infiltrating MK’s underground networks. From the beginning of August 1963,214 mass arrests were made. Among those detained were Curnick Ndlovu, Billy Nair and Bruno Mtolo, the three members of the Natal Regional Command. Also caught in the net were Harry Gwala, Matthews Meyiwa, Alpheus Mdlatlose, Natrival Babenia, David Mkhize, Bernard Nkosi, George Naicker, Siva Pillay, Sunny Singh, Solomon Mbanjwa, Ebrahim Ismail Ebrahim and David Ndawonde.215 Elinor Kasrils was also held, but escaped from Fort Napier and skipped the country.

Those who remained in prison were charged under the Sabotage Act216 and their trial opened in Pietermaritzburg in 1963. All were found guilty, and sentenced to long prison terms on Robben Island. The trial was followed by that of MK members who had been arrested in Livingstone, Northern Rhodesia, in 1964. Among them were Anthony Xaba and John Nene, who were also given lengthy prison sentences on Robben Island.217

212 Interview with Cletus Mazimela, conducted by Jabulani Sithole, Ntuzuma, 13 October 2001, SADET Oral History Project.
215 Interviews with Matthews Meyiwa and David Ndawonde.
The Eastern Cape

MK operatives were more active in Port Elizabeth than in any other region. Their willingness to abandon the non-violent struggle, and the numbers that followed that path, can be explained partly by the impact of the Mpondoland revolt, but were chiefly the result of a tradition of grassroots activism and organisation that had been nurtured in the area since the early 1940s by unions affiliated to SACTU, and the African-led local branch of the SACP. The rural/urban chemistry that was a central aspect of political mobilisation in Port Elizabeth and the surrounding area was remarkably similar to that of Natal. In order to understand how MK was formed in the Eastern Cape, it is necessary to revisit the situation prevailing in the late 1950s in Port Elizabeth, East London and rural towns such as Cradock, Fort Beaufort and Alice (site of Fort Hare University).

By the mid-1950s, the industrial hubs of both Port Elizabeth and East London had developed a substantial manufacturing sector that was absorbing an increasing number of African workers in unskilled and semi-skilled positions. This urban working class was organised by SACTU’s affiliates, with the most militant in Port Elizabeth being the Food and Canning Workers Union, the Textile Workers Industrial Union and the Laundry Workers Union, of which Raymond Mhlaba was the organising Secretary.

The ANC had successfully built up a mass following through the 1952 Defiance Campaign, together with a strong grassroots leadership – the amaVolontiya. After the New Brighton riots in late 1952 and the banning of meetings by the PE City Council in 1953, these volunteers were deployed in accordance with the M-Plan, with each street in the township forming a committee to ensure that, in the absence of public meetings, there would still be a way of communicating with supporters. When Govan Mbeki arrived in Port Elizabeth in 1955, he found that implementation of the M-Plan was well advanced.

When the ANC realised the likelihood of its being banned they were looking for a plan that could be used to carry on its activities underground … But all the capable activists of the ANC at the time had not had much educational experience … They had built a core during the Defiance Campaign of what was known as the Volunteers of the ANC. These volunteers therefore started implementing the M-Plan after the 1953 riots when the ANC was banned in New Brighton. This was a group of ordinary men and women, virtually all of them from the working class.218

Among the leaders of the volunteer groups was Alvon Bennie, who explained how it was done:

At that time, I would be given instructions, as a member of the ANC, to organise 10 houses. That was my job for the whole year. In that house

218 Interview with Govan Mbeki.
stays so-and-so who is a member of the ANC. In number so-and-so stays so-and-so who is a policeman. At number so-and-so stays so-and-so who works at the railway station. As I am sitting here, I would be able to know the 10 houses here. And the next person knows the next 10 houses. And so on. Then these streets were grouped into a zone. And we would report to a zone steward, who would report to a chief steward. So that was the system. I was present when Raymond [Mhlaba] and Govan [Mbeki] and others were reporting about the system we were using, saying this system must be used provincially. Then Chief Albert Luthuli said no, this plan must be used nationally, because we are heading for trouble.

In 1959, Wilson Khayingo, brother of Diliza, one of three cadres from the Eastern Cape Regional High Command who would be executed by the government in 1964, was elected a group leader. His area of activity was Stage 1, which extended from Matomela to Daku Road in KwaZakele, Section M17. He had to arrange meetings to discuss new government restrictions, organise boycotts or mobilise the community, as when Mandela arrived in PE for a morning meeting. On that occasion, everybody had to wear suits and carry briefcases and walk up and down the streets in town until 1 pm, to provide camouflage for Mandela and confuse the Special Branch. Another initiative was the arbitration of violent conflict among residents of different areas. ANC street committees would try to stop the conflict and thus avoid brutal intervention by the police.

Whether or not the M-Plan was implemented effectively elsewhere, it is clear that at the time of the banning of the ANC in 1960, a particularly strong grassroots organisational network had been developed in Port Elizabeth and East London, involving both ordinary working class residents of the African townships and factory workers. While SACTU was not banned outright, it became increasingly difficult for the union to organise openly, and many of its key activists became part of the new underground network that was being established as MK.

The role of the banned Communist Party in the formation of these early structures was extremely significant. It was the most committed and politically educated communists who were selected by local leaders such as Robert Matje to establish study groups, and it was from these groups that new members were recruited into the rudimentary structures of MK. In addition to these communists, there were a handful of white communists who played a key role on the technical and logistical side of early MK operations. One of them was Tolley Bennun, a chemist and explosives expert who had assisted Govan Mbeki during the Mpondoland revolt by providing both the use of his car and a ‘cover’ for Mbeki, who posed as his chauffeur.

Mbeki, along with a number of other Port Elizabeth ANC leaders, had been
strongly influenced by both the strength of peasant resistance in Mpondoland, and by its brutal repression. These factors drove him to the irrevocable conclusion that the only option available to oppressed African people in South Africa was armed struggle. Many other communist and trade union leaders from Port Elizabeth – including Vuyisile Mini and Caleb Mayekiso – reached the same conclusion via a similar course of reasoning.

It was through the political education programme, led by communists, and the M-Plan structures that the decision to turn to armed struggle was strategised and that leaders such as Mbeki started examining the possibilities of urban guerrilla warfare. Having successfully built up semi-underground networks in densely populated urban townships, they began to explore a different notion of armed struggle from that understood and employed by liberation movements in other parts of the world. Mbeki explained how, thanks to successful organisation, Red Location – the oldest section of New Brighton – became the model for the new concept of underground work and armed resistance:

Red Location served a very useful purpose when Umkhonto we Sizwe was formed in 1961. Some people said, when the decision was taken by the ANC to embark on armed struggle, that it couldn’t succeed. They said an armed struggle couldn’t succeed in South Africa. There are no mountains, no big forests like in Algeria and other places. My view was – which was the view we adopted – that places like Red Location were the forests for underground work. If you influence and persuade people over time to support the organisation, they would not give it away. So in that respect, the townships, especially areas like Red Location, became a virtual forest for the African National Congress.220

Another early MK member, Cecil ‘Gugu’ Magqabi, confirmed that Red Location was a ‘key resistance area’, because it became home to rural immigrants from the Transkei, who were subjected to harsh repression under apartheid. Laws governing the movement of rural immigrants to urban areas, such as the Urban Areas Act and the Bantu Authorities Act, must have facilitated links between urban and rural resistance. This was confirmed by General Andrew Masondo:

I became a rural area organiser. So I used to go and organise, particularly after the banning of the ANC, and I worked with, in that rural area organiser’s cell, I worked under Govan, I worked with Vuyisile Mini, I worked with James Kati, we worked together. I worked with people like Mayekiso, people like Mkabela from East London. I was part of the rural area organisation. We, the Eastern Cape, developed a very good way of organising the rural areas. Now you see, you have these hostels in Eastern Cape, we used to call them ondokwenza. Migrant labourers would stay

220 Interview with Govan Mbeki.
there, but at a certain time, they go home. While I’m trying to get into the villages in rural areas, I’m not known, so I needed contacts, and that then made me go to Port Elizabeth. When I’m in PE, together with Mini and Kati, we would go to these places, we would go to those hostels, meet people who were from the villages around Victoria East, so that they could introduce me to people who I could be safe with in rural areas. Because the ANC then was banned, I would get into trouble. So, and then the other thing is that, in the city itself, PE, the rural area committee organised the people in the hostels in terms of their areas of origin. They were very good at that.221

The influence of Mbeki and Mhlaba was considerable. Three members of MK’s original National High Command – Slovo, Mbeki and Mhlaba – were senior SACP members. The overall significance of these influences is that in the Eastern Cape, the links were particularly strong between the initial MK cells and the working class activists, trade unionists and communists. Interestingly, this did not lead to an exclusive focus on urban forms of organisation and struggle, as links with rural areas of the Eastern Cape were maintained.

The process of adjustment to underground struggle, and especially the relationship between political and military structures, was a long and difficult one. Even in the Eastern Cape, where activists had begun to combine strategies of mass organisation with semi-underground methods through the M-Plan structures, the reconstitution of the ANC command and the formation of MK units was a delicate and, at times, controversial process.

Cecil Magqabi recounted how, about eight days after the banning of the ANC, Mandela held a clandestine meeting with the ANC leadership in Port Elizabeth. Magqabi and others were instructed to go to a private house in Block 62 B9 in Red Location. They were unaware that Mandela would be waiting. He informed them that he was now the High Commander of the ANC and that a ‘caretaker committee’ of seven had replaced the old executive committee. His instruction that all organs of the ANC were to be immediately dissolved met with considerable resistance, but Mandela would brook no argument, and demanded a progress report the following morning.

His orders were carried out, but continued unhappiness expressed by local leaders led to Mandela being asked to attend another meeting, some time later in 1960 or early 1961.222

A great deal of anger was expressed at the second meeting, primarily because the branch executive felt excluded from decision-making. However, according to Magqabi:

221 Interview with General Andrew Masondo, conducted by Sifiso Ndlovu, 15 May 2001, SADET Oral History Project.
222 Feit, 1971, p 119, notes that this meeting took place in April 1961, but Magqabi thought it was some time in the second half of 1960.
After a long discussion, Mandela said because he gave them the right to voice their opinions … his last words were, ‘Now I’ve been listening to you very carefully, and I told you that you have no reason to be angry about this, because the African National Congress was banned in your absence, and that leadership that was there took action … there’s no other leader except myself, you see, in the African National Congress. And therefore if you don’t like or disagree with the decision taken, the door is open to leave the African National Congress, to go and stay in your house, don’t try and make your problems … because I am sure you will never face the anger of the people that would cause you regret for the rest of your life’. That was his final word, you see. And he said that the meeting is closed.223

The situation was seemingly resolved by the local leadership accepting the decision, and putting in place the new underground structures. However, Magqabi suggested that simmering resentment might have contributed to the actions of Kholisile Mdwayi, one of the Eastern Cape Regional High Command members from 1962 to 1964.224 It was also at this meeting, which preceded the Lobatse conference, that the possibility of armed struggle was raised:

He told us that we must prepare people to know that the government is now fighting; maybe there will be a time when the people themselves had to fight back. That was all that he said. This was made clear when we were at Lobatse, you see. We were told that we must mobilise the youth, and we must try [and see] that each and every youth should have a driver’s licence, and that the youth should be ready to go for military training.225

The first step, though, was to reorganise the ANC and establish structures to keep it functioning on an illegal basis. For example, many Youth League members were absorbed into the underground movement. Of the six executed by the government in 1964 and 1965, Mkaba had been in the New Brighton branch of the Youth League, while Ndongeni and Jonas had been at Kleinskool. Mini, who would be among the Treason Triallists, was one of the senior comrades, a Youth League member working in the regional office.226

Magqabi’s ascent through the ranks, both before and after the banning of the ANC, serves as a useful indicator of the structural adaptations that had to be made when the organisation went underground. A Youth League organiser at Red Location in the 1950s, he had been elected to the Youth League execu-

223 Interview with Cecil Magqabi, conducted by Brown Maaba, 29-30 September 2002, SADET Oral History Project.
224 Interview with Cecil Magqabi, conducted by Pat Gibbs, 10 January 2002, SADET Oral History Project.
225 Interview with Cecil Magqabi, conducted by Brown Maaba.
226 Interview with Cecil Magqabi, conducted by Pat Gibbs.
tive committee in 1955 as treasurer. A year later, he became the secretary and finance under-secretary until the ANC was banned, but maintained his position as secretary underground.

His primary task was to raise funds by collecting a monthly subscription of 20 cents from each member. Great care was taken not to keep any record of names, and to this end a code system was introduced. No personal details would be on the receipt, just a code number, so that even if the receipt were left lying around, the member’s identity would be protected. The house would be identified by the house number and the street in the zone – so house 143 in the eighth street would be 8/143; the individual would be identified by initials according to a simple alphabet code, where A is 1, and so forth. Thus AN Magqabi would be represented as 1/14/13 8/143.

This system enabled Magqabi to collect subscriptions – via a hierarchical network of street representatives and stewards – for the whole of New Brighton, where he estimated there were more than 60 000 ANC members at the time.

Although not MK members, some volunteers provided support in other ways. Wilson Khayingo, who had been appointed a group leader in 1959, had the task from 1963 to 1966 of providing a ‘safe-house’. This meant that his house was used as a temporary refuge by cadres who were leaving the country or returning to carry out operations in the Eastern Cape. Khayingo had few visitors, and cadres never stayed more than three days. Their names were never given to their host, who provided food paid for with his own funds. Money never changed hands in order to prevent the possibility of a set-up by police informers. The last group to pass through Khayingo’s house came from Cradock and included one Peter Mqapazane. On orders from his brother in the Regional High Command and on the basis that Kholisile Mdwayi had turned state witness, this group was hurried out of the safe-house and across the border.

During the state of emergency in 1960, and in the years of repression that followed, assistance was given to ANC activists by white non-communist supporters who had access to various resources. Some, like Father Thorpe, were ministers of religion who collected money to support the families of detainees. Others were lawyers, who represented ANC members in court, though the organisation made a clear distinction between lawyers who were understood to be progressive sympathisers, such as Colin Jankelowitz,227 and those who were unsympathetic but sometimes found themselves representing ANC members out of necessity.

While trying to maintain the ANC underground, certain individuals were recruited – presumably during 1961 – to the newly established MK command structure. The initial Regional High Command consisted of Vuyisile Mini, Diliza Khayingo, Zinakile Mkaba and Kholisile Mdwayi. Mini, who was the political commissar, according to General Masondo, was also in the trade

---

227 Colin Jankelowitz defended many ANC members during the 1950s and 1960s.
union movement and joined Govan Mbeki, the coordinator, James Kati and others in organising the rural areas. Below the Regional High Command was a committee of three, consisting of Jacob Skundla, Thompson Daweti and Charlie January; and at the next level, there was a committee of five who were charged with distributing information to the masses.

According to Govan Mbeki, the MK High Command selected targets for saboteurs to hit when the inaugural phase of the military campaign was launched on 16 December 1961. Since the expertise for making bombs lay with Bennun, Port Elizabeth became the centre of sabotage training. In the 18 months from December 1961 to June 1963, attacks were launched on more than 200 state installations, with most activity in the Eastern Cape. Of all the actions cited in the subsequent Rivonia Trial, 35% emanated from the Eastern Cape.

A number of the attacks were in Port Elizabeth, with five explosions between 9 and 10 pm on 16 December. Mbeki recollected:

That night, bombs right through the city were going off, boom, boom. You turned whichever way, boom, boom! The government was caught unprepared. It did not know ... A number of places were attacked, a number of places were blown out.

Among the targets were an electrical substation in New Brighton, the bomb, according to Mhlaba, ‘wrenching heavy double doors and smashing the ceiling and roof and damaging the walls’. Damage was also caused to the New Brighton Labour Bureau and the offices of the Bantu Administration Board and the Bantu Education Department.

Mini, Khayingo, Mkaba and Mdwayi, who formed the initial regional command structure, were later charged with 16 counts of sabotage, although the operations were carried out by various units. Lodge notes that Port Elizabeth was ‘the centre most affected by the campaign’, registering 58 attacks, of which 31 were ‘fairly trivial – indicative perhaps of a greater degree of rank and file initiative’. Among the attacks were a blast in a telephone booth in the city centre and the cutting of telephone and telex wires.234 Despite the

---

228 Interview with General Andrew Masondo.
229 Interview with Jacob Skundla, conducted by Pat Gibbs, 12 December 2000, SADET Oral History Project.
230 This was Govan Mbeki’s claim. However, commentators such as Barrell, 1990, p 10, assert that the first MK ‘bomb factory’ was in Jack Hodgson’s Johannesburg flat. The autobiographies of Kasrils and Mtolo also make it clear that Harold Strachan and Jack Hodgson played an important role in training the Natal MK command (see Kasrils, 1998, pp 39-40; and Mtolo, 1966, pp 15-6).
231 Interview with Govan Mbeki.
233 Lodge, 1983, p 236.
potential for loss of life, a train from Perseverance was also targeted, with iron clamps locked on the rails in an attempt to derail the train.

Elsewhere in the Eastern Cape, there were few sabotage attempts, probably owing to the fact that the technical committee, which was producing explosives, was based in Port Elizabeth. Lodge notes that there were six attacks in East London and five in Uitenhage. One of the East London attacks involved the throwing of a petrol bomb into an administration office, while another petrol bomb was thrown in Alice by Rex Lumphondwana, who was arrested shortly afterwards.235 General Masondo recalled:

Now, I was working with a young chap called Rex Lumphondwana and another one, Rhelo ... They were from Lovedale. Then we had a problem that this man, this Hermanus, was creating a problem. His role as a teacher there was not good. He was a good teacher, but his role with the authority was not good. The young people wanted to deal with it. I then said 'no,' because he was a man I worked with in the interdenominational choir, until I got to find out that in fact he had secret meetings with the Special Branch. Because I knew the guys and moves of the Special Branch and I saw him meeting the Special Branch. We then decided we must do something about it. We decided we are going to throw a petrol bomb at his place where he sleeps. Now I said to them, they must have gloves so that we don’t throw things. The mistake that Rex did, he took out a handkerchief which had RP, so when he was throwing the petrol bomb, he threw the handkerchief also. The police came, they saw that thing, they arrested him. What I must say about Rex, the boy was committed. The boy had guts, I could have been arrested then, Rhelo could have been arrested then, but he took the rap and got his five years alone.236

Ben Fihla was one of those selected to the technical committee. Along with Joseph Jack and the white SACP member Harold ‘Jock’ Strachan, he was trained to manufacture bombs using various types of explosives, as well as how to use ordinary household items to make crude explosives. Among the ingredients used were icing sugar, liquor, nitric acid, glycerine and chemicals such as magnesium and potassium permanganate. Some of these items were obtained illegally from Lennon’s, the pharmaceutical factory in Port Elizabeth. Recruits were required to keep the formulas for homemade explosives in their heads, and had strict instructions that ‘nothing must be written down’. At one point, the units also had access to dynamite when, according to Raymond Mhlaba – and confirmed by Ben Fihla – cadres broke into offices at a quarry and stole a quantity of dynamite.237 However, Govan Mbeki believed that while various items, including detonators, were found at the quarry, no dynamite

235 Ibid.
236 Interview with General Andrew Masondo.
was obtained on that occasion. He said it was nevertheless possible that other raids had produced dynamite.

We are always looking for an opportunity to get dynamite. We could not get dynamite. We had instructions to steal dynamite from government installations … in some cases we were successful, in other cases we were not.238

One of the sabotage methods adopted by MK was born of resistance to the chiefs during the Mpondoland revolt. A certain Mr Mtwana from Cala suggested the destruction of cattle kraals through the burning of manure, to which potassium permanganate and glycerine had been added. Mbeki told Bennun about this, and he responded: 'Gov, the peasants are correct, but there is one element they have left out, that is magnesium. Mix magnesium with permanganate and then drop glycerine on that – you get a beautiful white flame!'

However, the fledgling saboteurs were unschooled in the use of such chemicals, and engaged in a number of experiments to devise the safest way of applying them. According to Mbeki:

Tolley got this technical committee to experiment with a method of timing. You will be stupid if you lit the bomb when you were there, and it blew up. You must get away from the place. All those who experimented had that instruction: place the bomb and move away. Now it took time to get that correct. Tolley instructed the technical committee to use sea sand. It took time before we finally got the absolute reliable data. So much sea sand, and a tissue paper below it, and a mixture of magnesium and permanganate below. The glycerine will percolate. It will have to come through that little layer of sand. Now that could be controlled, and after some more long tests, they invited me to come along to be present and see those tests and results. If the explosion failed, Tolley would say it should have worked at such-and-such a time, it has not worked, and you go and find out why. The technical committee would be shaking. He would insist that we must know why it failed. Finally they had to yield and the mistakes were discovered. With that, we were able to make bombs.239

Such risky amateur operations invariably involved mistakes, one of which was amusingly recounted by Mbeki:

There is one unit that made a mistake. There were three in that unit. The technical committee trained them. They were PE people and … they made a mistake here in the Baakens Valley … They placed a bomb to blow up a substation. In order to direct the force of the bomb, we used a pocket of sand. Place the bomb and then place the pocket of sand, so that all the force of the bomb should be directed at the thing you want to destroy. These two young people … placed the bomb near a substation,

238 Interview with Govan Mbeki.
239 Ibid.
then placed the sandbag, but they had already put in glycerine, and the bomb went off – boom! And the sandbag hit one of them; both fell. When they got up they ran – long distance – it was at night. And then this little man called Johnny ran towards town, whereas the other ran towards New Brighton. The whites on the street see this young chap running – they all chase him – as a suspect for the bomb. The police caught up with him. The pass laws had started applying in Port Elizabeth. At 10 pm there was a curfew. When the police caught up with him, he said, ‘Ek soek my cherry, my baas’ (I am looking for my girlfriend, boss). The police would not accept that, and he went to jail. He did not point out the other guy, all he said was he was running because 10 pm had come and the curfew regulations were applying, so he was running to get to his ‘cherry’. He became the bomb suspect – Johnny was his name – an ordinary boy from Red Location.

Another type of device employed by the early MK units in the Eastern Cape was the incendiary bomb, which required only petrol. In one incident at Engcobo in the former Transkei, another ‘technical error’ led to a serious breach of security for the MK network as a whole, as Mbeki recalled:

... two men from the Transkei who were trained by the technical committee broke down. They made a mistake too at Engcobo in the Transkei. It was an incendiary bomb – a gallon tin of petrol with its detonator. This young chap – I think he operated alone – bought a gallon of petrol from the filling station, and at night he took that to the magistrate’s court and placed it in the area where there were files. But he made a mistake. Maybe he was not warned about this. He was supposed to leave a space in the bottle so that about two to three inches above the petrol, petrol vapour will be collecting there. When the little bomb was lit, the petrol bottle will catch fire and blow. As it catches fire it will spread petrol right up. But this fellow sealed the bottle and did not leave this space for the gas to gather. Of course it became easy for the police in their search, carrying the gallon with him. They went from filling station to filling station, and one filling station identified him. He, together with his friend, was arrested. They were brought back to Port Elizabeth and gave all the information to the police that they were trained here, by so-and-so ...

Of the technical committee members, Strachan was arrested and charged under the Explosives Act and with malicious damage to property, while Joseph Jack escaped into exile. Only Fihla was left, and he continued his work by recruiting others to carry on with him. When explosives had been prepared, they were given to his contact, Khayingo, who was the commander-in-chief. Then they were distributed to the units that would carry out the operations. These units usually consisted of four people, and the initial targets were post offices, police stations and electricity pylons.240

240 Ibid.
Lodge notes that while the National High Command had ordered that no blood be shed, a 'substantial number' of saboteurs made little effort to adhere to these instructions. Lodge pinpointed 23 actions, 18 involving railways (including two petrol bombs thrown into train carriages) and five beer hall bomb attacks that put lives at risk. There were also 23 attacks on policemen, informers or 'people regarded as collaborators', and 17 of these took place in the Eastern Cape. Most of the life-threatening attacks took place in Durban and Port Elizabeth and, according to Lodge, 'indicated considerable indiscipline as well as enthusiasm for violence among Umkhonto members in both places'. However, in the ANC's second submission to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a list of MK operations in Appendix 4 noted that no deaths or injuries were associated with these actions. Mhlaba recalled that the house of Memory Maneli, the PE representative of Chief Kaiser Matanzima, was burned down and that a bomb was thrown into the house of a detective named Gazo.

One of the most controversial early operations involved the explosives placed on the railway line near Perseverance. This led the police to detain one person who was involved and three who were entirely innocent. The police coerced one of the latter to name the others as guilty, in return for his freedom, and two innocent men thus went to prison for a long time.

It was clear from the start of the sabotage campaign that MK would face infiltration by police spies and betrayal by informers or those who were forced to become state witnesses. Thus, while MK's targets for sabotage were clearly demarcated as strategic installations, and considerable care was taken by most operatives to avoid loss of life, it was action against informers that led to the first executions of MK members. The two best-known cases in the Eastern Cape were the death of a 14-year-old girl in East London on 11 December 1962, and the killing of Sipho Mange in Port Elizabeth on 12 January 1964. The seven MK members involved in these two incidents were hanged by the apartheid state and thus became the ANC military wing's first martyrs.

Other targets were leaders who accepted homeland institutions. General Masondo told how he was ordered to assassinate KD Matanzima:

Now I started work with Mini, Khayingo, who was the commander, then they included me in their high command as an alternate member and I

242 Lodge, 1983, p 236.
244 Mhlaba, 2001, p 116.
245 Lodge, 1983, footnote 8, p 256 records that in an interview in 1969, an MK member from East London said a police informer was killed, possibly by ANC activists. His source was given as Dennis and Ginger Mercer (eds), From Shantytown to Forest: The Story of Norman Duka, LSM Information Centre, Oakland, 1974, p 51.
was particularly given the task of decoding coded messages and I continued. In the high command there was a chap called Mdwayi ... I had come to know Mdwayi also because of my going to and from Port Elizabeth and also my being able to work with the rural areas. So apparently in MK itself, he was the man who was looking after the rural areas, so we met and used to talk. Then one day we had a discussion with him, he came to see me and he said to me, 'The high command has asked me to come and give you a task'. That task was to shoot KD Matanzima. He was chairman of the Advisory Council and I was in that Advisory Council at Fort Hare. So this chap comes, he brings me an Astra pistol, that is Mdwayi. So I had it and to tell you the truth I was planning to do it. But sometimes I'm lucky, I think, because the aim was to shoot him at the graduation ceremony [in April], but in March I was arrested for the operation that we did.246

It is clear from this interview that the Regional High Command, and Mdwayi in particular, perceived that assassination was justified. The significance of Mdwayi having issued such an instruction is dealt with more fully in the next section.

Recruitment, training and arrests: 1962-1964

The political motivation for the ANC's adoption of armed struggle was formulated in a document entitled 'Outline of a Syllabus for a Brief Course on the Training of Organisers'.

Section A dealt with the historical background to the establishment of MK, covering the period from 1880 to 1910, and argued that since the subjugation of traditional chiefs and kingdoms, Africans had tried to wage a liberation struggle through constitutional methods, such as extension of the franchise to all provinces of the Union. Denial of the franchise by the South Africa Act of 1909 had completely excluded Africans from representation in the legislative bodies of the Transvaal, the Orange Free State and Natal. Africans who had been deprived of their lands continued to be exploited on what had become white-owned farms, and were denied the channels to seek redress for genuine grievances. From time to time, this untenable situation led to revolts such as the Bambata rebellion of 1906. Even then, for half a century from 1910 to 1960, Africans continued to seek constitutional ways of correcting a situation that was becoming unbearably worse as each year passed.

Section B dealt with the birth of MK. After more than 80 years, attempts to bring about reform by constitutional means had served only to worsen the situation of the Africans, while policies committed to white supremacy and domination of Africans had steadily intensified – segregation, white trusteeship, apartheid, race federation, Bantu authorities, self-rule, self-government, and
so-called independence in their own homelands. The people can take no more. MK is born and is committed to an armed struggle to overthrow white supremacy. Its immediate aim is to speedily bring about achievement of the objectives for which the ANC and the national liberation movement are struggling,’ the document stated. Addressing the question of the sabotage campaign, the document dealt with the problems posed by prevailing conditions in South Africa, Verwoerd’s Nationalist government and the forces that supported the policy of white supremacy. Arrayed against Verwoerd were: the ANC, the SACP, the South African Indian Congress and the South African Coloured People’s Congress. The problem was to ensure that each played its active role.

Section C dealt with organisational structures. All available literature on guerrilla warfare, with special reference to China, Cuba, Algeria and Vietnam, was to be studied and lessons extracted from it. The document created the distinct impression that the ANC recognised the importance of political education and that its struggle should be rooted in a historical context. Clear links were made between the various attempts to reduce Africans to the status of slaves in a white settler society, and African resistance to these efforts.

It is worth noting that the formation of MK was already anticipated by the fact that during the Defiance Campaign in 1952, a ‘Volunteer Section’ of the ANC had been created, called Amadelakufa (those who dare defy death). This was composed of a core of dedicated activists who were prepared to take any risk to carry out campaigns initiated by the ANC, like the distribution of leaflets, organising strikes and whatever else was necessary to ensure the success of campaigns endorsed by the movement.

They were called ‘volunteers’ precisely because they volunteered to face the penalties of imprisonment and torture. They were definitely forerunners of Umkhonto we Sizwe. That explains why Mandela said when Umkhonto we Sizwe was formed, the problem that faced the ANC was not whether to fight, but how to continue to fight.

Those who formed MK were all members of either the ANC or the SACP, or both. Although MK retained its own distinct structure and autonomy in order to protect its parent bodies, there was no doubt that in its operation and practice a new conceptual and political boundary had been crossed in the race/class divide that had characterised the alliance. This practice attained full realisation at the Morogoro conference, where ANC membership was opened for the first time to members of the other congresses. Bernstein articulated what the unification of ANC and communist cadres meant and how it worked:

247 State v Wilton Mkwayi, Ian David Kitson, Laloo Chiba and others, Witwatersrand Local Division, criminal case 578/64, National Archives, Pretoria.

It meant combining bodies of quite different character. The Party’s specialist units were an integral part of the Party structure; they functioned like any other non-specialist unit, under direct Party leadership and rules. Mandela’s units functioned as an autonomous organisation, outside of the ANC structure, and with its own independent leadership and rules. Unification could not come about by simple merger. It called for changes in both bodies and new organisational concepts. If not for the mutual trust and fraternity, which existed between us at a leadership level, it would probably never have been accomplished.249

It is worth recalling that the theory behind the formation of MK lies deep in the history of the evolution of the Congress Alliance – unity in action among all the oppressed groups was the fundamental principle of the South African liberation struggle.250

From the time of the Lobatse conference in Bechuanaland in October 1962, MK recruitment began in earnest. Magqabi was one of the ‘guinea pigs’ who attended this crucial conference, and he noted that most of the ‘MK chaps’ present were from Port Elizabeth. Having discussed how to recruit and mobilise for armed struggle, they returned to the Eastern Cape and began implementing this strategy. Having been in the leadership of the ANC Youth League, Magqabi recruited many of its members and arranged for them to leave the country – men such as Fezile Lobede, Zola Nqene and Sinikulu Matiwana. The practical arrangements were made by a ‘Volunteer Board’ that included the likes of James Kati, and which gave recruits the exact date and time they should report, and made arrangements for their journeys.251

Maintaining a distinction between MK and the ANC underground proved as difficult in the Eastern Cape as in other parts of the country. For many young men, the prospect of military action was more exciting than painstaking organisational work. As General Masondo put it:

Sometimes I was a little bit reckless in my youth … at a certain point I discussed the question of membership of Umkhonto we Sizwe with Govan [Mbeki]. Once again Govan told me no, I can’t be a member of...

250 The consciousness of their common interest developed among African and Indian people during the Second World War, as illustrated by the ANC’s support of Indian resistance against Smuts’s ‘Ghetto Act’ in 1946, and post-war campaigns by Africans that were supported by Indians. Formal unity was established in 1947 with the signing of a cooperation pact between the presidents of the SA Indian Congress and the ANC. Subsequently, the South African Coloured People’s Organisation, the Congress of Democrats (a white organisation) and SACTU also joined the alliance. The alliance between the ANC and the communists also gained ground following a meeting in 1946 where a large majority of ANC members voted in favour of a motion urging Africans to fight for full citizenship rights and boycott elections for the Native Representative Council and parliament (cf HJ Simons, Struggles in Southern Africa for Survival and Equality, St Martin’s Press, New York, 1997, p 118).
251 Interview with Cecil Magqabi, conducted by Pat Gibbs.
Masondo was then ‘put into MK’ by the leadership, but was told that he was not to be involved in operations. Instead, he was to play the role of recruiting and creating MK units. As a young and enthusiastic ‘man of action’, Masondo was not satisfied with these instructions:

In essence I was like the commander who was not allowed to operate with my units. That was very difficult for a young man who was 25 or 26. So I actually joined [MK] in 1962. Then I formed the units, but I broke another instruction again. I would form the unit, go and act with them and then leave them so that I can give them orders to act and do whatever. So I formed a few units and acted with them.

Competing demands also placed other strains on the underground movement. Uitenhage ANC member Temba Paulos, for example, instantly responded to the call to train overseas. As he explained:

The ANC was banned, there was no other option which was left for the movement to continue the struggle except the last resort – the armed struggle, which we undertook. A call was made, a clarion call was made and we answered to the clarion call by living on our own, by leaving our homes, by leaving all we had to go for the armed struggle. It was not an easy task to do but we had to do ... to undergo military training.

Paulos left in 1962, and was trained in Algeria and the Soviet Union before being based in MK camps in Tanzania and Zambia from the mid-1960s until 1990.

These departures weakened MK structures inside the country. Cecil Magqabi, for example, was recruited into MK, but never went abroad. He was selected to go for training, and when attending the Lobatse conference was enthusiastic about the idea, but was unable to leave because there was nobody to take his place in Port Elizabeth. Temba Dyasi was part of a cell led by political commissar Zola Nqene when he was recruited to leave South Africa for

---

252 Interview with General Andrew Masondo.
253 Interview with Temba Paulos, conducted by Brown Maaba, 18 September 2001, SADET Oral History Project.
military training in 1963. However, because his wife was pregnant, he
remained behind. The group that he would have been part of, which included
Ngene and Vuyisile Tholo, was arrested at the Rhodesian border on 10 May
1963. Dyasi and other young comrades then followed their instructions to take
over the work of those who had been arrested; but they, in turn, were arrested
on 26 April 1964. One of the biggest problems confronting the internal MK
units was access to weapons. Dyasi’s group ‘trained with one gun, all of us, not
on the same day. We used to meet three times a week at least’.254 Cecil
Magqabi’s firearm, for which he was arrested in 1961, was licensed to his
uncle, who had fought in the Second World War. Andrew Masondo made refer-
ce to ‘two 303s which were kept in the Red Location (“elaleni ebomvu”) and
there was a comrade there, Peter, his surname was Peter. We went to him, he
kept those things for us’.255

Masondo took the initiative to repair and use an old gun that he had found,
and which he took with him on a sabotage operation.

One of the units under Masondo, based at Fort Hare, was involved with the
sabotage of electricity pylons right up to their arrest in March 1963. Frustr-
ation over the lack of explosives led the young operatives to improvise one
night while Masondo and his unit were travelling from Alice to Debenek:

That’s 39 miles from Alice, to go and do this job. We are travelling on foot.
So we reach there ... we find that the thing is a steel box. We couldn’t do
anything. So we come back and I’m very unhappy. Just so that we should
not have gone for nothing, we just see a telephone wire, we cut it, just so
that we haven’t done nothing that day; we didn’t go for no good reason.

Masondo’s unit then decided to proceed with similar operations against elec-
tricity pylons using ‘cold demolition’ – instead of using explosives, they would
simply push over or saw down and break the wooden poles and pylons. He
identified a pole that was a ‘nodal point’ not far from Fort Hare, and which was
linked to various circuits. They successfully sawed down the pole, and the
lights went off in the surrounding area, ‘even at Fort Hare’. Unfortunately, a
number of things went wrong in this dramatic amateur operation, leading ulti-
ately to Masondo’s conviction. As he explained, ‘after we have cut the thing
and the pylon and the cables got cut, I hadn’t bargained for the fact that we are
dealing with about 3 000 to 6 000 volts ... I had a pistol in my back pocket; we
were running, I just found myself rolling and falling; Nelson Dick – the hot
cable got him here on the thigh, but we were able to run away. But when we
came back to the scene, they had found my pistol and it had my fingerprints
and all that ... so I had no chance really of acquittal’.

While they were carrying out the operation, the Special Branch had arrived

254 Interview with Temba Dyasi, conducted by Brown Maaba, 20 September 2001, SADET Oral
History Project.
255 Interview with General Andrew Masondo.
to search Masondo’s home and serve him with a banning order, and when they did not find him, left someone to watch the house. Masondo and his unit decided on the operation because it was drizzling, and so fewer people were out and about that day. However, this also meant that they left their footprints in the mud. Masondo carefully removed his shoes, but unfortunately gave them to another man, who was intercepted by the police. In addition, his clothes were muddy and his jersey full of sawdust from when they had sawn down the wooden pylon.

The mistake that had happened was the jersey. I had said to my wife that she should wash my things, the trousers that I had on which had mud and things. She did not realise the importance of washing the jersey, because it was an old jersey, so she washed everything except the jersey and when they came, they got into the bathroom, they found that jersey not only with marks but with the chips of wood. So they took me …

The prosecution argued for the death sentence for Masondo’s unit, on the basis that the sabotage had affected an area of 500 by 100 miles, including a number of towns, and could have affected hospitals where people would die in an emergency if the power supply were cut. Masondo’s lawyer, however, argued successfully that the intention was not to kill people, and that hospitals were supposed to have emergency generators in the event of power cuts. Masondo was sentenced to 12 years of hard labour; two of the other members of the unit were sentenced to eight and nine years respectively, while the fourth was acquitted.

From time to time over the following months there were reports, rumours and tales – some true and some untrue – of further acts of sabotage against symbols and installations of the state. There were tales of deliberate crop burning, and of petty industrial sabotage of machines, but no solid facts. The press, leaned upon by the government, suppressed the news of actual sabotage, even where reporters confirmed the facts. Sabotage, however, remained a flicker in the shadows, raising the hopes and morale of a suffering population, although they could discover nothing solid about its scale, its effectiveness, or who directed and carried it out.

And so it remained – a period of occasional and often unreported acts of sabotage, of sporadic legal protest actions breaking the surface, of rumour and speculation about what was really going on underground. Until June 1963.

The sabotage campaign gave rise to a severe backlash by the state, which embarked on a massive crackdown against ANC and MK underground operatives between 1962 and 1964. An extensive network of police informers was established, thousands of people were arrested and detainees were tortured into providing information about the organisation. Most interviewees referred to in this chapter were imprisoned during that time.

In the first known case of MK action against collaborators, Washington Bongco, the regional commander for Border (East London and surrounding
area), was involved in an attack on the home of Inkie Domboti Hoyi on 11 December 1962. The attack involved petrol bombs and at least one gun, but although Hoyi was shot at, he survived. However, his niece was burned to death and his daughter seriously injured.

Hoyi was considered a collaborator because of his support for Transkei independence and Chief Kaiser Matanzima. While it is not clear whether or not the MK National High Command sanctioned the attack, the ANC had published pamphlets condemning collaboration and the ‘traitors’ and ‘sell-outs’ who joined the Transkei authorities. In Chapter 9, Madeleine Fullard also notes that Mbeki was sent by the National High Command to look into the Eastern Cape region’s activities, and concluded that Bongco had ‘exceeded his authority’.257

Skundla remembered a statement by Walter Sisulu at the time that was used to justify the action taken against Sipho Mange. Sisulu said that local MK units had to take the initiative in dealing with informers.258 If this was indeed the policy, it would seem that orders issued by MK at national level were deliberately vague, allowing members of regional command structures, like Mdwayi, to issue assassination orders.259

Three of the four members of the Eastern Cape Regional Command – Vuyisile Mini, Wilson Khayingo and Zinakile Mkaba – were executed in 1964 following their conviction on charges of sabotage and conspiracy to murder.

Mini, a trade union organiser and SACTU leader, was one of ‘the key figures in the highly effective Eastern Cape command’.260 A charismatic and popular leader and musician, Mini wrote the resistance song Pasop – nants’indod’inyama, Verwoerd (Watch out, here is the African man, Verwoerd!), and would go to the gallows singing.

Arrested in the same crackdown were Jacob Skundla, Thompson Daweti, Charlie January, Samuel Jonas, Daniel Ndongeni and Nolali Petse, whose task had been to form a link between MK’s command structure and the masses, for example by conveying information and carrying out certain tasks. Some of the second-tier operatives were charged with sabotage or membership of a banned organisation.

In a remarkably speedy trial at Port Alfred, Mini, Khayingo and Mkaba were found guilty on one count of murder, 17 counts of sabotage, one count of housebreaking and theft, and six counts under the Suppression of Communism Act. They were sentenced to death on 16 March 1964. Their appeal

256 Barrell, 1990, p 9. He attributes this information to an article about Washington Bongco by Steve Tshwete in the souvenir issue of Dawn.
257 Fullard attributes this information to Edward Feit.
258 Interview with Jacob Skundla.
259 Oral testimony by two different people indicated that Mdwayi was responsible for issuing orders that individuals be killed.
261 Wilson Mthwato was a member of the same committee.
against the conviction was dismissed in September and the three men were hanged in Pretoria on 6 November 1964.²⁶²

Petse, Ndongeni and Jonas were tried separately on charges of carrying out the murder, sentenced to death on 23 February 1965 and hanged on 9 July. Skundla was given a 22-year prison sentence.

The arrest of the regional commanders had serious repercussions for the continued work of MK in the Eastern Cape. Alvon Bennie remembered hearing on the 7 pm radio news that Mini had been arrested. Ben Fhla and another comrade went straight to Dan Tloome’s office to report the arrest. Bennie was given instructions to leave the country, and 24 hours later, he crossed the border into exile. He recalled how hard it was for him to leave his comrades, who were subsequently hanged. ‘I was so close to them … I was never to see them again’.²⁶³

The pain of the executions was deeply felt by other members of MK in the Eastern Cape as well. As Skundla noted, Prime Minister BJ Vorster responded to international appeals for clemency by saying that the condemned men were ‘not politicians, but criminals’, adding: ‘If you saw a fly getting in the house, it’s either you kill it, or you open the window and let it go.’ ‘The statement caused great pain’, said Skundla.²⁶⁴

The personal cost to those who participated in the early sabotage operations and various support activities of MK in the Eastern Cape was high. In addition to those who paid the ultimate price, many were detained for long periods and tortured, while some were forced to testify against their comrades. There were also those who were imprisoned unjustly, and served long years of hard labour on Robben Island.

Those who were released in the mid-1960s after being imprisoned in 1962 and 1963 were banished to the Ciskei homeland, placed under house arrest or promptly rearrested. But this period of repression also saw continued recruitment into the underground – a desperately dangerous activity at the time. By 1968, Magqabi and two others were in command of MK in the Eastern Cape, but in mid-1969, the regional leaders were all detained and subjected to severe torture. One of them, Caleb Mayekiso, became the first political detainee to die in police custody. The rest of the group were released without charge after 180 days in detention, as there was no evidence against them.

**Mandela, the guerrilla struggle and the Rivonia arrests**

In January 1962, Nelson Mandela departed clandestinely from South Africa. Over the following months he visited North and East Africa, where he met

²⁶³ Interview with Alvon Bennie.
²⁶⁴ Interview with Jacob Skundla.
major African leaders, underwent military training in Algeria and made arrangements for MK cadres to do the same.265

There are indications that this trip arrested Mandela’s gradual slide towards the left, that had begun in 1950 or 1951. When he returned to Liliesleaf Farm, he briefed the Working Committee on his trip. Those present were Walter Sisulu, Moses Kotane, Govan Mbeki, Dan Tloome, JB Marks and Duma Nokwe – what Mandela called ‘a rare reunion’.

... I reported in detail the reservations I had encountered about the ANC’s cooperation with whites, Indians, and particularly communists. Still ringing in my ears was my final meeting with the Zambian leaders, who told me that while they knew the ANC was stronger and more popular than the PAC, they understood the PAC’s pure African nationalism but were bewildered by the ANC’s non-racialism and communist ties. I informed them that Oliver and I believed the ANC had to appear more independent to reassure our new allies on the continent, for they would be the ones who would be financing and training Umkhonto we Sizwe. I proposed reshaping the Congress Alliance so that the ANC would clearly be seen as the leader, especially on issues directly affecting Africans.266

The Working Committee urged Mandela to go to Durban to brief Chief Luthuli (with Mbeki dissenting). When Luthuli was apprised of Mandela’s thinking a few days later, a curious role reversal occurred:

He said he did not like the idea of foreign politicians dictating policy to the ANC. He said we had evolved the policy of non-racialism for good reasons, and he did not think we should alter our policy because it did not suit a few foreign leaders. Mandela replied that he saw his proposal as merely ‘a cosmetic change in order to make the ANC more intelligible – and more plausible – to our allies’. I saw this as a defensive manoeuvre, for if African states decided to support the PAC, a small and weak organisation would suddenly become a large and potent one.

Mandela was right to recognise African reservations about multiracialism and communism. But he was also possibly a trifle over-optimistic about the support for armed struggle that Africa would be able to provide. This balance between African credibility and communist support would constitute the axis around which ANC foreign policy would turn for at least the next decade.

After meeting with MK’s Natal Regional High Command, Mandela returned to Johannesburg, but on the way, he was arrested and later charged on two counts; one of incitement to strike, the other of leaving the country without a passport. His trial attracted a great deal of attention, for during his period underground, he had become something of a legend.

266 Ibid, pp 384-5.
Having become a fully-fledged freedom fighter, Mandela challenged not only the right of the white court to hear his case, but also the legitimacy of the South African state. His actions were more than mere bravado. He showed the extent to which he had broken with the legality of the ANC, and for the first time, an ANC leader declared himself a revolutionary fighter and challenged the authority of the white minority’s judicial system. In effect, he told the state: ‘I do not recognise your court and your justice, and your laws no longer have meaning for me.’

On the first day of the trial, Mandela appeared in traditional Xhosa dress, as had Luthuli at the Nobel Peace Prize awards in Oslo. ‘I was literally carrying on my back the history, culture and heritage of my people. That day, I felt myself to be the embodiment of African nationalism, the inheritor of Africa’s difficult but noble past and her uncertain future. The karos was also a sign of contempt for the niceties of white justice.’

Mandela wanted to make it clear to the bench, the gallery and the press that he intended putting the state on trial.

In a way I had never quite comprehended before, I realised the role I could play in court and the possibilities before me as a defendant. I was a symbol of justice in the court of the oppressor, the representative of the great ideals of freedom, fairness and democracy, in a society that dishonoured these virtues. I realised there and then that I could carry on the fight even within the fortress of the enemy court.

Mandela would pose questions that no previous defendant in a South African court had dared to ask:

Why is it that in this courtroom I am facing a white magistrate, confronted by a white prosecutor, escorted by white orderlies? Can anybody honestly and seriously suggest that in this type of atmosphere the scales of justice are evenly balanced? Why is it that no African in the history of this country has ever had the honour of being tried by his own kith and kin, by his own flesh and blood? ... What sort of justice is this that enables the aggrieved to sit in judgment over those against whom they have laid a charge?

On 7 November 1962, he was sentenced to five years in prison.267

In the course of his absence from South Africa, Mandela had been given substantial sums of money for weapons and training, and had made the acquaintance at first hand of guerrilla warfare in Algeria and Morocco. While the experience reinforced his inclination to take the next step from sabotage to all-out guerrilla war, the ANC remained officially committed to non-violence. It was not until October 1962, when the ANC convened its first conference since 1959, that the official thinking and that of Mandela began to converge.
The conference at Lobatse, in Bechuanaland, took place in the period between Mandela's arrest and trial. There was widespread confusion among ANC members as to what the organisation's official policy was, and according to Joe Matthews, a dangerous situation had arisen, because:

... here you had the official policy of the ANC, which was not for armed struggle, and you then had an organisation established called Umkhonto we Sizwe, which embarked on armed struggle. The question was, which political organisation had established the military body?268

Matthews remembers a perplexed Reverend James Calata (former ANC general secretary) asking his father, ZK Matthews: 'Intoni le High Command?' (What is this High Command?). He believes the grey zone between MK and the ANC created a security hiatus that allowed a level of infiltration that subsequently destroyed the domestic arm of MK.269

The Lobatse conference was intended to dispel this confusion, and was attended by a large delegation from South Africa, as well as abroad. As Mbeki explained, the purpose of the meeting was simple:

Until 1960 all struggles were based on non-violence, non-confrontation. Then in 1961 [in fact 1962] we met as the ANC in Bechuanaland. I was then chairperson of the ANC, appointed around 1956. Then the executive had already taken the decision to embark on the armed struggle. The ANC was banned. It could not meet in South Africa. We chose Bechuanaland particularly because it would have given our membership in exile an opportunity to meet with the membership from South Africa in Lobatse. The decision was that we would inform the membership about the decision to embark on armed struggle ... Chief Luthuli was not present. He was banned. But people like Moses Kotane were there. Oliver Tambo was there, AB Yengwa was there, and a number of ANC people from all over the country. Some of them were banned, like Walter Sisulu.270

A complication was encountered in the shape of a British officer of the Bechuanaland Police. Mbeki recalled: 'When we wanted to have a meeting without anybody, but only for the membership of the ANC, he threatened to stop the conference if we did not allow him [in].'271

Most of the important deliberations consequently took place outside official sessions, and were not immediately reported. It was not until April 1963 that the ANC issued an official statement arising from the conference. This was the first document to connect the ANC to the armed struggle, and it warned that there were 'no short cuts in the political struggle. It is not a hit or miss game.'

---

268 Interview with Joe Matthews.
269 Ibid.
270 Interview with Govan Mbeki.
271 Ibid.
Our struggle today needs a leadership with profound understanding of [the] issues involved ... In the changed South African conditions of the struggle, we have the mass political wing of the struggle, spearheaded by the ANC on the one hand, and the specialist military wing, represented by Umkhonto we Sizwe, on the other'. In bold block letters, the statement declared: OUR EMPHASIS STILL REMAINS MASS ACTION, adding: 'The political wing will ever remain the necessary part of the fight. Political agitation is the only way of creating the atmosphere in which military action can most effectively operate.' The phrase 'military action' rather than sabotage suggests that another bridge was being crossed.

A tussle between an African and a Soviet strategic inflection now began to play itself out. On the evening before his return to South Africa following his African trip, Mandela had met Indian Communist Party leader Yusuf Dadoo in London. Oliver Tambo, who had accompanied Mandela on part of his trip, had already confided in Dadoo his belief that 'the ANC had to appear more independent, taking certain actions unilaterally without the involvement of other members of the Alliance'. That evening, Mandela informed Dadoo that he concurred.

I explained that now we were embarking on the armed struggle, we would be relying on other African nations for money, training and support, and therefore had to take their views into account more than we did in the past.

Dadoo was deeply unhappy, claiming that 'Oliver and I were changing ANC policy'. Mandela replied: 'I was not talking about policy, I was talking about image.'

His view prevailed when he met shortly afterwards in Johannesburg with the ANC's Working Committee, although Dadoo and other SACP members continued to voice their reservations, not least about the scale of support that MK could expect to receive from newly independent Africa. Soviet assistance to the SACP had risen from $50,000 to $112,445 from 1961 to 1962, and much of this funding was, presumably, directed towards MK. The figure was well in excess of the amount donated by African states.

In December 1962, SACP representatives Arthur Goldreich and Vella Pillay requested a meeting in Moscow to discuss further assistance to MK. They claimed that Mandela's trip to African countries in 1962 'had shown that the large-scale training of cadres in Africa would be difficult to organise, and therefore that the MK High Command should seek assistance from the socialist countries [note Shubin's ambiguous wording here]. In response, the Soviet Union for the first time gave assistance to MK. According to Goldreich, these

---

consultations were already “in a very practical sense influenced by the draft Operation Mayibuye Plan”.

On 22 December 1962, the Soviet Central Committee Secretariat invited Oliver Tambo to Moscow. He finally took up the invitation on 5 April 1963. Henceforth, Soviet support for the ANC would also be forthcoming.

Two initial ideas that governed the formation of MK and the sabotage campaign persisted until Mandela returned to South Africa. The first was that ‘this bit of sabotage would bring the government to its senses and then we will continue a normal political struggle not based on violence’.

Umkhonto’s reluctance to trigger a full-scale civil war was spelled out in the manifesto distributed in the form of leaflets on the first day of the sabotage campaign:

We, of Umkhonto we Sizwe, have always sought – as the liberation movement has sought – to achieve liberation without bloodshed and civil clash. We hope – even at this late hour – that our first actions will awaken everyone to the realisation of the disastrous situation to which the Nationalist policy was leading. We hope that we will bring the government and its supporters to their senses before it is too late, so that both the government and its policies can be changed before matters reach the desperate stage of civil war. We believe our actions to be against the Nationalist preparations for civil war and military rule. In these actions we are working in the best interest of all the people of this country, Black, Brown and White, whose future happiness and well-being cannot be attained without the overthrow of the Nationalists ... The people’s patience is not endless. The time comes in the life of any nation when there remain only two choices – submit or fight. That time has now come to South Africa.

This commitment was not universally accepted and, like Sisulu, most members of MK’s High Command saw it simply as a stepping-stone to fully-fledged guerrilla struggle. Nevertheless, it was the only position that the broad ANC membership would accept.

The second pillar of MK’s foundation was that the military wing and the ANC underground would be kept strictly apart. By 1962, both the original propositions were coming under challenge. As Henry Makgothi observed:

At first the organisation was careful to say, look, we must have people who do the ordinary political work ... These must be kept separate from

276 Interview with Henry Makgothi.
278 Interview with Walter Sisulu.
those who do the military work. (And even that should be strictly limited to sabotage.) But it did not turn out that way. The more harshly the government came down on us, the more the struggle went to higher levels, until in the end one of the major things we were doing was simply to recruit people for the armed struggle.  

Rusty Bernstein recollected that there was ‘definitely a sort of tension in the sense that people were being pulled in two directions ... As MK grew and became more important, of course, the conflict grew. Now people who had been sort of heart and soul of the activist membership of ANC branches suddenly began to be too busy. They haven’t got time, you know, to keep up with the ANC thing’.  

Members of MK’s High Command, who had in any event always viewed the sabotage campaign as the starting-point for proper armed struggle, also began to see it as counter-productive, leading simply to more repression and arrests, but without exerting significant pressure on the government. Raymond Mhlababa, who had replaced Mandela as head of MK, was of this view, exemplified by Govan Mbeki.  

Now, this area, the Eastern Cape, had the biggest number of MK units and they were striking at various points. Their strikes were more than anywhere in the country, but their strikes were not very effective because we didn’t have the means. We tried to steal at a quarry here, there is a cement factory here. It has a quarry where they get the stone which they crush for cement-making. They had explosives there but when our units went there one night, oh! They felt very great. They thought they had acquired a lot of [explosives] and yet it was only detonators, there was no dynamite. Now, the only place that had successfully stolen dynamite was Durban. In Johannesburg they had started units that first acquired dynamite but were quickly infiltrated [while] getting that first lot of dynamite from the mines. They were quickly infiltrated and they were sold [out]. So you see, sabotage activities were not proving very successful as from ’61 through the end of ’62. And I knew very well. So I get to Jo’burg. We meet as a National High Command and I said, ‘Comrades, let’s take it a step further. The sabotage fails. It’s frustrating in fact. It’s no longer successful, and we think this is going to peter out, peter out and we can’t allow that. Let’s get on to the next phase, which is the armed struggle itself’. Then we considered that. They said, ‘You go and draw up a document’. So Joe Slovo and myself were instructed to go and draw up a document on how it was to be done.
The document referred to by Mbeki was the blueprint for Operation Mayibuye. The first part of the plan was premised on the acknowledgment that ‘very little, if any, scope exists for the smashing of white supremacy other than by means of mass revolutionary action’. The document went on to argue that since prevailing conditions made ‘the possibility of a general uprising leading to direct military struggle unlikely, that general uprising would have to be “sparked off by organised and well-prepared guerrilla actions” on the model of Cuba’. To accomplish this, a plan was proposed whereby four groups of 30 people each would be simultaneously landed by sea or air in South Africa. The groups would then split up into platoons of 10 each and they would establish base areas from which to attack and to which to retreat. Guerrilla units would already have been set up in the four regions identified by the plan:

- Port Elizabeth to Mzimkulu
- Port Shepstone to Swaziland
- North Western Transvaal bordering Bechuanaland and Limpopo
- North Western Cape – South West

The strategy was based on the intention that the external forces would find at least 7,000 men in the four main areas ready to join the guerrilla army. The plan concluded with a set of detailed logistical proposals.283

Mbeki and Slovo subsequently presented Operation Mayibuye to MK’s High Command.

It was in two, A and B. Joe presented A and I presented B. We discussed it at the High Command. We approved the document. We said now the document must go the Joint Executive of the ANC and the Communist Party. And it went there. But then differences began to arise over that.284

Sisulu contested Mbeki’s account and recalled that there was some sympathy for the general approach.

But ... we thought, no, it’s too wild. We are up to now not in agreement. If you go to Govan he will say Mayibuye was adopted. None of the others will agree to that – we don’t agree. It was never. It was under discussion when we were arrested [at Rivonia].285

Bernstein, however, adopted a position somewhere between those of Mbeki and Sisulu:

There was a great deal of disagreement, and even now there is disagreement as to whether the document was ever adopted or wasn’t adopted by anybody except the MK High Command ... My clear memory of it is that it

284 Interview with Govan Mbeki.
285 Interview with Walter Sisulu.
was never endorsed by the Party ... On the other hand, if you talk to Slovo he’ll probably tell you it was, and there were strong objections to it on the Party’s Central Committee ... Some of the people like Sisulu will tell you the ANC never adopted it. That will be disputed by some of them in the ANC. I am sure. I’m sure Mbeki will dispute it.286

It seems most likely, as Bernstein suggests, that ‘it was decided in the MK High Command ... They drafted it and approved it and then circulated it for consideration’.287 Part of the confusion arose, he believed, because of the intense repression to which the government was resorting.

So even the High Command of MK was a shifting body. People were leaving the country left and right, or being arrested and so on and you never even knew half the time who was on the High Command of MK. I mean it became a confused thing that changed from week to week, and also the roles began to double up. Now taking Govan Mbeki – he’s the best case I can think of – he, for some reason at some stage around the time that MK was formed, became the Acting General Secretary of the ANC ... At the same time he was a member of the MK High Command and because of the shifting membership in that he became the kingpin of both. Slovo was a strong advocate, one of the strongest, I think – so he and Kotane did not get on very well. The non-MK people, myself, Kotane, Fischer, Dadoo – well Kotane who was under house arrest and didn’t have much input – Dadoo must have been out of the country, Kathrada [were opposed].288

Bernstein’s objection to Operation Mayibuye was that it was ‘a purely technical military document, which set out a military plan, and I, having been in the army once, have got a total distrust of military thinkers. It didn’t make any attempt at providing an analytical strategy for the movement, it provided a military logistical assessment that could have been done at South African Defence Headquarters in Pretoria’.289

Other SACP Central Committee members were even more vehemently opposed. Matthews recorded that at the Central Committee meeting at which the operation was discussed:

Govan Mbeki introduced the subject. I challenged him. Ruth First challenged him. Bram Fischer called it a ... In fact Bram Fischer used his favourite swearword. You know, Bram Fischer couldn’t swear. He’s such a decent man. But he said, ‘Julle is ‘n klomp pampoene’ [You’re a bunch of pumpkin heads], you know, because he thought it was so crazy. Mbeki was so angry that he says, ‘Ag sies, you are all a bunch of cowards’. And

286 Interview with Rusty Bernstein.
287 Ibid.
288 Ibid.
289 Ibid.
140
of course Ruth First burst into laughter. The thing was a farce. The meeting was an absolute farce because you didn’t have an analysis, you see.\textsuperscript{290}

Fischer confirmed his opposition to Operation Mayibuye three years later in a statement made at his trial:

It obviously constituted a complete departure from the ideas on which Umkhonto had been founded and it was therefore raised quite clearly, with a view to ascertaining what the CP attitude towards such a departure would be. I, my lord, was totally opposed to the whole idea. It seemed to me that it was a plan which was politically wholly incorrect and wholly unsuited to the situation in SA as it then existed. It was, in addition, totally impracticable. If ever, my lord, there was a plan which a Marxist could not approve in the prevailing conditions, that was such a plan. So, far from being able to achieve anything along the lines of this plan, it was my opinion, my lord, that if any part of it even could have been put into operation, it could have achieved nothing but disaster. In fact, my lord, it seemed to me as if it were an entirely unrealistic brainchild of some youthful and adventurous imagination ... I gathered, my lord ... that it was a plan which had not even been approved by Umkhonto itself and we as a CC certainly expressed our complete disapproval. In fact we asked that our views should be conveyed to Umkhonto.\textsuperscript{291}

Matthews spread the responsibility for Operation Mayibuye wider than Mbeki, depicting Slovo as

... a bit of a romantic ... He even preached a very interesting idea which I think was not really correct ... that you could ... even before the objective conditions existed ... you could go ahead with an armed struggle. Now of course, from a materialist point of view, you cannot have a subjective feeling which is not based on a material, an objective condition ... That of course is an idealist position. But he got that from Che Guevara you see. Che Guevara’s book of guerrilla warfare suggested that a leadership could create a climate in which eventually armed struggle could flourish, even before the conditions existed for such an armed struggle.\textsuperscript{292}

Seven years later, Matthews would feel vindicated when, in Moscow, he asked a Soviet major general who had helped Castro, ‘Tell me, what would you think of the idea of training people and landing them somewhere on the South African coast, rather like the way Castro landed on the Cuban coast?’

\textsuperscript{290} Interview with Joe Matthews.

\textsuperscript{291} State v Abram Fischer, Supreme Court of South Africa, Transvaal Provincial Division, criminal case 254/66, National Archives, Pretoria, pp 249-50.

\textsuperscript{292} Interview with Joe Matthews. However, he stated the exact opposite in an article in Sechaba, 1 (9), September 1967, p 11, where he argued that ‘a revolutionary situation’ was not necessary for a guerrilla or people’s revolutionary struggle to be waged successfully.
Well, he attacked this. 'Look the sea is like a mirror. You can see everything on it ... Cuba was a disaster. That landing was an absolute disaster. Only 12 chaps survived – and they’re damn lucky that Castro was [among them].'293

Lilliesleaf Farm at Rivonia was purchased by Arthur Goldreich in 1961 and was acquired, according to Bernstein, ‘specifically for people who were on the run. It also served as a facility where we could on rare occasions have a meeting which we didn’t want to have anywhere else. Later, people who had been overseas for military training would arrive back in Bechuanaland without any proper planning. The first thing we’d know is that they were in Bechuanaland and wanted to come back. So we’d bring them back and they’d stay for a few nights. So there were people there from time to time'.294

Things changed when, … in a very short space of time, a number of people were subjected to 24-hour arrest. Govan Mbeki, Walter Sisulu, Kathrada, and it was very difficult to contact them, so within a few days of each other they all decided they were not putting up with this. They went underground. And immediately the question is, going underground is fine in theory [but] where is the underground? [Now] Rivonia came into sudden use in a way that had not been foreseen. So the place became a sort of centre, if you like, because Sisulu and Mbeki were the two senior ANC people at large at that time and they really were the ANC. [Since] both of them were [also] participating on the High Command they began to use it for MK High Command activities, both for keeping documents and holding meetings, and they were bringing in people to their meetings who were not in the High Command, not living underground and so on. So the place really changed [from] being a really closely kept secret to being something of a centre.295

Bruno Mtolo, a member of the Natal Regional Command who later turned state’s evidence against many leading MK figures, was among those who visited Rivonia. Billy Nair remembered that Mtolo, ‘through sheer accident was taken to Rivonia. He was actually to go for technical training abroad to Algeria, but he missed the train, and he stayed over and he missed it altogether. He was not sent out of the country. If he had, it would have been a blessing in disguise, but he remained, and he was taken to Rivonia and he saw the place. He was to recognise it later. He had a photographic memory, and he then used this very successfully against Nelson’.296

293 Ibid.
294 Interview with Rusty Bernstein.
295 Ibid.
296 Interview with Billy Nair.
Wilton Mkwayi remembered staying at Rivonia after he returned from China at the end of 1962. Within a relatively short time, he found it insecure and unsuitable. One day, the ‘boss-boy’ from the neighbouring farm arrived to enquire 'why your boss is not inviting us when he is having a party when we are inviting him'. Complaints about security led to another property, Travellyn, being purchased by Goldreich roughly halfway between Johannesburg and Pretoria. Mkwayi moved there, and Goldreich was on the point of doing so when the Rivonia arrests occurred. Many of the High Command documents were also transferred, according to Motsoaledi. Mkwayi’s suspicions were alerted at this point, among other things to Bartholomew Hlapane, who would also give evidence for the state against MK. Mkwayi insisted that Hlapane be kept in ignorance about Travellyn and later observed: ‘Lucky for me.’

Mkwayi believed the meeting at which the arrests occurred had been set up to discuss the impending Transkei elections, and whether Chief Sabata should be encouraged to stand against Matanzima.

Bernstein was vague about the meeting, but believed it was to discuss Operation Mayibuye. ‘I don’t even remember who convened the meeting. I know I didn’t want to go to it. I was afraid of the place. It was Hepple who persuaded me. [He said], “Okay you don’t want to go to this place, just this one last time”. Famous last words.’

Mbeki was also of the view that the meeting was called to discuss Operation Mayibuye. A similar meeting had taken place a week before, but the matter had not been resolved.

I said, ‘All right, let’s meet again the following week, because it was getting late. Where do we meet next week is the question?’ Some said at the military headquarters of MK, and we said nobody is going to be allowed at the headquarters of MK unless he is engaged in MK activities and a number of you here are not engaged in MK activities. Then someone said, ‘All right, the last time in Rivonia’. And it was the last time. That was the last time.

The following week, Mbeki and his companions drove from the new military headquarters at Travellyn (which had been earmarked as the future site where the High Command would manufacture and stockpile guns) to Lilliesleaf Farm. Bernstein arrived at 2 pm.

We couldn’t have been there for more than 15 minutes when the police drove in. They had a dry cleaning van – one of those closed light vans – and they drove right up to the main house which was perhaps 30 yards from the outbuilding we were in.
Mbeki recalled Bernstein having said that when he drove past the Rivonia police station, ‘there were a lot of police cars there … and then somebody exclaiming they are the police’.\textsuperscript{302} Mbeki had taken with him the Operation Mayibuye document. According to him only three copies existed, one of which had been taken out of the country shortly before by Joe Slovo and JB Marks, while the third had been given to Wilton Mkwayi to take to the townships to instruct the Transvaal Regional Command. When Mbeki heard the dreaded words, ‘the police’, he pulled the document out of his overalls and placed it in a small fireplace in the room.

Now by then I had already stopped smoking, so I was not carrying matches. I said ‘matches, matches’ because I wanted to set this thing alight. Operation Mayibuye. And Walter says you can’t destroy the document, and I rise and leave it there.\textsuperscript{303}

Bernstein recalled ‘someone’ screwing up the document, placing it in the fireplace and vainly trying to light it.\textsuperscript{304} Motsoaledi thought it was ‘shoved up the chimney’.\textsuperscript{305} The police subsequently misled the court by claiming they had found it on the table. Nevertheless, despite not having been approved, the Mayibuye plan proved to be political dynamite. Combined with a chain of tragic accidents, it ensured that virtually the entire MK High Command was arrested.

Wilton Mkwayi was more fortunate. He had to travel to Rivonia from Soweto, where he had been trying to organise the transport of ‘a lot of people from Natal, Eastern Cape, Cape Town, who were supposed to cross the borders [because] the people who used to do this job had been detained,’ [including Motsoaledi], and his late arrival at Liliesleaf Farm saved him from arrest.

On my going towards evening [to Rivonia] I took a taxi. There were flats near the Post Office. I told this chap that I am going to some of those flats to look for somebody. Drop. They go. After the car was gone, I went back. He must not know where I’ve gone to. Now this farm was bigger. When we come from the shop in Rivonia, we usually, there was a footpath outside the farm. There are bushes. When I was coming, I’m looking. We had two big dogs there. \textit{Hau}. Where are these dogs? But I see nobody. I say, oh, perhaps they’ve thought they want to frighten me. I won’t go in there, I’ll walk past – because in the middle there is another footpath – then there’s the main gate. When I was going to this, still on the main road, \textit{hau}, I see a dog. There’s this tall grass there. I saw nothing you know, moving. Perhaps I was not looking. Why is this dog already there? So I walked straight, main gate. Serious there, because there are tall

\textsuperscript{302} Interview with Govan Mbeki.
\textsuperscript{303} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{304} Interview with Rusty Bernstein.
\textsuperscript{305} Interview with Elias Motsoaledi.
trees. Stems as big like this. When I was already inside I saw the dogs
There’s something. But what is this something? I’m not staying on the
other side, they walk here when they go to shop. When I was going down,
I saw other dogs near the barn, near the river. Mmm. Anyway there were
cattle this side in the farm. Cattle – in another farm. So I jumped the
fence. Sort of driving these cattle up near now the gate – there, those
stems – ha! These dogs are having handlers. Somebody was handling
them. There must be something there. But I moved slowly with these cat-
tle. The house is far away from the owner of the cattle. Then some bush-
es, when I walk fast now to Alexandra. I didn’t know what was happen-
ing. There I saw somebody who used to be treasurer of ANC in Korsten,
Port Elizabeth. He says, ‘What’s happening?’ I say, ‘Why?’ Says, ‘No, your
face tells me that there is trouble somewhere. If there’s trouble here’s a
car, here’s money for petrol’. I say, ‘OK, I go to PE’. Mkwayi proved canny enough to escape from arrest twice – once when the
state of emergency was declared, and again at Rivonia. With the High Com-
mand shattered, the future of MK now effectively lay in his hands.

In conclusion, measured by any standard of success, each of the armed for-
formations established in the early 1960s failed dismally. Indeed, Poqo activity
provided an excuse for the regime to come down heavily on the liberation
movement. The Rivonia sabotage trial, culminating in the life sentence of Man-
dela, Mbeki, Kathrada, Sisulu and others on 11 July 1964, closed another chap-
ter in the struggle, but the movement was not defeated. Indeed, the struggle
against oppression could never be defeated. It suffered setbacks, certainly. But
like a phoenix, it rose again.