

Some Personal Reflections on the Road to Armed Struggle



Military action at every stage had to be guided and determined by the need to generate and promote political action, organisation and resistance.

By Aziz Pahad

On 21 March 1960 the apartheid police massacred 64 Africans who were protesting peacefully against the notorious pass laws in Sharpeville.

This was a decisive turning point in the history of the struggle against apartheid.

The ANC called for a nationwide pass burning campaign led by Nelson Mandela in the then Transvaal, and Chief Albert Luthuli in Natal. Thousands of people of all races responded to the call.

The apartheid regime declared a state of emergency and thousands

of Alliance leaders and cadres were arrested.

This brutal retaliation failed to stop the nationwide struggles, and the ANC and PAC were banned on the 30th of March 1960. In a secret meeting the ANC leadership took the decision to disband the Women's League and the Youth League and to continue the struggle from underground.

In 1961 the ANC organised the All-In African Conference in Pietermaritzburg, which was attended by more than 1400 delegates from across South Africa. The conference demanded that the apartheid regime

organise a National Convention of representatives of all our people to work out a new democratic, non-racial and non-sexist Constitution. Conference further resolved that if the regime failed to call such a conference a three-day strike would commence on the 29th May, the day that apartheid South Africa was to become a Republic. The apartheid regime mobilised the army, the police and intelligence services to arrest thousands of activists and carry out a reign of terror.

Mandela responded that "if the government's response is to crush by naked force our non-violent struggle, ...in my mind we are closing a chapter ...on non-violent policy".

In December 1961 SA was rocked by sabotage actions by MK units in the major cities.

Its manifesto declared "We of Umkhonto we Sizwe ...carried out the sabotage activities to achieve liberation without bloodshed and civil clashes... Our actions are against the Nationalist's preparations for civil war and military rule... We are working in the interests of all our people, black, brown and white, whose future and wellbeing 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 only remain two choices: submit or fight. That time has now come to South Africa."

By 1962 the leadership concluded that the sabotage campaign had not been as effective as they had expected largely because of lack of quality equipment and training.

Govan Mbeki and Joe Slovo were asked to prepare a plan for the next phase of the struggle. They produced a document "Operation Mayibuye", which provided a framework for launching guerrilla warfare and sparking a mass uprising.

The High Command accepted the document but there was sharp debate on whether the Plan was adopted by the ANC or the SACP. Bram Fischer speaking at his trial said that Operation Mayibuye "was a complete departure from the ideas on which MK was founded. It was a plan that was wholly incorrect and wholly unsuited for the conditions in South Africa. ...It was

totally impractical It could have achieved nothing but disaster ...an entirely unrealistic brain child of some youthful and adventurous imagination, it was a plan not even approved by MK ...and we as the Central Committee ... expressed our complete disapproval”.

However a National High Command was created, and Regional High Commands were established in Port Elizabeth, Johannesburg and Cape Town.

Senior leaders, including OR Tambo, Dr Dadoo, JB Marks, Moses Kotane, Joe Slovo, Joe Mathews, Michael Harmel, Johnny Makathini, and Duma Nokwe went into exile to mobilise support for the armed struggle and the AA struggle.

On the 11th of July 1963 apartheid forces raided the underground HQ based in Liliesleaf farm and arrested key ANC leaders, including Govan Mbeki, Walter Sisulu, Raymond Mhlaba, Rusty Bernstein, Denis Goldberg and Ahmed Kathrada, as well as many other activists throughout the country. Shortly afterwards Harold Wolpe and Arthur Goldreich were arrested.

The Alliance structures were decimated and hundreds were imprisoned, tortured and killed.

The Rivonia trial started on the 6th October 1963 and on the 11th of July 1964 all the accused were sentenced to life imprisonment.

Many ANC cadres were sent to other parts of Africa for training.

Some returned home.

The atmosphere and conditions unexpectedly were not as favourable as the ANC had expected.

There was strong sentiment for the PAC in some sections of the Tanzanian Government, who were pro-PAC and pushed for unity; countries were very nervous about apartheid regime retaliations and there was a constant push for ANC-PAC unity. Governments’ attitudes changed over time, but as far as the armed struggle went we continued to face challenges.

In 1969 because of differences with the Tanzanian authorities all our MK cadres had to be airlifted to the Soviet Union. [See article by Shubin in this issue.]

The ANC leadership made several attempts to infiltrate our trained cadres

into SA, including through Zambia and the then Rhodesia (the Wankie campaign). Given the objective realities this was not successful.

This reality only changed with the independence of Mozambique and Angola, later Zimbabwe and Namibia; and also surprisingly by the creation of self-governing Bantustans in South Africa.

Dissatisfaction felt by MK cadres in Tanzania with the ANC leadership resulted in what came to be known as the “Chris Hani memorandum”. The Consultative Morogoro conference called to deal with the growing dissent in MK ranks was crucial for the survival of the ANC.

Representatives of the Alliance attended in their organisational capacities. This was the first time that non-Africans had attended an ANC Consultative conference as delegates. It was also the “first time” that non

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Africans were allowed to be members of the ANC – but not its NEC.

The Conference created the Revolutionary Council to coordinate the armed and underground struggle and was accountable to the NEC. This council was led by OR Tambo and Yusuf Dadoo as his deputy.

In January 1964, my brother Essop and I were banned under the Suppression of Communism Act. In December 1964 after our arrest and trial it was decided that we should go into exile.

I became an active member of the ANC Youth Section in London.

In 1967, I completed my Master’s degree in International Relations at Sussex University.

I was deployed to work full time in the ANC office in London. Shortly afterwards I was deployed to work for the London section of the

Revolutionary Council. Its primary function was “internal reconstruction”, viz., to give shape and substance to the internal political and armed struggle.

I and other RC comrades worked under the leadership of Dr Dadoo and Joe Slovo.

Other London RC comrades included Jack Hodgson, Ronnie Kasrils, Ronnie Press, Barry Feinberg, Stephanie Kemp, Harold Wolpe and Mannie Brown. Kader Asmal in Ireland played an important role but he reported directly to comrades Dadoo and Slovo.

At a time when the internal structures were decimated we recruited “internationalists” to assist us with propaganda distribution, smuggling of weapons into SA from the front line states, provide safe houses in the front lines states and in South Africa, create a library of SA topographical maps etc., creating secret compartments to smuggle leaflet bombs and propaganda material to SA.

Comrade Ronnie Kasrils has published books about the wide ranging work of our “internationalist supporters”. [See Ronnie Kasrils’ article in this issue]

Given ‘the need to know rule’ I was not aware of all the people recruited in Europe and North America and their deployment.

I only heard of the arrests of our units, including the Rabkins and the Hosey cells, the “Broederstroom unit”, Ahmed Timol (who was killed in detention) and many others after their arrests or killings.

My Military training

In the early 70s comrade Billy Nanan and I attended a three weeks’ training course in the former GDR. We were trained in Military Combat Work (MCW), including building underground structures, surveillance and counter surveillance, intelligence and counter intelligence, interrogation, lock picking, secret communication, photography and creating false documents. We were also trained in using weapons, including AK 47s.

My second training, also in the GDR, was with 4 other comrades who had come from Lusaka.

We covered some of the courses

I had done in my earlier training. However, this time round there was greater emphasis on combat training.

In May 1973 I went to Moscow for an eight months' training course.

I stayed in a flat on the outskirts of Moscow. In this challenging and difficult time my only contacts were with my trainers and interpreters. The training covered much of my earlier training but it was more detailed and intensive. I also did field exercises.

In 1997 I was deployed to Luanda for 6 months to share experiences with comrades doing similar work to what we were doing in London. I also had the opportunity to visit some of our camps in Angola and get a better understanding of life and challenges in our military camps.

From around 1976 the GDR started providing military training for 40-50 ANC cadres twice a year.

London was mandated to prepare political lectures for the trainees. Brian Bunting, Ronnie Kasrils, Pallo Jordan and I were involved in this project.

The London RC were engaged in many tasks including: recruiting SA passport holders, providing extensive political training, determining whether they should return to SA to do legal or underground political work, and if comrades were suitable for MK work we referred their names to Lusaka. We could not provide military training in the UK or the rest of Europe, but we provided courses in Military Combat Work (MCW), including creating leaflet bombs and broadcasting techniques, surveillance and counter surveillance, creating false documentation, secret communications, setting up propaganda units in SA, methodology of recruitment and countering infiltration and creating "dead letter drops", and creating containers for smuggling arms.

The apartheid regime had used its full political, economic, intelligence and military power to destabilise and coerce the neighbouring countries not to allow ANC activities from their countries. They also had an effective military and intelligence presence on the borders with SA, and had penetrated Alliance structures in

exile and civil society organisations in SA. This made the infiltration of MK cadres and weapons into SA extremely difficult.

However, in the 80s PMC structures in the front line states and London creatively found new ways of infiltrating weapons and MK cadres into SA, and impressive "armed propaganda activities" were carried out. There were some clashes between MK units and the SADF.

Some units, acting outside of ANC policy, attacked civilian targets.

Hinterland Project

The Africa Hinterland Project in the mid '80s was a very successful MK project, initiated by the PMC in

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London.

Rodney Wilkinson, who in 1982 had planted two limpet mines at the Koeberg Nuclear Plant, was deployed to London.

He was obsessed with the idea of smuggling weapons into SA.

One of his ideas was discussed with comrade Joe Slovo, at that time head of the MK Special Operations section, who tasked Mannie Brown and myself to work with Rodney on this project.

With the help of British comrades, we set up the Hinterland travel company based in Greenwich. The objective was to organise and manage

overland tours in a truck "doctored" to carry unsuspecting tourists and hidden weapons.¹

Adverts for a 6-7 weeks' overland tour to SA from Mombasa were placed in magazines.

Many young tourists from Europe, the USA, New Zealand and Australia responded to the adverts.

Once the truck was modified it was shipped to Kenya. The tourists flew from the UK to Mombasa where they were picked up by the truck driver and a backup person who were recruits mainly from the UK and Netherlands.

London was not informed of where the weapons were loaded and delivered.

The Hinterland programme was very successful. I was surprised to learn that the project continued until 1993 from Johannesburg. The driver was the same person we had recruited in London when the project started. This must have been part of the Vula project.

As the mass struggle in SA intensified, the leadership decided that our "armed propaganda activities" were successful but we were suffering heavy casualties because our underground structures were unable to cope with the new challenges, including being the "Jungles, forests and mountains" for MK cadres. This included providing a supportive environment into which cadres could vanish if necessary, as is usual in guerrilla warfare.

The NEC created the Internal Political and Reconstruction Unit to build a strong underground machinery, that would enhance our capacity to intensify the political and "armed propaganda" activities.

"Green Book"

In 1978 OR Tambo led a delegation to Vietnam to study the experiences of the National Liberation Front. Once again the message was that the armed struggle in SA was different from other armed struggles, and was largely confined to the major urban areas.

In 1979 a joint meeting of the NEC and RC created a Politico-Military Strategy Commission which produced a report commonly referred to as the "Green Book" which, based on the Vietnamese experience, recommended

that we develop an elaborate strategy for effective mass mobilisation; creating the broadest front for national liberation, strengthening the ANC underground machinery; and armed struggle had to be based on mass struggle involving all sections of our people. Military action at every stage had to be guided and determined by the need to generate and promote political action, organisation and resistance.

The NEC decided that that there should be a joint planning command and control to guide the political and military aspects of the struggle.

The message was clear: we had to work on a long term strategy driven by the perspectives of a people's war. We therefore had to prioritise the strengthening of political structures that would serve as "the mountains and jungles" for MK cadres.

The Political-Military Committee (PMC) replaced the Revolutionary Council (RC) and the PMC became the Executive Arm of the NEC relating to the conduct of the political and armed struggle. The PMC had to coordinate the activities of the political headquarters, the military HQ, and the intelligence department. Regional PMCs were established in the "forward areas". They had to set up Area Political Committees in SA.

London was designated a "forward area", and I was the Secretary of the Political Military Committee in London. After discussions Essop Pahad, Billy Masethla, Wally Serote and Peloka Nkobi (secretary) joined the PMC. We also used the experience and expertise of other London comrades, including Tito Mboweni, Harold Wolpe, Brian Bunting, Ronnie Press, Bill Anderson and Gavin Cawthra.

All "forward areas" were instructed to intensify our efforts to meet with the leadership and activists from all internal formations representing political, trade unions, business, women, religious, cultural, student and civic organisations. The objective was to implement the 4 pillars of the struggle: mass mobilisation, strengthening the political underground, escalating the armed struggle and strengthening international solidarity.

A Political Code of Conduct,

a military Code of Conduct and Regulations governing the handling of weapons and explosives were also adopted. Interaction with all sectors of SA society increased dramatically in all "forward areas".

We used these documents to prepare lectures. They were timely because many of the cadres who had joined the ANC and MK post '76 had not come from within the ranks of the ANC. They had a limited understanding of the ANC's political, theoretical and strategic perspectives.

In the mid-80s the Vula project was launched. The London PMC was not informed about this initiative.

However, London had to hand over to Lusaka the names of comrades we had recruited, some of whom were recruited to work for Vula. In the '90s, following President FW's dramatic announcement of the arrest of senior comrades involved in the Vula project,

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I gained a better understanding of it.

SACP adoption of the 'Path to Power'

The SACP 7th Congress took place in Havana, Cuba in April 1989.

The "Path to Power" document, which had been discussed by all Party units for at least two years dominated discussions. It was an insurrectionary document, based on books including those by Regis Debray and Che Guevara.

How did this happen?

The final draft, presented to Congress, ignored realities, such as the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the emergence of a unipolar world dominated by the USA, the growing contradictions in the Soviet Union and other Socialist countries and the predicted collapse of many of

the Socialist countries; and boldly proclaimed "that the world was going through an era of transition from capitalism to socialism, which would be a catalyst for a "Peoples War" that would result in the seizure of power".

Comrade Thabo Mbeki and I went to the Havana conference shortly after a secret meeting with the apartheid National Intelligence Agency in Switzerland and we were aware of the planned date of the unbanning of organisations, including the ANC and SACP.

Although a number of SACP leaders were aware of the secret negotiations undertaken by Mandela as well as those led by Thabo Mbeki with representatives of the apartheid regime, "The Path to Power" document, nevertheless, with its insurrectionary postulates was idealistic in form and content. However it did make a reference to the possibility of a negotiated resolution of the conflict in South Africa.

On February 2 1990, the then President FW de Klerk announced the unbanning of the ANC, the SACP and other organisations, and agreed to a time frame for the release of the Rivonia Trialists, the return of exiles and the release of other political prisoners.

In 1994 we had the first democratic elections, which the ANC won decisively.

Conclusion

The Alliance decision to move from peaceful to "violent" forms of struggle came after decades of political struggle. The PMCs in all areas, underground political activities and the "armed propaganda" activities of MK played an important role in pressuring the apartheid regime to negotiations and democracy.

The supreme sacrifice of thousands of alliance leaders and cadres to achieve our democracy must continue to inspire us to work for a non-racial, non-sexist and democratic SA, which ensures that we tackle the continuing challenges of unemployment, poverty and inequality to create a better life for all our people. ■

Footnote

¹ The truck can now be seen, with some of its history and that of the 'London Recruits' at the Liliesleaf Museum in Rivonia.