

THE TURN TO ARMED STRUGGLE

International Dimensions, 1960-1967



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By Thula Simpson

International support for what became Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) was forthcoming soon after the South African Communist Party (SACP) decided at its December 1960 conference to authorise the training of a nucleus of fighters capable of leading a shift to violent methods, should the broader African National Congress (ANC) led liberation movement decide on a change of tactics.

Arthur Goldreich was then a sub-manager in the Checkers store chain. The SACP's Central Committee tasked him, using his job as cover, to explore the possibility of obtaining arms from Czechoslovakia. While the project was in its infancy, the Central Committee learned that the Chinese Communist Party was prepared to accept six people for military, Marxist and scholastic training. They selected Wilton Mkwayi, Nandha Naidoo, Raymond Mhlaba, Andrew Mlangeni, Abel Mthembu and Joe Gqabi to receive the training. The six gathered in Peking towards the end of 1961 before separating in January 1962, with Mlangeni and Naidoo heading north for radio training, and the remainder south to Nanking for military training in the use of guns, hand grenades, and explosives.

Within South Africa, the ANC and its alliance partners met at a beach house near Stanger a couple of months after the failure of a three-day stay-at-home that Nelson Mandela had organised for the eve of the country's proclamation as a republic on 31 May 1961. The purpose of the Congress Alliance meeting was to reconsider the movement's tactics in the wake of the strike. The delegates decided to grant a request by Mandela for permission to establish an armed force. This marked the broader liberation movement's endorsement of the turn to the use of armed force. Following the decision, Mandela drew Walter Sisulu and Joe Slovo into the force's High Command, while he worked with Slovo in fusing ANC and SACP personnel into its structures. This marked the formation of MK, which launched its first operations in December 1961.

When the ANC's National Executive Committee met on 3 January 1962, it

decided to send Mandela to attend the Pan-African Freedom Movement of East and Central Africa's (PAFMECA) conference in Ethiopia the following month. The ANC succeeded in obtaining PAFMECA membership at the conference, while Mandela read the movement's address on 3 February. Mandela, however, had an additional objective in Addis Ababa, that of exploring the possibilities of obtaining military training for MK. The Chief of Staff of the Ethiopian Armed Forces, Lieutenant-General Kebede Guebre offered training for twenty recruits, possibly more; Egypt places for seven; Algeria and Morocco 'any number.' The issue was also discussed with Malian, Guinean and Ghanaian representatives.

Mandela and his ANC colleague Robert Resha received training in shooting practice from the Algerian National Liberation Army in Morocco in March. Mandela would receive more intensive training at the hands of the Ethiopian Army from late June to July, but the course was cut short upon receipt of a telegram from the ANC urgently requesting his return to South Africa. When in Dar es Salaam on route home in July, Mandela met twenty-one MK recruits travelling to Ethiopia for the training that he had helped to organise. It was the first time he had been saluted by his own troops. Mandela would famously be arrested outside Howick in Natal on 5 August while returning to Johannesburg having reported to ANC President Albert Luthuli on his African voyage.

Into Exile

The six recruits sent to China by the SACP in 1961 regrouped in Peking around July 1962 upon completion of their respective courses. After about 9 months total in China, they returned to Dar es Salaam, then proceeded by bus to Northern Rhodesia, and train to Bechuanaland, before Joe Modise drove them to the liberation movement's underground headquarters at Liliesleaf Farm in Rivonia which was north of Johannesburg. On their arrival in December 1962, Joe Slovo told Mhlaba that they had been waiting for him to take over as MK Commander

(Walter Sisulu had served as acting Commander since Mandela's arrest).

The recruits Mandela had met in Dar es Salaam in July subsequently received ninety-days of training in Ethiopia in Debre Zeit (where Mandela himself had been trained) in the use of firearms, bombs, hand grenades, camouflage and radio equipment. After about four months in Ethiopia the group split, with nine being sent to infiltrate South Africa. The effort was unsuccessful. Their illegal crossing from Tanganyika in the area of Tunduma on 20-21 January 1963 was detected by the Northern Rhodesian Police who informed Southern Rhodesian counterparts, leading to the group's arrest on a train near Bulawayo on 26 January. They would all be deported to South Africa.

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The other Ethiopian trainees proceeded north, first to southern Sudan, then by steamer to Khartoum, before flying to Algiers, from where they headed west to Oujda just inside Morocco. There they formed part of a group of seventy-eight trainees known as the 'Luthuli Detachment' which was headed by Macdonald Masala, one of the Ethiopian trainees. In bases formerly used by French colonial forces, they received six months of training in the use of Molotov cocktails and firearms.

Egypt was another North African country that had extended pledges of training to Mandela. Towards the end of January 1963, twenty-one recruits left Dar es Salaam for Nairobi, whereafter they flew to Cairo. On 30 January they were transported to an infantry camp outside the city where two English speaking Egyptian

sergeants gave them a seven week course in handling firearms. This was followed by eight weeks' training in an engineering school where they were taught explosives and drill, and were provided physical training. They were thereafter joined by twelve more MK recruits for an eight week course at a Commanders' school near Cairo where the training involved camouflage, ambush tactics, guerrilla warfare, hand-to-hand fighting, shooting practice and explosives. The thirty-three cadres would return to Dar es Salaam in August 1963.

Operation Mayibuye

The early months of 1963 saw the liberation movement engage its international backers for support for the next stage of the struggle, in which the requirements would include assistance in preparing the return home of the trainees who were beginning to accumulate in Dar es Salaam. Arthur Goldreich joined the SACP's London representative Vella Pillay for discussions with China, Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union over the requirements. At a meeting with the Czechoslovakian Communist Party on 7 February 1963, Goldreich requested 3 tons of plastic explosives, 10,000 detonators, 500 machine guns, 300 pistols and 2,000 automatic rifles. He also called on Czechoslovakia to provide military training for 10-15 recruits. Moses Kotane visited Prague next, requesting 55 trucks, 35 motorcycles, 100 binoculars, and also radio transmitters, receivers and bicycles. The Czechoslovakians eventually approved shipments worth CZK 2,500,000 to Tanganyika while agreeing to receive ten South Africans for training. The first two trainees in Czechoslovakia were Omar Bhamjee and Amin Cajee who arrived on 16 March 1963 from London. They were followed by two further recruits (including Moses Kotane's son Joseph) on 27 May, and Walter Sisulu's nephew Gerald van Rensburg a month later. The five would receive training at the Czechoslovakian Military Academy at Brno; the remaining five would come in 1964.

On 5 April 1963, Kotane joined Oliver Tambo in Moscow for

discussions with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). While Kotane was a member of both the SACP and the ANC, Tambo was not: it was the first direct contact between the ANC and the Soviet Union.

In January and February 1963, Raymond Mhlaba and Wilton Mkwayi headed to the Eastern Cape where they contacted members of the MK underground in the region. Then, in April, in accordance with a decision made at Rivonia in January, Mhlaba departed the country to inspect the movement's external camps. In May he visited the training facilities in Morocco, as well as another camp that had been established in Algiers. His mission also took him to Czechoslovakia.

Mhlaba's trip unfolded amidst planning by MK's High Command for guerrilla warfare. On 2 June 1963, Joe Slovo arrived in Bechuanaland in the company of JB Marks. Slovo had in his possession 'Operation Mayibuye', a High Command blueprint that involved landing groups of 30 men by sea and air in four regions of South Africa where they would launch operations that would spark insurrection. Slovo wanted to discuss the plan with Oliver Tambo and the ANC's external leadership.

The days following his departure would however see MK's internal underground suffer a series of setbacks that rendered Operation Mayibuye incapable of achievement. On 9 June, the South African Police arrested 61 recruits seeking to exit the country near the border with the Bechuanaland Protectorate. It was the first interception of a convoy headed for the border. The leads provided by the arrests led to the detention of a number of recruiters on 24 June, including Elias Motsoaledi and Abel Mthembu who had both visited Liliesleaf Farm. Thereafter a series of messages were sent from Rivonia to Bechuanaland, warning Raymond Mhlaba not to return. He did not receive them and was therefore present at Liliesleaf on 11 July when the farm was raided. Arthur Goldreich and Walter Sisulu were also among the 17 people apprehended in the operation.

After Rivonia

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continued throughout this crisis. Between June and August, recruits had proceeded from Dar es Salaam to both Algeria and China.

Training in the Soviet Union would commence at the beginning of August 1963, when a group of thirty departed from MK's 'Luthuli Camp' in Dar-es-Salaam's Ukonga suburb. Their destination was a two-storey building in a plantation on Moscow's eastern outskirts where they received instruction in firearms, explosives, topography, security, politics, radio communication and guerrilla warfare. After four months they split, with half remaining in Moscow and the remainder proceeding to the Volokolamsky Highway. Both groups received two further months of training.

Towards the end of October 1963, another group had arrived in Moscow and it included some of those trained in Egypt earlier in the year.

Odessa was another main centre of MK training in the Soviet Union. Forty recruits left Dar es Salaam in December 1963 and became part of a group of sixty that received a nine month course at the Soviet Military Academy

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near the Black Sea. The training included political science, weapons handling, guerrilla tactics, engineering, topography, signals, communication, armour, physical training, first aid, and artillery.

The first groups sent to Moscow in August 1963 began returning to Tanganyika in batches in August a year later. Soon after their return to Dar es Salaam they were transported to the village of Kongwa where they found a dilapidated property that had been allotted to them. On the first night they slept in the village courthouse before cleaning out the premises the following day. In preparing the camp they made their own bricks with which they built houses and quarters. At the end of September 1964, sixty recruits arrived from Odessa by which time trained groups from Morocco were at Kongwa, and on 21 November five graduates from Czechoslovakia joined them.

Ambrose Makiwane, who had been trained in Cuba, became Kongwa camp's first Commandant. One of his priorities involved imposing disciplinary measures for infractions committed during the training. There had been numerous problems in Odessa, where the political training involved a Friday seminar. When the Soviet instructors criticised the Chinese interpretation of communism (the Sino-Soviet split had emerged into the open by then – MK's Chinese connection would soon end) they were challenged by a minority of the ANC recruits who had Maoist sympathies. Makiwane called eleven names, and sentenced them to twenty cuts with a hose pipe for embarrassing the ANC with its Soviet allies. Another case involved four MK members alleged to have raped a woman in Odessa. The perpetrator was given lashes and was imprisoned for a week, while the rest were confined for about two weeks.

Makiwane then set about preparing the guerrillas to return to South Africa. He convened discussions from early 1965 among the troops over infiltration routes and military strategy. There were sharp disagreements, informed by the diverse military doctrines to which the cadres had been exposed during their training. One view,

advocated by a section of the Odessa graduates, involved deploying fully armed units capable of fighting their way through if necessary. A contrary view propounded by a portion of the Moscow trainees, advocated sending small unarmed groups. Eventually a decision was reached involving sending small unarmed groups via Bechuanaland to train recruits in the Transkei and the larger cities of South Africa. These groups would remain in contact with Dar es Salaam and Lusaka, and on receipt of a positive signal would launch rural guerrilla warfare and urban sabotage with weapons delivered along the Transkei coast.

The Return Home

Ambrose Makiwane and Joe Modise became embroiled in a struggle for control of the Army which was resolved during 1965 when the latter arrived at Kongwa in the company of Oliver Tambo, Moses Kotane, Moses Mabhida and Mzwai Piliso. They were there to confirm leadership posts. Makiwane was announced Kongwa camp commander, while after about three days of consultation the recruits were told Modise would become MK Commander.

In his new position, Modise revised Makiwane's infiltration plans. MK would now send large groups to Zululand, Sekhukhuneland and the Transkei in order to train people for guerrilla warfare. The problem MK faced was that Modise and Makiwane's plans were alike premised on having overland access to South Africa. However as far back as 12 February 1964, soon after his installation as Northern Rhodesian Prime Minister, Kenneth Kaunda had stated he did not favour military action against South Africa 'until all possible peaceful means' had been exhausted.

MK's capacity to infiltrate its personnel was hampered by it having to wait for this trial to run its course. This is not to say that the cadres were immobilised in Tanzania, for Zambia's enforcement of the restrictions was permissive. For example on 7 September 1965 Zambia's attorney general James Skinner announced that the police had confiscated a huge

quantity of arms at Kapiri Moshi, 139 miles north of Lusaka. These were ANC weapons – Skinner said it would be 'barking up the wrong tree' to connect them with nationalists from Rhodesia – while he added there would be no prosecutions, for Zambia would not hinder 'the fight for freedom.' But the restrictions did prevent the kind of large scale transit of MK cadres envisaged in Modise's plan.

The logjam was partially broken early in 1967 when Zambia revised its policy for reasons outlined by Kaunda in a letter to President Mobutu of the Democratic Republic of Congo on 15 January 1967. Kaunda mentioned Portuguese military incursions, the constant threat from Rhodesia and South West Africa, and refugee flows from Mozambique, before stating that 'Our geographical location [...] has placed us in a position where we

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must fight a war on three major fronts – West, South and East.' He therefore proposed a division of labour whereby Zambia would focus on the south (Rhodesia, South West Africa and South Africa), the Congo on Angola, and Tanzania on Mozambique. He wrote a letter to Julius Nyerere to similar effect the same day.

This cleared the way for the deployment of troops through Zambia, but there were additional blockages further down the preferred infiltration pipeline. On 26 September 1966 – four days before Botswana received its independence – seven armed MK cadres were captured in the north of that country. At Botswana's first post-independence Cabinet meeting, the government chose to deport them to South Africa, but rescinded this and repatriated them to Lusaka with a

public warning that if 'terrorists' were discovered in the country in the future, they would be more severely dealt with.

At the same time Tanzania was keen for the guerrillas in its territory to return home. On 18 November 1965 it had informed the OAU Liberation Committee that it 'would not accept any refugee intended for military training abroad until an appreciable number of those [...] stationed in Tanzania have been sent out on engagements.'

Faced with these converging diplomatic pressures, the ANC opted to deploy MK, but channel the infiltrations through the white-ruled states neighbouring South Africa, operating in alliance with the armed liberation movements in the territories concerned.

This informed two missions. The first in June 1967 saw MK send two units of about three men each to Mozambique to investigate the possibility of finding a route to the northern Transvaal. They were taken to the Rovuma River by Samora Machel who told them he doubted whether it would be possible for them to reach South Africa because FRELIMO had not penetrated to the border. One group nonetheless proceeded to Niassa and the other to Cabo Delgado. They returned without having identified a route for the reason identified by Machel.

The other, main mission was through Rhodesia, where the ANC operated jointly with the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU). A combined group of 81 ANC-ZAPU troops crossed the Zambezi into Rhodesia on 2 August 1967. MK's aim was for its guerrillas to assist ZAPU to establish bases in Rhodesia's Lupane and Tsholotsho areas. The remainder would proceed to South Africa where they would prepare for guerrilla warfare as per Modise's plan. The latter would constitute a new 'Luthuli Detachment', named after the ANC President who had died on 21 July 1967 after being run over by a train.

When crossing the Zambezi, MK's armed and trained combatants at last started their war proper. ■