

“You Are a Political Soldier:”
The People’s War in N’wamitwa 1989-1994
by
Faelan Lundeberg
Bachelor of Arts, University of Victoria, 2014

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the Department of History

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Supervisory Committee

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Abstract:

In the waning days of apartheid, an operative of Umkhonto we Sizwe, the armed wing of South Africa's most powerful dissident organization the African National Congress, returned to his home community of N'wamitwa after over a decade in exile. His mission was to spark a people's war, an imported form of revolutionary warfare developed by Mao Zedong and perfected by the North Vietnamese in their revolutionary struggles. In this thesis I examine the political context in which the ANC chose to adopt the strategy and how it was imported into South Africa. The later chapters of this thesis use N'wamitwa as a case study examining how a people's war is successfully implemented on the ground. I argue that one can see the three phases of a people's war as articulated by Mao play out in N'wamitwa between the years 1989 to 1994. This piece was largely written and researched using oral testimony from nine former members of the MK in N'wamitwa and thus can also be seen as a collection of personal histories of the South African Freedom Struggle.

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This thesis never could have existed without the hard work of Basani Ngobeni who first gave me the idea to speak with the MK, and was instrumental in every step of the way when it came to researching this project. Without her help I never would have been able to locate, or even communicate with many of my interview participants. Basani, I had so much fun "playing detective" all through N'wamitwa with you. Thank you for showing this "*umlungu*" the ropes, and introducing me to your wonderful and welcoming community. I will always cherish the memories of our time working together.

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Lastly, thank you to my grandmother Lois Higgins, who in a time of scarce resources for humanities research offered financial help that made my "research expedition" possible. Thanks Grandma! Hope it was worth it.

Dedication:

To all the South Africans who resisted apartheid

Those who chose to share their stories

And those who did not.

To my father who taught me to love the world around me

To my mother who taught me to love the people who inhabit it

Introduction:

“What about the MK”?

The genesis of this thesis came to me during my first visit to N’wamitwa in 2014 on a completely unrelated project. I found myself in the area as part of a field school examining the complex legacies of apartheid. While we were in N’wamitwa ostensibly to gather life stories of black agricultural labourers, my attention was drawn elsewhere. The objects of my fascination at the time were the Afrikaner farmers who lived nearby. Due to the unique nature of white South African society during the apartheid era, virtually every male over a certain age has military experience.¹ Given that Southern Africa was one of the theatres in which the Cold War was consistently “hot,” much of this experience was in active combat. When discussing their time in the military, former members of the South African Defence Force (SADF) reminded me of the Vietnam veterans I had worked with earlier during my undergraduate degree. They shared the same sense of wounded pride, resentment, and defensiveness common to those who fought in unpopular and unjust wars. However, like Vietnam veterans they also possessed the unflappable confidence of trained soldiers. Needless to say, I was intrigued, and over my time in the country I began to realize that South Africa was a place full of stories, still largely untold. I began to consider oral histories of former SADF personnel as a possible avenue to continue my studies.

It was years later when I was a graduate student that Basani Ngobeni, who would go on to be an absolutely integral research collaborator on this project, opened my eyes to another story that had been right under my nose. Likely unknown to her at the time, Basani’s question: “Well

¹ This phenomenon is largely due to a combination of mandatory conscription and the constant state of warfare between the South African state and its neighbors from the mid-1970’s onwards.

what about the MK?” drastically changed the trajectory of this project. While my focus had been the former soldiers who lived on the farms that surrounded the area, N’wamitwa itself was home to another group whose experience has been far less examined in South African historiography: former members of Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK). As the armed wing of the African National Congress (ANC), the MK infiltrated N’wamitwa in the late 1980s in a bid to destabilize the area and pave the way for a seizure of power. The insurgency evolved to meet the complex and ever shifting needs of a people’s war, an imported strategy of revolutionary warfare. Over the course of five years between 1989 and 1994, the MK in N’wamitwa went from assassinating police officers and ambushing soldiers to policing the community and protecting polling booths during the nation’s first multi-racial democratic election.

This thesis is an attempt to tell part of the story of that insurgency. The bulk of the primary research for this project comes from ten days of fieldwork in N’wamitwa in early 2018. Based largely out of the village of Nkambako, Basani and I collected oral testimony of nine former MK operatives. Using Basani’s local knowledge of the area and its inhabitants we began recruiting participants, counting on a snowball effect to identify more once we began. The process—which included flagging down cars on the side of the road in search of the phone number of a former gun runner and helping to bail another participant out of jail—was at times hectic, and emotionally and physically draining. In the end it was also largely successful and profoundly rewarding. Basani and I are both proud of the amount of material we were able to gather in this tight timeframe. Still, as will be discussed in later chapters, John Ngobeni, the central figure of this story, refused to speak on record. The absence of John’s voice is a self-acknowledged shortcoming of this thesis. I tried to work around the problem as best I could. Because of his reluctance to speak, John’s story

is largely cobbled together from the memories of others and his testimony to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).

This project is an oral history of the insurgency in N’wamitwa between 1989 and 1994. Oral history is an inherently subjective process,² in fact, it can be argued that “subjectivity is ... at the root of all oral histories.”³ By 2018, when this study was done, interview participants had twenty-four years to interpret their experience as members of MK. Ângela Campos, an oral historian of Portugal’s colonial wars in Africa, notes that “war memory” is fluid, because former combatants tend to contextualize their experiences through the lens of current social, cultural, and political conditions.⁴ As such, this study can be seen both as an account of the liberation struggle in N’wamitwa and a study on the historical memory of that same struggle. To borrow from the oral historian Paige Raibmon, I am writing the history as they remember it.⁵

The challenges of oral history are further complicated when gathering testimony surrounding the founding myth of the new South Africa. When the state supports a particular narrative, complicating that narrative can be seen as an inherently subversive act. South Africa’s ANC-led government has vigorously participated in the shaping of the collective memory of the freedom struggle.⁶ Historian Jessica Schafer, whose work with veterans of the civil war in neighboring Mozambique has deeply informed this project, notes that often the important symbolic

² As is the exploration of history through documentary or archeological evidence.

³ Jennifer Ballantine Perera and Andrew Canesa, “Gibraltarian Oral Histories: Walking the Line Between Critical Distance and Subjectivity,” *Life Writing After Empire* 13, no. 2 (2016): 273-283, 277.

⁴ Ângela Campos, *An Oral History of the Portuguese Colonial War: Conscripted Generation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 23.

⁵ Elsie Paul and Paige Raibmon, *Written as I Remember It: Teachings (ʔəms taʔaw) from the Life of a Sliammon Elder* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014) 1.

⁶ Chitja Twala, “The African National Congress (ANC) and the Construction of Collective Memory and Its impact in the Post-Apartheid Era,” *Journal of Social Sciences* 41, no. 2 (2016): 151-157, 151.

role of soldiers in national mythology can subsume individual life stories into a hegemonic narrative.⁷ This phenomenon was apparent in interviews with the former combatants I spoke with in N'wamitwa. Interviewees who were still active ANC members and had successfully reintegrated into civilian life tended to view the struggle very differently than those who had deserted the movement or had failed to reap the economic rewards of the transition. Former combatants no longer linked to the ANC's political apparatus were much more likely to speak about issues such as abuse and violence during their time as members of the MK.

Interviewing former soldiers comes with its own host of problems. It seems that old habits die hard: the MK was an organization that operated under the shroud of the utmost secrecy; decades later, this shroud remains difficult to penetrate. My having the blessing of local ANC functionaries and the national veterans association, the MKMVA, was not enough for many MK veterans. A considerable number of former insurgents were unwilling to talk without the explicit approval of their commander, John Ngobeni. Despite my desire to remain impartial and non-disruptive, my presence in the community caused something of a split among veterans in the area between those who were willing to talk despite the protestations of their former commander and those who were not. Some of the former combatants who did choose to speak with me were estranged from the organization and wished to use this thesis to air their grievances with their commanders and the post-apartheid economic order. This cleavage undoubtedly impacted this study on many levels, the most profound of which is that it determined which veterans in the community were willing to lend their voice to this project. Several former combatants also preferred to remain anonymous and have been assigned pseudonyms for this study.

⁷ Jessica Schafer, *Soldiers at Peace: Veterans and Society After the Civil War in Mozambique* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2007) 2.

In her work in Mozambique, Schafer found that soldiers tend to indulge in the twin behaviors of self-aggrandizement while minimalizing their role in criminal behavior or transferring responsibility for it away from themselves.⁸ There are several potential reasons for this phenomenon. Firstly, veterans often occupy a special place within national mythology.⁹ While this role has the potential to carve out a discursive space in which veterans can influence policy, it has the unfortunate by-product of often subsuming individual experiences into a wider shared narrative. Similarly, former combatants can be known to fall back on tropes within collective memory as a “psychological defense mechanism.”¹⁰ During my own interviews, I did my best to follow Schafer’s lead and avoided “probing too deeply into individual accounts of violence.”¹¹ Instead, I allowed my informants to set the “boundaries of narration,”¹² and followed up with them when information was volunteered.

It also is important to remember that the majority of the men I interviewed were veteran insurgents and political operatives¹³ who had been trained to resist interrogation, under torture if necessary. In short, they were unlikely to tell me anything they didn’t want me to know. I encountered this reticence when attempting to find out the fate of community members the MK suspected of acting as informers. This conscious management of the narrative was typified by Hendrik Mohononi’s frank admission, “Let me say there are certain things we cannot say to other people.”¹⁴

⁸ Schafer, *Soldiers at Peace*, 104-105.

⁹ Schafer, *Soldiers at Peace*, 2.

¹⁰ Schafer, *Soldiers at Peace*, 17.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ I use the term operative due to the multifaceted nature of the insurgency in N’wamitwa. In addition to acting as soldiers, members of the unit also played a role as political organizers. The term is also evocative of the clandestine nature of the insurgency.

¹⁴ Interview with Hendrik Mohononi. February 22, 2018.

Similarly, in line with Schafer's descriptions of self-aggrandizement, the unit's disciplined behavior and good relations with the civilian community might very well be exaggerated. Still, I am confident that none of my participants were intentionally deceitful. As is often the case when working with oral history, I believe they might not have always been telling me *the* truth. However, I do believe they were telling me *their* truth. That is, they were honestly imparting their life experience, filtered through the prism of their own memory and self-perception. This subjectivity in itself can be inherently valuable, oral history can be a "powerful tool for discovering, exploring, and evaluating the nature of the process of historical memory — how people make sense of their past, how they connect individual experience [to its] social context."¹⁵ As such, I noted inconsistencies in the interviews where I noticed them, but have intentionally left them in the text.

In my presentation of the interview material I did my best to follow the example of Paige Raibmon in *Written as I Remember It: Teachings (ʔəms taʔaw) from the Life of a Sliammon Elder*. I sought at all times to use the words of my participants as the bedrock of this study, adding my own analysis for context as needed. Whenever possible I tried to preserve many of the non-verbal communication cues such as facial expressions, hand motions, and actions. I, of course, added punctuation as needed but did all I can to remain true to the intonations, pauses, and exclamations of the speaker. I also followed Raibmon's lead when it comes to line editing. Several interviews were carried out in XiTsonga using a translator. Others were carried out in English, which is a second language for all participants who spoke it. I attempted to remain true to the way each subject spoke, idiosyncrasies and all. Ironically, while I hold Raibmon up as a model, I also fall into the

¹⁵ Alistair Thomson, "Making the Most of Memories: The Empirical and Subjective Value of Oral History," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 9 (2009): 291-301, 293.

model of oral history she describes as “colonial appropriation of voice.”¹⁶ There has been no attempt at collaborative writing as advocated by Raibmon.¹⁷ The structuring and editing of this thesis was done by me, with no input from interview participants. Still, I am committed to using the voices of participants to tell their stories as fairly and humanely as I know how.

When it comes to sources that have informed my approach to the project, first and foremost is *People’s War: A New Light on the Struggle for South Africa* by Anthea Jeffery. Jeffery argues that the ANC’s decision to adopt the strategy of people’s war was the defining moment of the freedom struggle. Throughout the book, Jeffery traces the ANC’s importation and implementation of people’s war, from the 1978 visit to Vietnam that will be discussed in Chapter One, to the ANC’s eventual victory in the polls in 1994. According to Jeffery, the adoption of the people’s war strategy was the primary factor in the organization’s transformation from a marginalized and exiled dissident organization to the political juggernaut that has dominated South African politics since 1994.¹⁸ Throughout *People’s War*, Jeffery focuses on the enormous human cost of this transformation—a price paid largely by ordinary black South Africans.

Jeffery challenges several commonly held views on the history of South Africa’s “miracle” transition to democracy, and ties policy decisions made by the ANC leadership in exile to events in South Africa. She convincingly deflates the argument that many of the excesses of the freedom struggle were unfortunate by-products of the frustrations of South Africa’s underclass rather than the deliberate result of ANC political and military policy.¹⁹ In addition, she successfully matches directives issued by the ANC leadership with events on the ground to make a compelling case that

¹⁶ Raibmon, *Written as Remember It*, 11.

¹⁷ Raibmon, *Written as Remember It*, 10-11.

¹⁸ Anthea Jeffery, *People’s War: A New Light on the Struggle for South Africa*, Kindle edition (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2009), location 13137.

¹⁹ Jeffery, *People’s War*, 444.

the ANC's adoption of the people's war strategy was a vital and understudied turning point in South African history.

Jeffery's methodology is simple but largely effective. She takes two approaches that I borrowed for this project. Firstly, she examines directives issued by the ANC in exile and uses documentary evidence to tie these orders to actions carried out on the ground in South Africa. She convincingly argues that many events portrayed as spontaneous actions in support of the ANC were actually directed by the organization as a part of a wider people's war strategy. Secondly, Jeffery uses primary sources on people's wars in East Asia to examine and analyze events in South Africa. Sources used heavily by Jeffery that also appear in this piece are the works of Mao Zedong, Vo Nguyen Giap, and Douglas Pike. One large blind spot in Jeffery's work that this project seeks to remedy is a complete lack of oral testimony and bottom-up analysis.²⁰ In some ways, this study can be seen as an inversion of Jeffery's method, using her thesis and theoretical framework to study the people's war from a rank and file perspective.

People's War was released in 2009 to a storm of controversy, not least because it undermined the founding myth of the new South Africa. As Jeffery notes, "Many people have found great comfort in the notion of South Africa's miracle transition, and have little wish to question this view of events. ... There is ... an understandable reluctance to probe beneath the 'miracle' to the less palatable reality."²¹ Reviews of the book were decidedly mixed; Drew Forrest of *The Mail and Guardian* described Jeffery's central thesis as "a refinement of the standard international communist conspiracy theory that became fashionable among apartheid securocrats in the 1980s."²² However, the book has many defenders. Thula Simpson, a historian of the MK

²⁰ Drew Forrest, "Polemic Pretending to be History," *The Mail and Guardian*, Nov 27 2009.

²¹ Jeffery, *People's War*, 292.

²² Forrest, "Polemic Pretending to be History."

from the University of Pretoria whose work will appear in this project, described *People's War* as “one of the most important contributions to the historiography of the political transition in South Africa in the 1980s and 1990s.”²³

People's War is far from a perfect work; as a piece of revisionist history nuance takes a back seat to Jeffery aggressively arguing her point. In that she is successful. I remain convinced by Jeffery's general argument that the ANC's success was based largely on its adoption of the people's war strategy after the 1978 visit to the People's Republic of Vietnam by high ranking party members. Unfortunately, she makes several assertions that detract from the overall quality of her work. In trying to undermine the hegemonic and un-nuanced narrative of the freedom struggle put forward by ANC, Jeffery builds one of her own.

Jeffery's goal to balance the historical record when it comes to the ANC's role in the bloodshed that engulfed South Africa during the liberation struggle is laudable. However, she often minimizes the very real and equally horrifying actions carried out by other players in the conflict. For example, her description of the surge of torture and extra-judicial executions carried out by the apartheid security forces in the 1980s as “brutal by South African standards ... [but] not particularly by comparison with undemocratic regimes elsewhere in the world,” calls her academic impartiality into question.²⁴ Needless to say, sober historical examination of atrocities carried out by one faction in a civil war does not require the minimization of atrocities carried out by another.

Similarly, Jeffery shows an astonishing level of affinity for the ANC's implacable rivals: the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP). Throughout the book Jeffery portrays the IFP as a pragmatic and

²³ Thula Simpson, Andrew Cohen, Fransjohan Pretorius, Thula Simpson, Aldwin Roes, Annabelle Wienand, and Chris Saunders, “Book Reviews,” *South African Historical Journal* 62 no. 4 (2010): 775.

²⁴ Jeffery, *People's War*, 13334.

even pacifist movement that had the potential to act as a conservative and market friendly alternative to the ANC.²⁵ This view fits very poorly with the general scholarly consensus that the IFP were at the very least equal partners in, if not the enthusiastic instigators of, communal violence.²⁶ It is also likely that the IFP worked closely with elements of the apartheid state in an attempt to undermine the ANC.²⁷ These discrepancies hint that Jeffery, the head of policy research for the long-standing liberal think-tank the South African Institute for Race Relations, holds some particular animus towards the socialist-leaning ANC that is reflected in her work. That being said, the documents used by Jeffery speak for themselves. Furthermore, Douglas Pike's work stands as an effective handbook for examining the blueprint of a people's war. Thus, *People's War: New Light on the Struggle for South Africa* stands as a flawed but important theoretical foundation for this study.

An aspect of Jeffery's methodology that has carried into my own work is her use of *Viet Cong: The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam*, by Douglas Pike, as a handbook for understanding events in South Africa. Published in 1966, *Viet Cong* remains the single best work, scholarly or otherwise, on people's war. As a US Foreign Service Officer in Vietnam, Pike was far from an impartial observer, nor did he claim to be. In the introduction to *Viet Cong*, Pike writes that "Victory by the Communists would mean consigning thousands of Vietnamese, many of them of course my friends, to death, prison, or exile."²⁸

²⁵ Jeffery, *People's War*, 799.

²⁶ Gary Kynoch, "Reassessing Transition Violence: Voices from South Africa's Township Wars 1990-94," *African Affairs*, 112, no. 447 (2013): 283-303, 291.; Martin Murray, *The Revolution Deferred: The Painful Birth of Post-Apartheid South Africa* (New York: Verso Books, 1994,) 97.; Adrian Guelke, "Interpretations of Political Violence during South Africa's Transition," *Politikon: South African Journal of Political Studies* 27, no. 2 (2000): 239-254, 250.

²⁷ Murray, *The Revolution Deferred*, 108-109.

²⁸ Douglas Pike, *Viet Cong: The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam* (Boston: MIT Press, 1966) xi-xii.

Pike went to his grave a dedicated anti-communist.²⁹ However, he understood that one cannot defeat an enemy one does not understand. Through the analysis of tens of thousands of captured documents and many hours spent interviewing VC defectors and prisoners, *Viet Cong* represents the culmination of Pike's quest to understand the nature of the enemy the United States faced in Vietnam.³⁰ Pike's work is meticulous, thoroughly examining every aspect of the insurgency from administration, to propaganda, to guerilla tactics. His analysis is sobering; he writes that the US faced "a strategy for which there is no known proven counterstrategy."³¹ I would argue that in the years following the ANC's decision to adopt the strategy of people's war, the South African government found itself in a similar position. In this study, Pike is used mainly as a blueprint for examining how a successful people's war is implemented.

Another invaluable source for this project has been the work of British journalist turned historian Steven Ellis. As a journalist, Ellis cultivated several highly placed contacts within the ANC and MK during the struggle. His work exposed many of the less savory activities of the ANC in exile, including crushing of the mutiny in 1984³² and the human rights abuses taking place in the ANC's camps in Angola.³³ I primarily use two works by Ellis: *Comrades Against Apartheid: The ANC and South African Communist Party in Exile* and *External Mission: The ANC in Exile 1960-1990*. While the two books tackle similar subject matter, they do so in very different ways. *Comrades Against Apartheid* was written in 1992 in the midst of South Africa's volatile transition period. The tone of the book is for the most part journalistic, Ellis was writing as an observer to

²⁹ Douglas Martin, "Douglas Pike, Vietnam Expert, Dies at 77," *New York Times*, May 16, 2002, Accessed October 14 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/05/16/world/douglas-pike-vietnam-expert-dies-at-77.html>.

³⁰ Elaine Woo, "Douglas Pike, 77; Historian, Archivist of the Vietnam War," *LA Times*, May 17 2002, Accessed October 14, 2018. <http://articles.latimes.com/2002/may/17/local/me-pike17>.

³¹ Martin, "Douglas Pike, Vietnam Expert, Dies at 77."

³² Stephen Ellis and Tsepo Sechaba, *Comrades Against Apartheid: The ANC and the South African Communist Party in Exile* (London: Peter Currey, 1992) 124-140.

³³ Ellis and Sechaba, *Comrades Against Apartheid*, 124-140.

the historical process rather than a scholar. *External Mission*, written in 2012, is a much more conventional work of scholarly history, written with the benefit of now-opened archives and historical hindsight.

Both books focus largely on the development of the ANC's strategy during their three decades in exile and the seemingly unending power struggles and purges that took place within the organization during that period. While the two books were written under different circumstances, Ellis draws similar conclusions in both. This is particularly true when it comes to the armed struggle. Ellis argues that the South African Communist Party positioned itself as a vanguard organization within the ANC, as is consistent with Marxist insurgent strategy.³⁴ He comes to the conclusion that the SACP dominated Umkhonto for virtually its entire existence and used the largely unsuccessful armed struggle as a way to push their influence within the wider ANC alliance, at enormous human cost to their own rank and file.³⁵

I have used several secondary historical works on the liberation struggle in order to contextualize the course of events in N'wamitwa. For general discussion of the mass democratic movement, I have used the works of Tom Lodge and Martin Murray, who both emphasize that the contributions of the MK were largely symbolic. Both authors note that the organization was thoroughly outclassed by the impressive apparatus of repression built up by the apartheid state.³⁶ Still, Murray states that the biggest victory of the MK during the freedom struggle was that simply by existing, the MK "captured the imagination of the oppressed masses."³⁷ Similarly, Lodge notes

³⁴ Ellis and Sechaba, *Comrades Against Apartheid*, 60.; Stephen Ellis, *External Mission: The ANC in Exile 1960-1990* (London: Hurst & Co, 2012) 6-7.

³⁵ Ellis, *External Mission*, 42.; Ellis and Sechaba, *Comrades Against Apartheid*, 181.

³⁶ Murray, *The Revolution Deferred*, 119.

³⁷ Murray, *The Revolution Deferred*, 120.

that the “armed propaganda” of the MK did indeed raise the profile of the ANC within the borders of South Africa and granted the organization an aura of revolutionary legitimacy.³⁸

I have also used several works on the history of Umkhonto we Sizwe. For a general history of the MK I have used *Spear of the Nation: Umkhonto Wesizwe South Africa's Liberation Army, 1960s-1990s* by Janet Cherry and *The ANC's War Against Apartheid: Umkhonto we Sizwe and the Liberation of South Africa* by Stephen R. Davis. In terms of perspective, Cherry's work can be seen as a counterbalance to Anthea Jeffery. As a former member of the ANC underground,³⁹ Cherry writes about the MK in largely glowing terms. Still, while she describes the MK as fighting a “just war by just means,”⁴⁰ Cherry also provides a “sober analysis”⁴¹ of the effectiveness of the armed struggle. As is in line with the common scholarly consensus,⁴² Cherry argues that while the MK stood no chance of defeating the forces of the South African state militarily, the bravery and sacrifice of MK personnel was of tremendous significance to an oppressed population in need of heroes. Cherry states that “the more the armed struggle failed, the more it succeeded. As far as legitimacy and popular support are concerned, MK had won the war against the apartheid regime by 1986.”⁴³ I have also used the work of South African historians Stephen R. Davis and Thula

³⁸ Tom Lodge, “Resistance and Reform 1973-1994” in R. Ross, A. Mager, & B. Nasson (Eds.), *The Cambridge History of South Africa* Vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 409-491, 429.

³⁹ “Janet Cherry,” *South African History Online*, Accessed October 20, 2018.

<https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/janet-mary-cherry>.

⁴⁰ Janet Cherry, *Spear of the Nation: Umkhonto Wesizwe South Africa's Liberation Army, 1960s-1990s* (Cincinnati: Ohio University Press, 2012) 3.

⁴¹ Cherry, *Spear of the Nation*, 51.

⁴² Thula Simpson, “The Making (and Remaking) of a Revolutionary Plan: Strategic Dilemmas of the ANC's Armed Struggle, 1974–1978,” *Social Dynamics* 35, no. 2 (2009): 312-329, 320.; Lodge, “Resistance and Reform,” 463.; Ellis, *External Mission*, 282-283. Martin Legassick, “Armed Struggle in South Africa: Consequences of a Strategy Debate,” *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 21 no. 2 (2003): 285-302, 286.; Patti Waldmeir, *The Anatomy of a Miracle: The End of Apartheid and the Birth of the New South Africa* (London: W. W. Norton, 1997), 47.

⁴³ Cherry, *Spear of the Nation*, 4.

Simpson primarily to examine Military Combat Work (MCW), the common training methods and protocols in the MK underground.

This project also draws on a range of primary documents. First and foremost, the development of the people's war strategy is explored through pamphlets, memoranda, conference notes, and other documents drafted primarily by the ANC in exile and by underground organizers in the mass democratic movement. I have also used the writing of the two most successful practitioners of people's war: Mao Zedong and Vo Nguyen Giap. These works have primarily been used to contextualize policy decisions of the ANC leadership through the lens of a people's war. Delivered in 1938 during the darkest days of the war against Japan, Mao's "On Protracted War" represents the first articulation of the strategy.⁴⁴ When "On Protracted War" was written there had never been a successful people's war, and Mao's strategy introduced in the speech is largely theoretical. This is not the case with the writings of Giap whose book, *People's War People's Army*, was written in 1961 shortly after his triumph over France.⁴⁵ Both works emphasize the primacy of political organization, communications, and mass action over armed struggle.⁴⁶ They also emphasise that a successful people's war occurs in three stages over a potentially decades-long timeline.⁴⁷

In order to explore how the ANC enacted their policies on the ground, I used a mixture of primary documents. The most important of these are the reports and transcripts of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and the annual surveys by the South African

⁴⁴ Mao Zedong "On Protracted War" in *The Selected Works of Mao Tse Tung*, Marxists Internet Archive. Accessed December 13, 2017. https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2_09.htm

⁴⁵ Vo Nguyen Giap, *People's War People's Army* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961) found on Marxists Internet Archive. Accessed December 16, 2017. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/giap/1961-pwpa.pdf>

⁴⁶ Mao, "On Protracted War."; Giap, "People's War People's Army."

⁴⁷ Mao, "On Protracted War."; Giap, "People's War People's Army."

Institution for Race Relations (SAIRR) for the years 1989-1994. The SAIRR reports mainly represent the viewpoint of a long-standing liberal watchdog organization, while the TRC is the culmination of the ANC-dominated act of national catharsis in the wake of the democratic transition.⁴⁸ In a way both the SAIRR reports and the TRC are inherently political works. Still, both sources meticulously recorded acts of political violence during the apartheid era and have proved to be invaluable. The TRC in particular, which sought not only to describe but to contextualize the violence that occurred during the struggle, has been of great use. When it comes to events on the ground in Gazankulu, I have used the above sources and supplemented them with newspapers from the era.

Lastly, I have used the memoirs of three high ranking members of the MK, *The Long Walk to Freedom* by Nelson Mandela, *Shades of Difference: Mac Maharaj and the Struggle for South Africa* by Mac Maharaj and Pendrag O'Malley, and *Armed and Dangerous* by Ronnie Kasrils. All three are works of political legacy building rather than works of scholarly or journalistic analysis. For example, Kasrils' assertion that allegations of human rights abuses carried out by the ANC in exile were politically motivated exaggerations is less than convincing.⁴⁹ Still, to some degree all three offer unique and valuable insider perspectives from instrumental figures in the history of the organization.

⁴⁸ The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission was a public attempt by a non-partisan commission to publicly examine breaches of human rights committed by all sides during the freedom struggle. The report drafted by the commission has been a major source of research in this thesis. For more information on the intricacies of the process see *Country of my Skull: Guilt, Sorrow, and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa* by the South African poet Antjie Krog.; Antjie Krog, *Country of my Skull: Guilt, Sorrow, and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa* (New York: Random House, 1998.)

⁴⁹ Ronnie Kasrils, *Armed and Dangerous: My Undercover Struggle Against Apartheid* (Ibadan: Hienemann, 1992), 254-255.

This thesis unfolds over three chapters. Chapter One seeks to set the scene and provide context for events in N'wamitwa. In Chapter One, I lay out the basic principles of people's war and the political context in which the ANC chose to adopt the strategy. I also describe how the strategy played out within the borders of South Africa until 1989, when the MK infiltrated N'wamitwa and began operations. Chapter Two tells the story of the early stages of the insurgency in N'wamitwa between October 1989 and August 1990. This chapter focuses on the MK's infiltration of the area and how it recruited operatives and armed them. In this chapter I describe three distinct acts of armed propaganda definitively linked to the MK. I also discuss the probable role of the insurgency in the broad-based civil uprising that crippled the homeland government. I argue that the actions carried out by the MK represented the first two stages of a people's war as articulated by Mao. Lastly, Chapter Three focuses on the expansion of MK activity in N'wamitwa after the unbanning of political organizations. This chapter examines the expansion of the MK in the area and how the role of the insurgency adapted to fit the various needs of the community through the transition period. The timeline of Chapter Three stretches from the release of political prisoners in August 1990 to the first multiracial election in April 1994. Once again, I argue that the expansion of MK operations in the area represented the third and final stage of a people's war. The counterattack, as Mao dubbed the third stage, was largely bloodless in N'wamitwa yet still represented a titanic shift in the balance of power in the area.

This project seeks to contribute to existing scholarship in a number of ways. Firstly, within South Africa, ANC-directed national mythology has obscured or ignored the voices of rank and file MK operatives. There are several memoirs of former members of MK as discussed above, but most are written by the high-ranking intellectual elite of the organization like Maharaj and Kasrils.

There have been several scholarly treatments of the MK that use oral history as a component.⁵⁰ The strategy of the ANC was predominantly urban, and the scholarship of the liberation struggle reflects this.⁵¹ There is also very little written from a historical perspective about ANC-aligned auxiliary militias or Self Defence Units (SDUs). This thesis, the focus of which is a rural SDU, seeks to play a role in redressing that imbalance. It is my hope that this work will contribute, even in a small way, to a more well-rounded understanding of the freedom struggle.

⁵⁰ For example, see *The ANC's War Against Apartheid: Umkhonto We Sizwe and the Liberation of South Africa* by Stephen R. Davis, *Apartheid's Rebels: Inside South Africa's Hidden War* by Stephen R. Davis (Newhaven: Yale University Press, 1987) and "Armed Resistance and Self-Esteem: Ex-combatants in Palestine and South Africa," by Lætitia Bucaille. Lætitia Bucaille, *International Political Sociology* 5, no. 1 (2011): 52-67. And

⁵¹ Ellis and Sechaba, *Comrades Against Apartheid*, 144.; Simpson, "The Making (and Remaking) of a Revolutionary Plan," 313.; Martin Legassick, "Armed Struggle in South Africa," 289.

Chapter One:

“Make Apartheid Unworkable, Make the Country Ungovernable”

South Africa’s first non-racial democratic election in 1994 put an end to decades of communal and political violence. Eighty-two years after its founding, the African National Congress (ANC), the continent’s oldest liberation movement, was elected in a landslide victory under its formerly imprisoned leader Nelson Mandela. The liberation struggle, as it came to be known, was a complex web of military and political maneuvering coordinated alongside a mass popular uprising. As will be discussed later, this conflict was organized along the lines of a people’s war, an imported form of revolutionary warfare. It encompassed elements of both inter-state and intra-state conflict; the battlefield stretched from the townships of South Africa, to the vicious bush wars in the frontline states,⁵² to the streets of European capitals. The military aspect of the struggle encompassed large-scale conventional military operations, guerilla warfare, sabotage, and terrorism. From the late 1970s onwards, these military actions were coordinated to support a campaign of mass mobilization and a sophisticated propaganda offensive.

The vanguard of the ANC’s people’s war was its armed wing: Umkhonto we Sizwe, Spear of the Nation (MK). MK operative Ronnie Kasrils explained the significance of the name in his memoir *Armed and Dangerous*. “The name harkened back to the wars of resistance against British and Boer colonialism. The spear was a sign of resistance.”⁵³ MK was formed in 1961, ironically the year after the ANC’s then president, Chief Albert Luthuli, was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize.⁵⁴

⁵² The Frontline states represented the independent African nations bordering or in close proximity to South Africa. These included Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Mac Maharaj and Pendrag O’Malley, *Shades of Difference: Mac Maharaj and the Struggle for South Africa* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 203.

⁵³ Kasrils, *Armed and Dangerous*, 38.

⁵⁴ Davis, *Apartheid’s Rebels*, 15.

The ANC was able to secure the support of the Soviet Union (USSR) through their allies in the South African Communist Party (SACP). This was the beginning of a relationship that would last until the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the USSR. The founding of the MK in 1961 was not without controversy. At that time, the ANC was a deeply Christian organization and much of its membership opposed the use of violence.⁵⁵ However, the banning of the ANC and massacre of unarmed protesters in the township of Sharpeville the previous year convinced many in the movement that the only way to counter the reactionary violence of the state was with revolutionary violence of their own.⁵⁶

On December 16, 1961, a day of great symbolic importance to South Africa's ruling Afrikaner community,⁵⁷ the MK announced its creation with a series of coordinated bomb attacks throughout the country.⁵⁸ The government's response was characteristically harsh and efficient. Within 18 months most of the MK's leadership, including its paramount leader and future president of South Africa, Nelson Mandela, had been arrested or killed. Mandela's imprisonment effectively brought his role in the armed struggle to an end. When he emerged from prison twenty-seven years later, it was as a diplomat rather than soldier. What remained of the MK was forced to take the "Northern Highway" into exile.⁵⁹ For the remainder of the 1960s and early 1970s, the ANC was at its lowest ebb and the organization was forced to rely on the help of friendly nations and sub-national groups for its survival. Luckily for the ANC, help was forthcoming.

⁵⁵ Jeffery, *People's War*, location 190.

⁵⁶ Kasrils, *Armed and Dangerous*, 38.

⁵⁷ Commemorating the remarkable Afrikaner victory over the Zulu at The Battle of Blood River.

⁵⁸ Davis, *Apartheid's Rebels*, 16-17.

⁵⁹ Kasrils, *Armed and Dangerous*, 77.

It is likely that in any other era, the struggle would have remained a localized civil conflict. It was quickly subsumed, however, into what intellectual historian David Armitage described as “the global civil war” between the two competing superpowers of the era: the United States and the Soviet Union.⁶⁰ Armitage describes a “global civil war” as an “unbridled struggle between opposed parties without any of the constraints placed on conventional forms of warfare ... a particular species of conflict in which boundaries between internal and external, interstate and intrastate conflict are utterly blurred.”⁶¹ By Armitage’s definition, the South African liberation struggle represented a civil war that went global, within the context of a “global civil war.” The apartheid state and the ANC both drew support from nations and sub-national groups far outside of the borders of South Africa. Furthermore, for decades South Africans killed one another in operations in over a dozen countries.⁶²

Many of the grand strategists of American foreign policy, most notably Henry Kissinger, saw the staunchly anti-communist South Africa as a reliable “policeman” in the region.⁶³ However, they were at least somewhat beholden to the American electorate. Throughout the apartheid era American support for South Africa was increasingly undermined by grassroots activism against the illiberal racial policies of apartheid⁶⁴ and an unprecedented rise in anti-interventionism among

⁶⁰ David Armitage, *Civil Wars: A History in Ideas* (New York: Vintage 2017), 228-229.

⁶¹ Armitage, *Civil Wars*, 229.

⁶² For more on the international dimensions of the liberation struggle I recommend the works of Steven Ellis whose perspective has greatly informed this project. For discussion of the apartheid state’s activities outside of South Africa look to *Apartheid’s Contras: An Inquiry into the Roots of War in Angola and Mozambique* by William Minter, William Minter, *Apartheid’s Contras: An Inquiry into the Roots of War in Angola and Mozambique*, (Johannesburg: University of Witwatersrand Press, 1994) and *Total Onslaught: Apartheid’s Dirty Tricks Exposed* by the journalist De Wet Potgieter. De Wet Potgieter, *Total Onslaught: Apartheid’s Dirty Tricks Exposed* (Cape Town: Zebra, 2007)

⁶³ Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of our Times* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 237.; Ellis and Sechaba, *Comrades Against Apartheid*, 76.

⁶⁴ Janice Love, *The U.S. Anti-Apartheid Movement: Local Activism in Global Politics* (New York: Praeger, 1985) 1-4.

the American public in the wake of their ill-fated adventure in Vietnam.⁶⁵ Certain factions within the US foreign policy establishment sought closer co-operation with the South African government throughout the Cold War. However, from the mid 1970s onward efforts to co-operate with South Africa were in direct conflict with the wishes of the American electorate and democratic institutions.⁶⁶ This tension came to a head in 1976, when the US senate passed The Tunney Amendment stripping funding from the CIA's secret war in Angola.⁶⁷ Left in the lurch by their allies, the South African task force advancing on the Angolan capitol of Luanda was routed by superior Cuban artillery, in a rare but humiliating defeat for the battle hardened SADF.⁶⁸ After the debacle in 1976, the South Africans rightly felt that the US was at best an unreliable ally in the fight against communism in Africa.⁶⁹ Thus the apartheid state was left largely to face the growing resistance on its own, with minimal help from the outside world.⁷⁰

Unrestrained by electoral obligations and possessed of a near messianic belief in the eventual victory of their cause, the Soviet Union found itself in a much stronger position to operate openly in African conflicts. Ideological and practical concerns drove the Soviet presence in Africa. Both Christopher Andrew and Odd Arne Westad note that for much of the Cold War, Soviet foreign policy was driven by a genuine belief that “socialism would replace capitalism ... within a generation.”⁷¹ Westad in particular states that the Soviet imperial vision was driven by a

⁶⁵ Ellis and Sechaba, *Comrades Against Apartheid*, 75.

⁶⁶ Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 237.

⁶⁷ John Stockwell, *In Search of Enemies: A CIA Story* (New York: Norton, 1978), 232-234.

⁶⁸ Stockwell, *In Search of Enemies*, 214-215.

⁶⁹ Ellis and Sechaba, *Comrades Against Apartheid*, 77.

⁷⁰ A key exception to this trend was the state of Israel which collaborated closely with South Africa for much of the Cold War. While the intricacies of the Israeli/ South African relationship are far beyond the scope of this project more details can be found in *The Unnatural Alliance* by James Adams and *Total Onslaught: Apartheid's Dirty Tricks Exposed* by De Wet Potgieter. James Adams, *The Unnatural Alliance* (London: Quartet, 1984).

⁷¹ Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 72.

civilizing mission: to make the world safe for revolution and bring the light of socialism into the dark and oppressed corners of the world.⁷²

Andrew argues that from the 1960s onward, as the political situation in Europe began to calcify, the process of decolonization shifted the focus of the Cold War into the Global South.⁷³ Soviet policy makers saw the Third World⁷⁴ as a battlefield in which the USA and the USSR could compete without risking all-out global war.⁷⁵ Creating a strong socialist bloc in the Third World was also seen as a potential solution to the inherent weakness of the Soviet style command economy. Westad argues that Soviet policy makers saw the Third World as a potential empire where they could build up a kind of mercantilism without merchants, in which newly independent states would provide “a unified supply line from Shanghai to Berlin.”⁷⁶ Nikita Khrushchev articulated this trend of hitching Soviet style socialism to Third World decolonization struggles in a 1961 speech in which he declared that by supporting the “sacred anti-imperialist struggles” of colonies and the development of newly independent states, the Soviet Union could advance its own progress to Communism and bring imperialism to its knees.⁷⁷

The ANC would not likely have survived through this period without regular monetary and political aid from the Soviet Union.⁷⁸ However, while Pretoria did its best to portray the ANC as

⁷² Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 5.

⁷³ Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way: The KGB and the Battle for the Third World* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 8.

⁷⁴ I use the term Third World as it was defined by Odd Arne Westad in *The Global Cold War*. That is nations united by a shared memory of “imperialist oppression and similar challenges in building a new state.” According to Westad both the US and the USSR were ideologically compelled to offer competing paths to development for these emerging nations. Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 334.

⁷⁵ Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way*, 13.

⁷⁶ Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 69.

⁷⁷ Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way*, 8.

⁷⁸ Jeffery, *People’s War*, location 66.; Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way*, 443.; Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way*, 470.; Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way*, 430.

a collection of pro-Moscow stooges, the reality is much more nuanced.⁷⁹ The Soviet Union undoubtedly saw South Africa as the crown jewel of the continent where they were most able to contest Western influence. Soviet policy makers saw Southern Africa as one of the “twin treasure chests” on which Western economic power relied.⁸⁰ South Africa had particular strategic significance due to its vast mineral wealth and position on important shipping routes.⁸¹

It is also clear that the Soviet Union saw the ANC as an ideologically compatible partner.⁸² Daniel Kempton argues that Soviet interest in South Africa was driven largely by the fact that at the time South Africa was by far the most industrialized nation in Sub-Saharan Africa and the only one with a recognizable class structure in which Marxism could take root.⁸³ Kempton also notes that the ANC fit Soviet perceptions of how a successful revolutionary party was organized. It was a broad-based coalition with the SACP acting as a revolutionary vanguard that could eventually seize control.⁸⁴

The USSR and the ANC had a close working relationship for much of the freedom struggle and this relationship was essential for ensuring the organization’s existence through the dark days of the 1960s and 1970s.⁸⁵ By the 1980s, the US State Department estimated that 90 percent of the military aid and 60 percent of the total aid received by the ANC came from the Eastern Bloc.⁸⁶ Still, it was the ANC rather than Moscow that proved to be the primary beneficiaries of this

⁷⁹ Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way*, 430.

⁸⁰ The other being the vast energy resources of the Persian Gulf.; Jeffery, *People’s War*, 391.

⁸¹ Jeffery, *People’s War*, 391

⁸² Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way*, 423.; Edward A. Lynch, *The Cold War’s Last Battlefield, Reagan, the Soviets, and Central America* (Louisville: Global Academic Publishing, 2012), 8.

⁸³ Daniel R. Kempton, *Soviet Strategy Toward Southern Africa: The National Liberation Movement Connection* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 1989), 151-152.

⁸⁴ Kempton, *Soviet Strategy Toward Southern Africa*, 172.

⁸⁵ Ellis and Sechaba, *Comrades Against Apartheid*, 42.

⁸⁶ Daniel R. Kempton, *Soviet Strategy Toward Southern Africa*, 169.

arrangement. Christopher Andrew, the foremost Western historian of the KGB, noted that “ultimately the ANC gained more than Moscow from the once close relationship between them.”⁸⁷ This view was echoed by none other than Nelson Mandela, who said, “The cynical have always suggested that we were being used by the communists. But who is to say that we were not using them?”⁸⁸

The struggle against apartheid also fit into the wider global trend of decolonization in the Third World. It is highly doubtful that the ANC would have been able to rebuild and reorganize its revolutionary organs without safe havens in neighboring states, Angola and Tanzania chief among them.⁸⁹ Over time the organization’s reliance on friendly governments in the region affected not only how the ANC waged the struggle but also how the organization began to perceive its own mission. As will become apparent in later chapters, MK foot soldiers were encouraged to think of themselves as the vanguard of the last great push against colonialism in Africa. Similarly, while the ANC’s reliance on independent African states was born of its own weakness, it undoubtedly strengthened the Pan-African credentials of the organization.⁹⁰ This fact was not lost on many of the former MK personnel who were consulted for this project and who contextualized their own experiences within the wider struggle for African liberation.

The battle for South Africa proved to be the final front line in what the political scientist John Saul calls the “Thirty Years War for Southern African Liberation.”⁹¹ Like its namesake, Southern Africa’s thirty years war was a complex network of ever shifting alliances, internecine

⁸⁷ Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way*, 470.

⁸⁸ Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom* (London: Little and Brown, 1994), 108.

⁸⁹ Daniel R. Kempton, *Soviet Strategy Toward Southern Africa: The National Liberation Movement Connection* (New York: Praeger, 1989), 169.

⁹⁰ Ellis, *External Mission*, 294-295.

⁹¹ John Saul, *Flawed Freedom: Rethinking Southern African Liberation* (London: Pluto Press, 2014), 4.

conflicts and strange bedfellows. However, it can broadly be described as a conflict that pitted a broad array of African liberation movements, inspired by a fusion of Pan-Africanism, anti-imperialism, and Marxism-Leninism, against reactionary settler states and their proxies.⁹² The ANC began its long period of exile in the early 1960's, just as much of Africa was becoming independent. In the heady days of decolonization, the general feeling amongst many African leaders was "as long as one African nation was not free, the continent could not be viewed as free."⁹³ The proliferation of internationalist ideology and rhetoric gave a powerful motivation for independent African states to lend support to liberation movements still struggling against colonial rule.⁹⁴ As Africa's oldest liberation movement, the ANC held a special caché among its compatriots that the organization was able to leverage into aid for much of the struggle.⁹⁵

As in many conflicts, a mutually reinforcing dynamic of violence emerged. Fearing increased domestic risk of revolution, counter-revolutionary states used force externally to coerce their rivals to cease their assistance or even potentially "restore reactionary forces to power."⁹⁶ In turn, in response to this external threat liberation movements stepped up their own

⁹² Phillip Roessler and Harry Verhoeven, *Why Comrades go to War: Liberation Politics and the Outbreak of Africa's Deadliest Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 30; Saul, *Flawed Freedom*, 6-7. These included the Portuguese colonies of Angola and Mozambique, the settler states of South Africa and Rhodesia, and South West Africa (now Namibia) which was illegally occupied by South Africa from the end of the First World War until 1990. Many of the African proxies who collaborated with the South African security forces were rural traditionalists who feared that the liberation movements' adoption of socialist policies would undermine the power of local rural elites. For an example of how this tension played out in Mozambique see *Soldiers at Peace: Veterans and Society After the Civil War in Mozambique* by Jessica Schafer.

⁹³ Mark Malisa and Phillippa Nhengeze, "Pan-Africanism: A Quest for Liberation and the Pursuit of a United Africa," *Genealogy*, 28:2 (2018), 2.

⁹⁴ An early and influential example of this trend was the career of Tanzania's idealistic founding father Julius Nyerere who turned the nation's capital of Dar es Salaam into a hub for African liberation movements. Minter, *Apartheid's Contras*, 89.

⁹⁵ Despite any ideological affinity they shared, the ANC often had tense relationships with its host countries. For example, the organization was almost expelled from Tanzania in 1969 under suspicion of involvement in an attempted coup against Julius Nyerere. Ellis, *External Mission*, 83-84.

⁹⁶ Roessler and Verhoeven, *Why Comrades Go to War*, 50-51.

interventionist polices.⁹⁷ Thus by Armitage's definition, the struggle in South Africa fits into two overlapping international civil wars, the global conflict between the United States and the USSR, and the regional one among African states. According to William Minter, an activist and researcher, support for liberation movements from neighboring African states had a strong ideological foundation. Conversely Pretoria's support of other white-dominated regimes was driven by the pragmatic desire to create a white controlled "cordon sanitaire" on South Africa's borders.⁹⁸ The collapse of Portuguese Africa in 1974 and the end of white minority rule in Rhodesia in 1979 ended this hope. From the late 1970's onwards South Africa found itself directly on the front line of the struggle. This served the dual role of allowing the ANC to establish a presence in states on South Africa's immediate borders, while opening up the newly liberated states of Angola and Mozambique to massive destabilization campaigns by the apartheid state in retaliation.⁹⁹

Within South Africa for much of the 1960s and 1970s, the ANC's internal rival Inkatha and various groups linked to the Black Consciousness Movement eclipsed the organization in influence.¹⁰⁰ At this time, the ANC was largely unknown by the masses within South Africa or was openly disliked. The ANC's commitment to a non-racial South Africa played very poorly with the angry and disenfranchised black working class who tended to gravitate toward the Africanist

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Minter, *Apartheid's Contras*, 109.; While maintaining a buffer of white controlled states on its borders was a strategic imperative for South Africa, it is fair to say that maintaining white supremacy in Africa could also be considered an ideological project. As was ensuring the failure and destabilization of newly independent African states.

⁹⁹ The consequences for these new and somewhat fragile states was ruinous. In the case of Mozambique, the destabilization campaign orchestrated by the Rhodesian Central Intelligence Organization and inherited by South Africa after 1979 caused an estimated US\$15 billion in economic damage and led to the deaths of at least 700 000 people. Minter, *Apartheid's Contras*, 7.

¹⁰⁰ Ellis and Sechaba, *Comrades Against Apartheid*, 66.

philosophies of the Black Consciousness Movement.¹⁰¹ The ANC's alliance with the South African Communist Party also raised suspicions among many South Africans, particularly those with a more traditionalist or Black Consciousness outlook; as did their willingness to accept aid from non-African nations, particularly the USSR and other Eastern Bloc countries.¹⁰² Lastly, the fact that they operated as an exiled resistance movement meant that the ANC had little opportunity to build up grassroots support within South Africa.

For much of the 1960s and early 1970s, the MK existed as a small but well-trained paramilitary force. Many cadres underwent military training in neighboring African states or the Eastern Bloc.¹⁰³ Some MK guerillas saw combat as part of the ANC's strategy of "hacking their way home."¹⁰⁴ This entailed the MK taking part in the liberation struggles in Rhodesia, Angola, and Mozambique in the hopes of establishing bases along the border and creating a "Ho Chi Minh Trail to South Africa."¹⁰⁵ Until the late 1970s, the MK's chief strategists had drawn inspiration from the *foco* theory of guerilla warfare, advocated and exported by the legendary freedom fighter Che Guevara.¹⁰⁶ The Cuban model posited that a small, dedicated core of guerilla fighters could use an armed struggle to galvanize a mass insurrection.¹⁰⁷ This approach was poorly suited to conditions in South Africa, which Janet Cherry describes as a "strong, stable, authoritarian

¹⁰¹ Davis, *Apartheid's Rebels*, 24-25.; Ellis and Sechaba, *Comrades Against Apartheid*, 66.

¹⁰² Davis, *Apartheid's Rebels*, 29.; Ellis and Sechaba, *Comrades Against Apartheid*, 66.

¹⁰³ Kasrils, *Armed and Dangerous*, 85-100.

¹⁰⁴ Jeffery, *People's War*, location 619.

¹⁰⁵ Jeffery, *People's War*, location 619.; Ellis and Sechaba, *Comrades Against Apartheid*, 46.

¹⁰⁶ Spanish for "focus;" Ellis, *External Mission*, 32-33.

¹⁰⁷ Ellis, *External Mission*, 32-33.; Simpson, "The Making (and Remaking) of a Strategic Debate", 317.

state.”¹⁰⁸ The attempt by the ANC to implement Guevara’s theories on guerilla warfare led to several costly failures in the early years of the ANC’s external mission.¹⁰⁹

In the early years of the ANC’s external mission, the architects of Umkhonto’s armed struggle faced a dilemma. In the words of Joe Slovo, “We knew that without mass political organization, you couldn’t get the armed struggle off the ground. But we also knew that without manifestations of armed resistance you couldn’t get the political forces motivated.”¹¹⁰ While the ANC had been sidelined for over a decade, two events in the late 1970s marked a decisive shift in the ANC’s resources and strategy. The 1976 massacre of protesting school children in the township of Soweto and the 1978 visit by members of the ANC politburo to the newly unified Peoples Republic of Vietnam would prove to be radical turning points for the MK.

The first of these turning points occurred on June 16, 1976, and in the following months. A student walkout in the Johannesburg township of Soweto erupted into unprecedented violence. The protesters were met with “overwhelming military force.”¹¹¹ The photo of twelve-year-old Hector Peterson shot dead by South African riot police shocked the world and enraged black South Africa.¹¹² South Africa would never be the same again. Among black South Africans, Soweto marked a shift from weary resentment to open hostility. Riots erupted across the country. The state response was far out of proportion to the threat posed by the rioters. In many ways, the altercation that followed set the tone for relations between the white government and their black subjects for the next eighteen years.

¹⁰⁸ Cherry, *Spear of the Nation*, 53.

¹⁰⁹ Ellis and Sechaba, *Comrades Against Apartheid*, 49-50.; Legassick, “Armed Struggle in South Africa,” 286.

¹¹⁰ Waldmeir, *Anatomy of a Miracle*, 48.

¹¹¹ Martin Murray, *South Africa: Time of Agony, Time of Destiny* (Norfolk: Thetford Press, 1987), 201.

¹¹² Murray, *South Africa: Time of Agony, Time of Destiny*, 201.

Caught completely unprepared, the white regime was forced to rely almost exclusively on repression to quell the disturbances. Through the use of their guns, tear gas, armoured cars, helicopters, dogs, prohibition of gatherings, indiscriminate arrests, systematic house to house raids, and road block searches, the state imposed a reign of terror on the townships.¹¹³

For tens, if not hundreds of thousands of South Africans, the uprising marked their first political action.¹¹⁴ Soweto proved to be a political awakening for young South Africans who had lived under apartheid rule for their entire lives. Suddenly, and to their own surprise, the ANC found itself relevant again. Steven Ellis argues that the fact the ANC was an exiled movement subsisting on foreign support became a strength rather than a detriment. Through their patrons in the Soviet Union, the ANC had the means to fund their revolution and arm themselves.¹¹⁵ Furthermore, the organization's decade in exile meant that that it could provide new recruits with a sanctuary as they pursued military and political education.¹¹⁶

In the face of intensified repression, thousands of newly radicalized young men and women fled South Africa to seek guerrilla training in the newly independent frontline states.¹¹⁷ These “children of Soweto”¹¹⁸ would imbue Umkhonto we Sizwe with a new energy. Ronnie Kasrils describes the impact this infusion of manpower had on the ANC.

Recruitment into the MK, which in the years before had been at a trickle, began speeding up and became a torrent. Youngsters were leaving South Africa in droves for neighboring states in search of the ANC, with a single wish, to learn how to shoot, to get a gun, and go home to finish off the Boers for good.¹¹⁹

¹¹³ Murray, *Time of Agony, Time of Destiny*, 201.

¹¹⁴ Murray, *Time of Agony, Time of Destiny*, 200.; Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, 421.

¹¹⁵ Ellis and Sechaba, *Comrades Against Apartheid*, 84-85.

¹¹⁶ Ellis and Sechaba, *Comrades Against Apartheid*, 84.

¹¹⁷ Annette Seegers, *The Military in the Making of Modern South Africa* (London: International Library for African Studies, 1996), 174.

¹¹⁸ Murray, *Time of Agony, Time of Destiny*, 203.

¹¹⁹ Ronnie Kasrils, *Armed and Dangerous*, 122.

Soweto proved to be a mixed blessing for the ANC. Umkhonto's fighting capacity grew as more and more young people fled repression at home to seek military training abroad. Journalist Richard Manning, who covered the revolts in the townships for *Newsweek* magazine, described the Soweto generation as "black South Africa's best and brightest."¹²⁰ These new recruits brought a new sense of militancy into the MK, and were to form the core of the organization throughout the 1980s. However, the fact that the uprising had largely caught the ANC leadership by surprise showed the movement was troublingly out of touch with the masses they claimed to represent.¹²¹ In 1978, at the urging of the Soviet Union, a delegation of high-ranking ANC cadres visited the newly unified People's Republic of Vietnam. This delegation included the commander in chief of the MK, Joe Modise, and its paramount strategist, Joe Slovo.¹²² The goal of this visit, according to Mandela's successor, Thabo Mbeki, was to "learn from the victorious Vietnamese struggle, in order to intensify our own struggle for liberation."¹²³

Through meetings with the Vietnamese leadership including the legendary guerilla commander General Vo Nguyen Giap, the ANC sought to learn the formula for a successful people's war.¹²⁴ The doctrine of people's war was honed by communist insurgencies in East Asia and, by the late 1970s it had become a model for revolutionary groups to defeat militarily superior opponents.¹²⁵ The axiom of people's warfare is "a revolution marches on two feet"—one military

¹²⁰ Richard Manning, *They Can't Kill Us All: An Eye Witness Account of South Africa Today* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 66.

¹²¹ Jeffery, *People's War*, location 619.; Ellis and Sechaba, *Comrades Against Apartheid*, 83.

¹²² Kasrils, *Armed and Dangerous*, 183.

¹²³ Jeffery, *People's War*, location 619.

¹²⁴ Jeffery, *People's War*, location 619.; Ellis, *External Mission*, 123.

¹²⁵ Jeffery, *People's War*, location 1074.; Douglas Pike, *Vietcong*, 32.

and one political.¹²⁶ In a successful people's war, military operations play an ancillary role to mass organization and action.¹²⁷ In the words of Jeffery:

People's war goes far beyond conventional conceptions of warfare, for its principal effort revolves around organization and communication ... The underground armed struggle and the legal mass struggle support each other to form an anvil and hammer.¹²⁸

The end goal is to crush an adversary between the two forces. A successfully implemented people's war is meant to neutralize the military superiority of an adversary by turning a military conflict into a protracted battle of wills. In the words of Mao Zedong, the architect of the people's war,

Weapons are an important factor in war, but not the decisive factor; it is people ... The contest of strength is not only a contest of military and economic power, but also a contest of human power and morale.¹²⁹

According to Mao, a people's war progresses along three stages: the defensive, the stalemate, and the counterattack. The first stage represents a period of relative weakness for the resistance. The defensive stage of a people's war is marked primarily by political organization and agitation. Networks of grassroots organizations with loose or hidden links to the insurgency are used to galvanize resistance in the form of protests, strikes, and other legal mass actions.¹³⁰ In turn, a mobilized populace provides protection, manpower, and legitimacy to the underground armed struggle.

During the early stages of a people's war, the insurgency avoids full-blown conflict with the forces of the state, and guerilla actions serve as what Mao called "politics with bloodshed."¹³¹

¹²⁶ Jeffery, *People's War*, location 1074.

¹²⁷ Pike, *Vietcong* 36.

¹²⁸ Jeffery, *People's War*, location 236.

¹²⁹ Mao, "On Protracted War."

¹³⁰ Pike, *Vietcong*, 117.

¹³¹ Mao, "On Protracted War."

Political mobilization is matched with a “programme of violence,”¹³² the goal of which is to destroy the mechanisms of local government and replace them with political organs operated by the resistance.¹³³ In the South African context, this largely meant focusing political violence inward on black community leaders, policemen, and civil servants deemed collaborationist.¹³⁴ Once the government’s means of control and service delivery have been dismantled, they are replaced with administrative structures under the control of the liberation movements.¹³⁵

The role of a guerilla army such as the MK during the defensive phase of a people’s war is twofold. Firstly, the guerillas work to purge communities of perceived collaborators and rival liberation movements. Secondly, they take part in armed propaganda actions: carefully orchestrated attacks across a wide geographic area meant both to raise their own profile and to demoralize the enemy.¹³⁶ Another important aspect of this armed propaganda is to provoke a heavy-handed response from the authorities, thus forcing people to turn to the liberation movements for protection or in many cases revenge.¹³⁷ Eventually, by the end of the defensive phase, large swaths of the country are left ungovernable by the state and in the hands of the revolutionary movement.¹³⁸

As the power of the state is increasingly destabilized and the resistance gains momentum, the people’s war enters the second phase of stalemate.¹³⁹ While the first stage of a people’s war is

¹³² Jeffery, *People’s War*, location 1262.

¹³³ *Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa*, Vol 2. (London: Macmillan Reference, 1998) 339-340.

¹³⁴ *TRC* vol. 2, 339, *TRC* vol. 2, 345.

¹³⁵ Pike, *Vietcong*, 113.

¹³⁶ Ellis, *External Mission*, 123.; Pike, *Vietcong*, 37.

¹³⁷ Jeffery, *People’s War*, location 1262.

¹³⁸ Jeffery, *People’s War*, location 1124.

¹³⁹ Mao, “On Protracted War.”

marked by organization and communication, the second stage is marked by escalation. In liberated zones, the resistance becomes the de-facto government, delivering services and security as state control continues to be eroded.¹⁴⁰ As the resistance moves out of the shadows and into the public sphere, a tremendous amount of manpower is spent converting, indoctrinating, and coercing the population.¹⁴¹ Militarily, the insurgency moves from avoiding conflict with the state to actively seeking it out. Recruitment into the armed movement soars, and attacks are carried out along a wide front.¹⁴² The stalemate can be considered a period of attritional warfare where the resistance is expected to take enormous casualties. In the words of Mao, “the fighting in the second stage will be ruthless, and the country will suffer serious devastation.”¹⁴³ However, if the defensive stage has progressed as it should the resistance will have a near bottomless well of manpower and public support to draw on. According to Mao, the stalemate can go on indefinitely, wearing out the forces of the state over the span of decades if required.

The third stage of a people’s war is marked by a reversal of the power dynamic. As Mao describes, “the first and second stages of the war ... are marked by the enemy's strength and our weakness ... [in] the stage of strategic counter-offensive ... an enemy will be in the inferior and we in the superior position.”¹⁴⁴ Once the resistance has seized the initiative and the power of the state has been ground down by years of attritional warfare, international isolation, and civil unrest, the insurgency launches its killing blow. The counterattack represents an all-out blitz assault waged by conventional means to topple what remains of the state. Luckily for South Africa, this period of large-scale conventional warfare never materialized. However, it is interesting to note

¹⁴⁰ Pike, *Vietcong*, 294-305.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid*, 39.

¹⁴² Jeffery, *People’s War*, location 1117.

¹⁴³ Mao, “On Protracted War.”

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid*.

that by the end of the struggle, the MK might have become the world's most overqualified guerilla army. The majority of MK personnel remained in exile, training in sophisticated combined arms tactics for an invasion of South Africa that would never come.¹⁴⁵

The 1978 visit to Vietnam proved to be revelatory for the leadership of the MK. Upon leaving Vietnam, Joe Slovo commented that for two decades the ANC had been “working ass backward.”¹⁴⁶ In the wake of their visit to Vietnam, the Revolutionary Politico-Military Commission of the ANC met in the Angolan capital of Luanda to discuss a bold strategic pivot. The end result of the Luanda meetings was the decision to import the Vietnamese style of revolutionary warfare into South Africa.¹⁴⁷ In August 1979, the chief strategists of the MK released “The Report of the Politico-Military Strategy Commission to the ANC National Executive Committee,” more commonly known as the “Green Book.”¹⁴⁸ The Green Book began with the statement that “The Vietnam experience reveals certain shortcomings on our part and draws attention to areas of crucial importance which we have tended to neglect.”¹⁴⁹

The trip to Vietnam and the period of debate and introspection within the high command of the MK that followed led to a reappraisal of the relationship between their military struggle and the political struggle waged by the wider ANC. While the ANC had counted on armed actions by the MK to create a political base, their experience in Vietnam had shown the primacy of political mass mobilization to galvanize armed struggle:

¹⁴⁵ Tom Lodge, “Resistance and Reform,” 435.

¹⁴⁶ Jeffery, *People's War*, location 1455.

¹⁴⁷ “The Green Book: Report of the Politico-Military Strategy Commission to the ANC National Executive Committee,” August 1979,” Found on *Marxists Internet Archive*. Accessed December 14, 2017. <https://www.marxists.org/subject/africa/anc/1979/green-book.htm>.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

The preparation for People's Armed Struggle and its victorious conclusion is not solely a military question. This means that the armed struggle must be based on, and grow out of, mass political support and it must eventually involve our whole people. All military activities must, at every stage, be guided and determined by the need to generate political mobilisation, organisation and resistance, with the aim of progressively weakening the enemy's grip on his reins of political, economic, social and military power, by a combination of political and military action.¹⁵⁰

Among the recommendations made in the Green Book was a commitment to drastically increase the underground presence of the ANC within South Africa itself.¹⁵¹ The infiltration of trained ANC and MK cadres into South Africa was meant to aid in the creation of "genuine mass organisations among all sections of our people."¹⁵² The ANC conceptualized the armed struggle as one of "four revolutionary pillars,"¹⁵³ the others being the underground within South Africa, popular above-ground mass mobilization, and international diplomatic efforts to isolate the South African government.¹⁵⁴ As will be discussed in later chapters, former MK personnel interviewed for this project were encouraged to think of their armed activities as an aspect of a wider political struggle.

From 1979 onwards, MK operatives were given compulsory political education and were expected to act as political organizers as well as soldiers while on assignment within South Africa.¹⁵⁵ For MK soldiers training in the frontline states, military and political instruction went hand in hand. Aside from the expected training in combat maneuvers and military hardware, recruits would be given instruction on a litany of political topics including Marxist-Leninist

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ Ellis, *External Mission*, 124.; Ellis and Sechaba, *Comrades Against Apartheid*, 200.; Ronnie Kasrils, "Boycotts, Bricks, and the Four Pillars of the South African Struggle," in *Generation Palestine: Voices from the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement*, ed. Rich Wiles (London: Pluto, 2013), 18-33, 19.

¹⁵⁴ Ellis, *External Mission*, 124.

¹⁵⁵ "The Green Book."

philosophy,¹⁵⁶ gender politics, and South African history.¹⁵⁷ This trend can be seen most acutely in the activities of Jack Simons, “the revolutionary teacher.”¹⁵⁸ Simons was a South African-born Marxist intellectual who, with the help of a dedicated corps of instructors and backing from Cuban advisors, transformed the ANC’s camp at Novo Catengue in Southern Angola into the so-called “University of the South,” a full-time political education centre.¹⁵⁹ Ronnie Kasrils estimated that at any given time, the “University of the South” was instructing at least 500 students.¹⁶⁰

Within South Africa, the United Democratic Front (UDF), which formally launched in August 1983, served as the ANC’s legal face.¹⁶¹ According to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s (TRC) report “Gross Violations of Human Rights in the Context of the People’s War,” “The ANC played a direct role in the establishment of the new generation of mass organizations in the late 70’s ... as outlined in the ‘Green Book’.”¹⁶² While MK activity was escalating within the borders of South Africa, it was still largely symbolic. Martin Murray notes that “the modest level of armed attacks brought disproportionately large political rewards in terms of ... building the prestige of the MK.”¹⁶³ Attacks were more often coordinated to support actions by the UDF and served to complement the activities and campaigns of the mass movement.¹⁶⁴ As in Vietnam, it was important that links between the ANC and its internal proxies remain shrouded

¹⁵⁶ Jack Simons, *Comrade Jack: The Political Lectures and Diary of Jack Simons, Novo Catengue*, ed. Marion Spring, Jenny Schreiner and Gwen Ansell (Pretoria: Real African Publishers, 2001), 115-130.; Kasrils, *Armed and Dangerous*, 157.

¹⁵⁷ Simons, *Comrade Jack*, 204-210.

¹⁵⁸ Simons, *Comrade Jack*, 1.; Ellis and Sechaba, *Comrades Against Apartheid*, 88.

¹⁵⁹ Simons, *Comrade Jack*, 91; Ellis and Sechaba, *Comrades Against Apartheid*, 87.

¹⁶⁰ Kasrils, *Armed and Dangerous*, 173.

¹⁶¹ Welsh and Spence, *Ending Apartheid*, 102-104.

¹⁶² TRC vol. 2, 340.

¹⁶³ Martin Murray, *Revolution Deferred*, 119.

¹⁶⁴ Lynda von den Steinen, “Experiencing the Armed Struggle: The Soweto Generation and After,” (MA thesis, University of Cape Town, 2007), 10-11.; James Higgs, “South African Exile Armies: Spear of the Nation and Other, Weapons in the Anti-Apartheid Movement,” in *Exile Armies*, ed. M. Bennitt and P. Latawski. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 122.

in plausible deniability. The TRC notes that the lines between the ANC and UDF were deliberately blurred. Many members of the mass movement were initially unaware that they were receiving their marching orders from the ANC.¹⁶⁵

This shift in strategy was not wholly popular among the rank and file of the MK, who sought a more direct role in the struggle within South Africa. In fact, the MK's greatest crisis came from within. In 1984, a large group of low-ranking MK cadres in camps in Angola mutinied. These soldiers resented being used as cannon fodder in the Angolan government's war against UNITA, an Angolan rebel faction backed by the South Africans. They demanded an immediate shift to a more direct strategy of confronting the SADF militarily.¹⁶⁶ However, the ANC, with the help of their Angolan allies, crushed the uprising and the MK stayed committed to waging a protracted people's war.¹⁶⁷

In South Africa, the 1980s was a decade defined by a constantly escalating campaign of destabilization carried out by the ANC and its internal proxies under the battle cry of "Make apartheid unworkable! Make the country ungovernable!"¹⁶⁸ The UDF, the main internal proxy of the ANC, was in many ways its mirror image. While the ANC was a rigidly controlled political organization operating on a national level, the UDF was an unruly collection of over 600 grassroots organizations largely built around addressing localized grievances.¹⁶⁹ The ANC in exile advocated for a "two-level struggle" in which the UDF would "organize around immediate local issues at the

¹⁶⁵ TRC, vol. 2, 340.

¹⁶⁶ Kasrils, *Armed and Dangerous*, 160-162.; Higgs "South African Exile Armies," 122-123.

¹⁶⁷ von den Steinen, *Experiencing the Armed Struggle*, 10.; TRC, vol. 2, 349-350.

¹⁶⁸ "ANC Call to the Nation: the future is within our grasp!" 1985, Found on *South African History Online*, Accessed June 14, 2018. <https://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/anc-call-to-the-nation-the-future-is-within-our-grasp>

¹⁶⁹ Lodge, "Resistance and Reform," 438.; Welsh and Spence, *Ending Apartheid*, 108.; Waldmeir, *Anatomy of a Miracle*, 48.

first level in struggles that would later coalesce to challenge broader problems on the second [national] level.”¹⁷⁰

Under the directives of a people’s war, the mass democratic movement played a dual role. The first was what was deemed the above-ground or legal struggle. This entailed organized boycotts, stayaways, strikes, and protests aimed at disrupting South Africa’s economy, society, and international image. For example, organized rent boycotts were so successful that many local governments found themselves unable to deliver basic services to their constituents.¹⁷¹ Similarly, in 1986 alone, UDF activity disrupted the studies of 250 000 black students.¹⁷² As is to be expected in a people’s war, civic organizations tied to the mass movement filled this vacuum.¹⁷³ These activities were largely a result of popular mass mobilization but there was certainly a coercive pressure to support mass actions. Refusal to do so could often result in injury or even death.¹⁷⁴ The TRC notes that “militant youth often took it upon themselves to monitor and enforce boycotts.”¹⁷⁵

The second role is somewhat more sinister. Throughout the 1980s, at the behest of the ANC, the Mass Democratic Movement made a concerted effort to uproot and destroy the mechanisms of local black government in urban areas in order to replace them with political organs controlled by the resistance. This was paired with an equally intense campaign to eliminate state

¹⁷⁰ Lodge, “Resistance and Reform,” 439.; Simpson, *Umkhonto We Sizwe*, 313.

¹⁷¹ Davis Welsh and J. E. Spence, *Ending Apartheid* (Harlow: Pearson, 2011), 108.

¹⁷² Welsh and Spence, *Ending Apartheid*, 109.

¹⁷³ Welsh and Spence, *Ending Apartheid*, 108.; Murray, *The Revolution Deferred*, 53-54.; Jeffery, *People’s War*, location 3778.

¹⁷⁴ TRC, vol. 2, 381.; Murray, *The Revolution Deferred*, 55.

¹⁷⁵ TRC, vol. 2, 381.

informers and uproot the state's network of eyes and ears in black majority areas.¹⁷⁶ This period of uprooting state structures would prove to be one of the bloodiest in South Africa's history, with the number of deaths far exceeding casualties caused by MK attacks. Between 1984 and 1989, the TRC confirmed 5707 deaths resulting from political violence in the townships.¹⁷⁷ The vast majority of casualties were community members believed to be informers, collaborators, or "boycott breakers."¹⁷⁸ Within the context of a people's war, the ultimate objective of this purge was to turn black majority areas into liberated zones where the resistance could act as a shadow administration. In *Comrades Against Apartheid*, Steven Ellis notes that by the mid 1980s many townships had "become no-go areas where the police were afraid to patrol other than in force, leaving control of the streets to the young comrades."¹⁷⁹

This pattern is illustrated in a pamphlet written by the ANC National Executive Committee and circulated in the townships in 1984 under the title "ANC Call to the Nation: The Future is Within our Grasp!" "Call to the Nation" began by trumpeting the successes the mass democratic movement had achieved:

In the black ghettos of the urban areas the legitimacy of authority of all types is not only under attack it has largely been destroyed. Most of those who served white rule in so called urban councils have suffered the wrath of the people.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁶ Robert D'A. Henderson, "Operation Vula Against Apartheid," *International Journal of Intelligence and Counter Intelligence* 10, no. 4 (1997): 418-455, 425. Murray, *The Revolution Deferred*, 53. Welsh and Spence, *Ending Apartheid*, 107.

¹⁷⁷ TRC vol. 2, 389.

¹⁷⁸ TRC vol. 2, 390.

¹⁷⁹ Ellis and Sechaba, *Comrades Against Apartheid*, 144.

¹⁸⁰ "ANC Call to the Nation: the future is within our grasp!"

Over the course of the 1980s, the mass democratic movement became increasingly militarized, and many comrades began to train and arm as local MK auxiliaries.¹⁸¹

Fired by the heroic example of Umkhonto we Sizwe more and more youth are searching for ways to organize themselves into effective combat units to defend the people, deal with collaborators, and hit back selectively at the enemy's armed personnel.¹⁸²

By the mid 1980s, with many of the state's methods of control destroyed in many black majority areas and violence worsening, the South African government imposed a state of emergency on the country.¹⁸³ The SADF was forced to intervene, further inflaming tensions.¹⁸⁴ In 1986 alone, 39 000 SADF soldiers were deployed in the townships.¹⁸⁵ However, as has been discussed, in the context of a people's war destroying mechanisms of the state is only half the battle; equally important is replacing them with an alternative institutional framework operated by the resistance. The TRC notes that following the collapse of government-created structures such as community councils, residents started forming alternative structures such as street committees, area committees, residents' associations, and *amabutho* (militias).¹⁸⁶

"The Call to the Nation" demanded that the people "replace the collapsing government stooge councils with people's committees on every block, which will become the embryos of people's power,"¹⁸⁷ and for the nation's fighting youth to "organize into mobile units to defend communities against forces of the state and anti-social elements."¹⁸⁸ In order to fill what Tom Lodge calls the judicial void caused by the destruction of local government, the UDF began to

¹⁸¹ Lodge, "Resistance and Reform," 446.

¹⁸² "ANC Call to the Nation: the future is within our grasp!"

¹⁸³ Murray, *The Revolution Deferred*, 53.

¹⁸⁴ Lodge, "Resistance and Reform," 446.

¹⁸⁵ Lodge, "Resistance and Reform," 470.

¹⁸⁶ TRC vol. 2, 383-384.; Cherry, *Spear of the Nation* 38.

¹⁸⁷ "ANC Call to the Nation: the future is within our grasp!"

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

form people's courts to create a parallel judicial structure that could help administer the liberated zones. While the concept of a people's court was rooted in an egalitarian and redemptive conception of the UDF's social mission, many of the courts quickly devolved into "summary tribunals" where corporal punishment and summary execution were common punishments for many infractions.¹⁸⁹

The campaign to uproot the power of the state in black majority areas was paired with an escalation of terrorist activity aimed at South Africa's power structures and white population carried out by the MK.¹⁹⁰ Tom Lodge records that terrorist attacks rose considerably through the mid to late 1980s, with 136 incidents recorded in 1985, 227 in 1986, and over three hundred in 1989, making MK attacks a near daily occurrence.¹⁹¹ These attacks did little to dent the overall effectiveness of state security structures, but they did have an important psychological effect for both blacks and whites. While the military effectiveness of these actions was negligible, they demonstrated that the ANC had military as well as political muscles to flex.¹⁹² The cost of this campaign was high for the MK operatives who took part. It is estimated that during this period, MK operatives in South Africa suffered a near 100 percent casualty rate.¹⁹³ One former MK operative estimated that in the field, the average survival period for guerrillas was six months.¹⁹⁴ It is estimated that of all the casualties the MK suffered over their thirty-four year armed struggle,

¹⁸⁹ Lodge, "Resistance and Reform," 447.; Welsh and Spence, *Ending Apartheid*, 108-109.

¹⁹⁰ For a much more in-depth discussion of this process than is feasible to give here please see *Spear of the Nation (Umkhonto Wesizwe): South Africa's Liberation Army, 1960s-1990s* by Janet Cherry and *People's War: New Light on the Struggle for South Africa* by Anthea Jeffery

¹⁹¹ Lodge, "Resistance and Reform," 462-463; Cherry, *Spear of the Nation*, 38.

¹⁹² Lodge, "Resistance and Reform," 462-463.

¹⁹³ Thula Simpson, "Toyi-Toyi-ing to Freedom: The Endgame in the ANC's Armed Struggle," 1989-1990," *Journal of South African Studies* 35, no. 2 (2009) 507-521, 509.

¹⁹⁴ Howard Barrell, *MK: the ANC's Armed Struggle* (Johannesburg: Penguin, 1990), 60. Cherry, *Spear of the Nation*, 39.

over half occurred between 1985 and 1990.¹⁹⁵ These losses put an enormous amount of strain on the MK. Steven Ellis notes that while the organization's leadership remained confident and unflappable in public, its losses were unsustainable and its activities had little tangible effect on the military balance of power.¹⁹⁶

With the situation in South Africa spiraling out of control, moderate elements within both the ANC and the National Party began to put out feelers in the hopes of reaching a negotiated settlement to the bloodshed.¹⁹⁷ In the words of Janet Cherry, a historian of the MK, "While the apartheid regime could maintain control through force, it could not gain legitimacy; while the ANC had gained legitimacy, it could not win state power [by force]. It was in this context that a negotiated settlement became an attractive option on both sides."¹⁹⁸ The impending collapse of the Soviet Union also afforded political space for negotiations.¹⁹⁹ Beginning 1985, Kobie Coetzee, the South African Minister of Justice, began to meet in secret with the imprisoned Nelson Mandela to discuss the possibility of "talks about talks."²⁰⁰ Still, despite elements on both sides showing themselves willing to negotiate, both were determined to do so from a position of power.²⁰¹ Thus, the armed struggle continued to escalate as part of what Oliver Tambo, the acting president of the ANC, called a two track strategy.²⁰²

¹⁹⁵ Lodge, "Resistance and Reform," 462.

¹⁹⁶ Ellis and Sechaba, *Comrades Against Apartheid*, 175.

¹⁹⁷ Welsh and Spence, *Ending Apartheid*, 111.

¹⁹⁸ Cherry, *Spear of the Nation*, 44.

¹⁹⁹ Hein Marais, *South Africa: The Limits to Change: The Political Economy of Transition* (London: Zed Books, 1999), 134.

²⁰⁰ Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, 456

²⁰¹ Nancy L. Clark and William H. Worger, *South Africa, the Rise and Fall of Apartheid* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 102.; Simpson, *Umkhonto We Sizwe*, 469.

²⁰² This attitude mirrors that of the North Vietnamese, who adopted a strategy of "talking while fighting" during their war with the United States.

By 1988, both the strengths and deficiencies of the ANC's people's war in South Africa were on display. While the campaign to make South Africa ungovernable had largely succeeded, the ANC and MK leadership in exile were still largely out of the loop when it came to the freedom struggle within the country. While an extremely dedicated core of ANC operatives oversaw the activities of the mass movement, they had no reliable means to coordinate with the ANC leadership in exile.²⁰³ Thus for the most part, the ANC in exile was relegated to reacting to the events occurring within South Africa rather than directing them. The TRC notes that "activists within South Africa interpreted what they understood to be the line of the movement ... [they were] in practice determining the line and the ANC in exile was bound to accept their interpretation."²⁰⁴

In order to remedy the lack of an ANC political presence on the ground within South Africa, the ANC embarked on one of its most ambitious operations of the liberation struggle. Operation Vula represented a drastic escalation of the ANC's presence within South Africa. The goal of Operation Vula was to smuggle senior members of the ANC and MK leadership into the country in order to coordinate and direct the mass democratic movement and armed struggle.²⁰⁵ In many ways Vula was a, if not the, defining moment of the ANC's people's war and the largest and most successful clandestine operation carried out by the ANC during the struggle.²⁰⁶ In the words of Nelson Mandela:

Vula must always be viewed through the prism of the infrastructure of a people's war ... Without Vula we never would have been able to coordinate the activities of Umkhonto we Sizwe, the ANC underground within South Africa and the on the ground structures, especially the United Democratic Front.²⁰⁷

²⁰³ TRC vol. 2, 339.

²⁰⁴ TRC, vol. 2, 340.

²⁰⁵ Henderson, "Operation Vula Against Apartheid," 420.; Cherry, *Spear of the Nation*, 39.

²⁰⁶ Henderson, "Operation Vula Against Apartheid," 420.

²⁰⁷ Nelson Mandela, in introduction to *Shades of Difference: Mac Maharaj and The Struggle for South Africa* by Pendraj O'Malley and Mac Maharaj (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 10.

The MK had a special role to play within the wider context of Operation Vula. While special operations units still engaged in sabotage and armed propaganda actions, specially trained MK cadres were infiltrated into South Africa with a new mandate: to begin the process of arming and training a guerilla army within the borders of South Africa itself.²⁰⁸ According to Stephen Ellis, by the late 1980s, the strategy of the MK had evolved from infiltrating small groups of well-trained operatives into South Africa to building up semi-autonomous armed squads within the country.²⁰⁹ Similarly Tom Lodge notes that:

People's war required bringing under uMkhonto leadership the youthful militants who had already turned the townships into combative arenas ... [forming them] into organised groups of combatants under an externally trained 'officer corps'.²¹⁰

Vula also represented what is likely the largest gun smuggling operation in South African history, with thousands of small arms flooding into the country between 1988 and 1990.²¹¹ It was presumably under the auspices of this operation, that a man named John Ngobeni returned in secret to his home community of N'wamitwa after over a decade in exile.

²⁰⁸ O'Malley and Maharaj, *Shades of Difference*, 283.

²⁰⁹ Ellis and Sechaba, *Comrades Against Apartheid*, 173.

²¹⁰ Lodge, "Resistance and Reform," 461.

²¹¹ Connie Braam, *Operation Vula* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2004), 399.

Chapter 2:

“We Were Giving Our People Hope”

As dusk fell on the evening of April 12, 1989, a car approached a temporary SADF camp in the township of Nkowankowa, outside the city of Tzaneen.²¹² Several weeks previously, the army had commandeered the football stadium as a forward operating base in response to a broad-based civil uprising in the nearby Gazankulu homeland. For over a month, the homeland had been wracked by violence. The Gazankulu police, backed by the national army, sought to suppress the insurrection. Now the resistance prepared to hit back. As the car pulled to a halt two blocks away from the stadium four men exited, armed with AK-47 assault rifles and hand grenades.²¹³ The operation was meticulously planned. For several days Muhlava Muhlava, the operation's getaway driver, had carefully observed the soldiers' movements and routines.²¹⁴ As John Ngobeni, the ranking commander of the group, took up a firing position, the other three approached the high fences of the stadium, grenades in hand. The quiet of the night was abruptly shattered as “five or six” explosions ripped through the camp.²¹⁵ As the bombers ran for the safety of the car, their comrade covered their escape, firing on the pursuing soldiers with his AK-47.²¹⁶ Piling into their getaway car, the insurgents peeled out into the night to return to their base of operations: the rural community of N'wamitwa. In the aftermath of the “battle of Nkowankowa stadium,” there could be little doubt that the liberation struggle had come to the formerly isolated rural homeland.

²¹² *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Amnesty Committee*, “Attack on Rita Township and the Murder of Mr. Shingange,” Statement of John Khombomuni Ngobeni, Johannesburg, May 23, 2000.

²¹³ *Ibid*

²¹⁴ John Ngobeni, *TRC; Truth and Reconciliation Commission Amnesty Committee*, “Attack on Rita Township and the Murder of Mr. Shingange,” statement of Muhlava Muhlava, Johannesburg, May 23, 2000.

²¹⁵ *Ibid*.

²¹⁶ *Ibid*.

N'wamitwa is a communal territory comprised of a collection of thirty-two villages and is currently home to roughly 74 000 people.²¹⁷ Under the apartheid system, N'wamitwa was part of the Gazankulu homeland devised by the architects of apartheid as a semi-autonomous enclave for the Tsonga ethnic group.²¹⁸ At the time, Gazankulu represented a backwater in South African politics. In the late 1980s the territory was home to roughly 600 000 people, largely subsistence farmers.²¹⁹ The homeland system within South Africa stands as a stark illustration of the institutionalized injustice of the apartheid system. Described by the famous South African dissident Steve Biko as “sophisticated concentration camps,”²²⁰ the homelands were kept as deliberately impoverished “tribal dumping grounds” under the control of local strongmen.²²¹

For virtually the entirety of its existence as a homeland within South Africa, Gazankulu was under the control of one man: Professor Hudson Ntsanwisi. Ntsanwisi is somewhat of an enigma. In the historical memory of the former Gazankulu area, he is remembered as both a collaborator with apartheid and as a Tsonga renaissance man who published several novels in his native language.²²² The Ntsanwisi family was also involved with various business interests in Gazankulu, particularly the distribution of alcohol.²²³ In *The Revolution Deferred*, Martin Murray ranks Ntsanwisi alongside the infamous Buthelezi clan in Kwazulu as being amongst the ANC's

²¹⁷ “N'wamitwa population statistics received from Ben Shipalana. E Vibert, Personal Communication.

²¹⁸ “Hudson Ntsanwisi: Leader of Gazankulu, 72.” *New York Times*, March 26, 1993.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Andile Mngxitama, *Biko Lives: Contesting the Legacy of Steve Biko*, ed. Andile Mngxitama Amanda Alexander and Nigel C. Gibson (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 12.

²²¹ Murray, *The Revolution Deferred*, 63-65.

²²² “Prof. Hudson Ntsanwisi, former Chief Minister of Gazankulu, dies in Johannesburg,” *South African History Online*. Accessed April 24, 2018. <http://www.sahistory.org.za/dated-event/prof-hudson-ntsanwisi-former-chief-minister-gazankulu-dies-Johannesburg>.

²²³ *South African Institute of Race Relations Annual Report 89/90* (Johannesburg: South African Institute for Race Relations, 1990). 497.

most implacable opponents within the homeland system.²²⁴ *The Sowetan*, an ANC-aligned newspaper, described Ntsanwisi as ruling the homeland with an iron fist.²²⁵ “He wields so much power that even his name, which is mentioned in hush-hush tones has become synonymous with the homeland.”²²⁶ Ntsanwisi’s rule was enforced by a local army and constabulary loyal to him. As will be demonstrated later in this chapter, the security forces in Gazankulu were no strangers to using heavy-handed tactics to quell dissent. Up until the late 1980s, the violence engulfing much of the country had largely passed Gazankulu by.²²⁷ Rural mobilization is a self-acknowledged blind spot in the ANC’s people’s war.²²⁸ In his memoir *Armed and Dangerous*, Ronnie Kasrils laments that, “Until 1990 at any rate, we had not sufficiently reached out to politicise rural people.”²²⁹

Unlike urban settings in South Africa where the inhumanity of the apartheid system was an inescapable fact of life, the rural inhabitants of Gazankulu were largely insulated from its worst excesses, although their urban relatives were certainly not.²³⁰ While Ntsanwisi’s administration was repressive and corrupt, within Gazankulu there was little of the institutionalized racism that was a defining feature of life in urban South Africa. The ANC, on the other hand, was largely viewed negatively, particularly by older generations, as a collection of unruly terrorists with links to international communism. The former combatants interviewed for this project expressed a deep-seated mistrust of older residents when it came to the liberation struggle in N’wamitwa.

²²⁴ Murray, *The Revolution Deferred*, 67.

²²⁵ “Big Brother Alive and Well in Giyani,” *Sowetan*, March 2, 1989.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*

²²⁷ “Hudson Ntsanwisi: Leader of Gazankulu, 72,” *New York Times*, March 26 1993.

²²⁸ There was a vigorous decades long debate within the MK on whether to focus their limited resources on rural or urban mobilization. According to Ellis it was finally decided that “people in the townships would take the place of the jungles and mountains which had hidden guerillas in other countries. For a more in-depth discussion of this debate see *Comrades Against Apartheid* by Steven Ellis, 111.

²²⁹ Kasrils, *Armed and Dangerous*, 195-196.

²³⁰ Interview with Case Ngobeni, February 24, 2018.

While their reasons vary, many of the former MK operatives interviewed expressed a sense of generational isolation from their parents and older residents, whom they believed to be complacent and collaborationist. At least two interviewees expressed the view that rural isolation was to blame.

In the words of Bohani Mathebula, a former MK combatant:

Older people like my parents did not understand what ANC is or was, but people who lived in the cities [did] because they were too oppressed. They came to a point where they understood that ANC was the only party that was going to free them; [unlike] The people [in Gazankulu] who work for the local [white] farmers. The farmers would tell them Mandela and his friends are terrorists who want to steal your country.²³¹

Interestingly, Bohani is not the only former combatant to use the farm workers as a discursive tool to discuss what they saw as the compliant attitude of older generations in Gazankulu towards the apartheid regime. In the words of Hendrik Mohononi, who joined the MK in N'wamitwa in 1992:

You see if you are known to be a member of the MK, you were regarded as a terrorist of course. Because there were people that were enjoying [benefits] under that particular arrangement and they were always scared of the unknown. So there was no way in which they would not inform the whites. It's just like now, if you are working for a white in a particular farm what is likely to happen ... if you want to go on strike for whatever reason? A white will know it, your boss will know it, because there are people that are informing those people because they are enjoying [benefits] under that particular person. So we are very sure there were people around us who were doing that.²³²

Like Bohani, Case Ngobeni also notes that those who stayed in the homelands tended to be insulated from much of the institutionalized racism of the apartheid system.²³³

²³¹ Interview with Bohani Mathebula, February 23, 2018.

²³² Interview with Hendrik Mohononi. February 22, 2018.

²³³ In fact, there was constant movement between rural and urban South Africa, under apartheid this occurred both legally and illegally. Still, the belief that N'wamitwa was an isolated rural enclave was pervasive amongst former MK personnel consulted for this study.

In fact, those who were less sympathetic were those who grew [up] in the homelands and had never been to any other area. Because they never knew and they never saw how difficult it was then to live in a country which was divided. But those who even grew up in Joburg, in Gauteng, they knew what apartheid was, because they met these white people, police, they were sometimes imprisoned, they were also bound to carry these pass identity documents. So they were more sympathetic than those who were in homelands. But to a certain extent they realized [in the homelands] that they could not remain like that. They started fighting also.²³⁴

There is perhaps another reason for the general lack of trust many residents of Gazankulu seemed to have for the ANC. The Northern Transvaal was centre of the MK's landmine campaign in the mid to late 1980s. In an attempt to disrupt white-owned agriculture in the area, MK operatives placed a series of anti-tank mines on roads and in fields. While the targets of these operations were military patrols and white farmers, the victims were overwhelmingly black farm labourers.²³⁵ Between 1985 and 1987, the TRC confirmed twenty-three deaths resulting from the landmine campaign, including two MK operatives.²³⁶ In mid-1987, the operation was called off due to the anger it was causing amongst the local population.²³⁷ Press coverage at the time shows that the South African government made the most of these indiscriminate attacks in order to discredit the ANC.²³⁸ During the TRC hearings, the ANC expressed "deep regret" over the number of civilian casualties caused by the laying of landmines in the area.²³⁹

Despite the isolation of growing up far away from the white-controlled urban centres, by the late 1980s youth in Gazankulu were beginning to chafe under the yoke of apartheid. Some

²³⁴ Interview with Case Ngobeni, February 24, 2018.

²³⁵ TRC vol. 2, 334, "Landmine Kills Five Blacks on South African Farm," *The New York Times*, August 18, 1986.

²³⁶ TRC, vol. 2, 333.

²³⁷ Cherry, *Spear of the Nation*, 33.

²³⁸ "Landmine Kills Five Blacks on South African Farm."

²³⁹ TRC, vol. 2, 334-335.

were beginning to look to the ANC for a solution—among them was “George.”²⁴⁰ “George” was an ideal recruit for the MK’s fledgling army in N’wamitwa. He was a rebellious and physically imposing man of twenty-seven years, fond of picking fistfights in the local shabeen.²⁴¹ By 1989, he was also becoming increasingly political and was an organizer in the Giyani Youth Congress, a radical youth organization with links to the ANC.²⁴² “George” remembers,

I was an activist. In fact, I was one guy who would spread the ANC message around this area by then. People would consult with me. But the majority did not know that I was also an underground operative. They know me as comrade “George” the ANC guy, who talks to us about ANC.²⁴³

Aside from his physical attributes and background in political activism, “George” possessed something else indispensable to the resistance: his brand new bright red bakkie (pickup truck).²⁴⁴ Perhaps the exact reason he was selected for recruitment into the MK will never be known. What is known is that in October 1989, “George” was asked to a surreptitious meeting with a high-level figure in the ANC underground.

If one were to think of the insurgency in N’wamitwa as a web, John Ngobeni is the spider sitting in the middle, subtly manipulating the strings. Due to his refusal to be interviewed, he remains an enigmatic yet central figure of the people’s war as it unfolded in N’wamitwa. However, through his appeal for amnesty at the TRC and interviews with former comrades, we can trace some aspects of his time as an exile and as the paramount commander of the MK during the people’s war in N’wamitwa.

²⁴⁰ Pseudonym.

²⁴¹ A shabeen is an informal drinking establishment, one of the several Gaelic words that have inexplicably worked their way into the lexicon of Black South Africa.

²⁴² Interview with “George,” February 26, 2018.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

We know comrade John was born in Mavele village around 1960. By all accounts, John Ngobeni was a gentle and soft-spoken child. Case Ngobeni, a distant cousin who later served under John as a member of the MK, described him as “a fine man, gentle, he wouldn’t harm a fly.”²⁴⁵ Due to a congenital defect in one of his legs, John was left physically disabled from an early age and attended a school for the disabled in Letaba.²⁴⁶ Here, he distinguished himself as a brilliant student, particularly excelling in math and the sciences.²⁴⁷ It remains unknown what caused John to renounce his life in South Africa and pursue a career as a stateless militant. What we do know is that John Ngobeni left N’wamitwa in 1977 when he was in his late teens.²⁴⁸ This lines up with the wave of student activism that followed the Soweto uprising and the subsequent government crackdown. We can assume John was one of the thousands of young South Africans who took the Northern Highway into exile during this period in order to join the ANC in the frontline states. From John’s testimony we know his time in exile was not spent idly. In his own words:

I joined the ANC in 1977 in Mozambique. I then went to complete O levels for two years at Sierra Leone. I then went to ... Tanzania, where I stayed until March 1980. I then went to Cuba to study Chemical Engineering. I returned in 1986 and went to Dakawa, Tanzania. In 1987 I was sent to Angola to do military training. Thereafter I went to Zambia to await infiltration into the country.²⁴⁹

According to associate Bennit Mkhari, someone in the MK command saw John’s potential and groomed him to be their man in N’wamitwa.²⁵⁰ It is impossible to know exactly what happened

²⁴⁵ Interview with Case Ngobeni, February 24, 2018.

²⁴⁶ Interview with “George,” February 26, 2018.

²⁴⁷ Interview with Bennit Mkhari, February 23, 2018.

²⁴⁸ Interview with Bennit Mkhari, February 23, 2018.; *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Amnesty Committee*, “Attack on Rita Township and the Murder of Mr. Shingange,” Statement of John Khombomuni Ngobeni, Johannesburg, May 23, 2000.

²⁴⁹ *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Amnesty Committee*, “Attack on Rita Township and the Murder of Mr. Shingange,” Statement of John Khombomuni Ngobeni, Johannesburg, May 23, 2000.

²⁵⁰ Interview with Bennit Mkhari, February 23, 2018.

to John Ngobeni during his decade in exile. How this sensitive, physically disabled young man made it through the MK's notoriously brutal military training is equally mysterious. What is known is that by October 1989, John Ngobeni had returned to N'wamitwa, via the ANC's smuggling routes in Swaziland.²⁵¹ Presumably, John was one of the hundreds of MK operatives smuggled into South Africa as part of Operation Vula. It seems that under the alias Norman Mangani, John re-established contact with his sister in Mavele village and used her home as a kind of forward operating base. As John explains, "My mission was to reconnoitre and establish an MK presence in the area. I had orders to establish underground units which I commanded. I also trained and recruited MK cadres in the area."²⁵²

It appears that John Ngobeni returned to N'wamitwa a changed man. Despite Case Ngobeni's description of John as a gentle soul incapable of harming the local insect life, the image of the John Ngobeni who returned from exile is that of a hardened covert operative absolutely dedicated to the cause of liberation and more than willing to use violence to achieve it. Even Case, who was reluctant to speak ill of his kinsman, noted that it seemed as if John, who was still a relatively young man at this time, had aged far beyond the ten years he spent in exile.²⁵³ Perhaps not even John himself knows exactly when, why, and how this transformation occurred, but it is likely that the answer lies somewhere in the camps.

The ANC's system of camps in the frontline states remains a deeply contested battleground in South African historical memory. Despite the assurances of ANC stalwarts like Ronnie Kasrils that reports of human rights abuses within the camps are exaggerated and politically motivated,²⁵⁴

²⁵¹ *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Amnesty Committee*, "Attack on Rita Township and the Murder of Mr. Shingange," Statement of John Khombomuni Ngobeni, Johannesburg, May 23, 2000.

²⁵² *Ibid.*

²⁵³ Interview with Case Ngobeni, February 24, 2018.

²⁵⁴ Kasrils, *Armed and Dangerous*, 254-255.

the general scholarly consensus is that the ANC's camps were home to grave and systemic abuses of human rights.²⁵⁵ MK recruits found themselves under harsh military discipline. Infractions ranging from smoking daga (cannabis), to destruction of ANC property, to fighting were punished with beatings, occasionally to death.²⁵⁶ A common form of punishment within the camps was *mbophelele esihlahleni*, tying to a tree, where the unfortunate victim would be hung from a tree, beaten, and left to hang, sometimes for days.²⁵⁷ One witness who visited the Pango camp in Angola in 1979 described the path leading to the main administrative building as “lined with the bloody and filthy victims of beatings hanging from trees.”²⁵⁸

Within the camps, which were often the targets of the South African military and intelligence agencies, paranoia and fear of informers was rife. That the ranks of the MK had been comprehensively infiltrated by the South African state is beyond doubt.²⁵⁹ However, for regular MK recruits, the cure to this problem might have been worse than the disease. Those within the camps lived in constant fear of the *Mbokodo*, the internal intelligence agency of the ANC. *Mbokodo*, Xhosa for the crushing stone, was founded in the late 1970s to monitor the influx of new recruits in the wake of the Soweto riots.²⁶⁰ The East German government aided in the formation of the *Mbokodo* which was modeled after its own intelligence service, the *Stasi*.²⁶¹ Steven Ellis makes the argument that the East German connection led to “a highly ideological view

²⁵⁵ Cherry, *Spear of the Nation*, 30.

²⁵⁶ Ellis, *External Mission*, 158.; *Amnesty International Report “South Africa: Torture, Ill- Treatment and Executions in African National Congress Camps,”* December 2, 1992, Accessed April 27, 2018 2.

²⁵⁷ Ellis, *External Mission*, 173.; *Amnesty International Report “Torture, Ill- Treatment and Executions”* 2.

²⁵⁸ Ellis, *External Mission*, 173.

²⁵⁹ Steven Ellis, “Mbokodo: Security in ANC Camps, 1961-1990,” *African Affairs* 93, no. 371 (1994): 279-298, 288; Higgs, *Exile Armies*, 122.; Chery, *Spear of the Nation*, 27.

²⁶⁰ Ellis, “Mbokodo,” 285.

²⁶¹ Ellis, *External Mission*. 152.

of security.”²⁶² In line with the East German model the ANC’s security treated any form of lax discipline or ideological deviation as “prima facia evidence of disloyalty or even espionage.”²⁶³

Many of the new recruits who joined MK after 1976 were South African patriots rather than ANC party stalwarts. Among the newly arrived “children of Soweto,” dissatisfaction over poor conditions in the camps, what they saw as incompetent and ineffectual leadership, and the ANC’s expectation that they would take part in the Angolan civil war, led to widespread dissatisfaction.²⁶⁴ While the 1980s were marked by an escalation of the people’s war in South Africa, ANC exiles in the camps faced an equally brutal campaign waged by *Mbokodo* against saboteurs and “ideological dissidents.”²⁶⁵ In a 1992 brief titled “South Africa: Torture, Ill Treatment, and Executions in African National Congress Camps,” Amnesty International documented a longstanding pattern of human rights abuses carried out by the *Mbokodo*.²⁶⁶ As an exiled member of the MK, John Ngobeni would have been party to many of these developments. As will be discussed in Chapter Three, it seems he brought elements of the culture of the camps back to N’wamitwa with him.

Despite John Ngobeni’s use of an alias, “George” recognized him immediately:

I told him look man I know you. You were at school in Letaba, the school for the handicapped, there he was learning along with my younger brother ... And he used to tell me that you skipped the country somewhere around seventy-seven ... I know what you are doing and I want to work with you.²⁶⁷

²⁶² *Ibid.*

²⁶³ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁴ Ellis, “Mbokodo,” 292-293.; Thula Simpson Toyi-Toyi-ing to Freedom: The Endgame in the ANC's Armed Struggle, 1989–1990, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 35:2 (2009) 507-521, 510.

²⁶⁵ Ellis, *External Mission*, 153.

²⁶⁶ *Amnesty International Report*, “Torture, Ill-Treatment and Executions,” 1-3.

²⁶⁷ Interview with “George,” February 26, 2018.

Even without “George’s” firsthand experience from Letaba, we know that by 1989 John Ngobeni had become something of a hometown hero amongst the rebellious youth of N’wamitwa. According to Bennit Mkhari,

We heard of this one guy who had skipped the country as early as nineteen seventy-eight.²⁶⁸ He decided ‘I can’t stay here as long as we are suffering,’ he decided to cross the country and get military training ... We only knew that around our area there was one student who decided to leave everything ... and go and fight for my country.²⁶⁹

In discussions with various informants about their time working under John Ngobeni, two character traits stand out—traits shared by many guerilla commanders throughout history: charisma and brutality. Bohani Mathebula, one of the young men John recruited into the MK, remembers,

John Ngobeni was very stubborn. We were very afraid of him. He was too aggressive to an extent that we thought he was crazy but he was not. He looked crippled sort of, but whatever he would say, we were going to do it.²⁷⁰

As will be discussed later, this fear was well founded. Still, many informants describe John Ngobeni as a charismatic leader who led by example and inspired a great deal of loyalty in those who served under him. According to Boysa Mkhari, another teenage MK recruit, “we all wanted to be like him.”²⁷¹ It also seems that Ngobeni was a canny judge of character; “it was almost like he could read someone’s mind.”²⁷² Upon his first meeting with John, “George” was suitably impressed.

²⁶⁸ From John’s TRC testimony we know he actually left in 1977.

²⁶⁹ Interview with Bennit Mkhari, February 23, 2018.

²⁷⁰ Interview with Bohani Mathebula, February 23, 2018.

²⁷¹ Interview with Boysa Mkhari, February 22, 2018.

²⁷² Interview with “George,” February 26, 2018.

I had read books about the guys who had sacrificed for our freedom ... I read about Chief Albert Luthuli and his call let my people go ... I've read books like...*Your Country is Beautiful*²⁷³ by Alan Paton. So I was fascinated by these people who were bold enough to stand up and say apartheid is wrong, and it must be abolished. And when I saw Comrade John I saw a guy who responded to that inner call that says do something for your country. And he was ... I mean physically this problem of walking. Yeah, and I was like why is this man doing this when he has this condition and I am fine. But I am doing nothing. I think I need to join this man ... he really inspired me.²⁷⁴

“George’s” induction into the shadowy world of the MK was a carefully managed affair, marked by small tests of competence and loyalty as well as an incremental escalation of his responsibilities. The first duty “George” was asked to perform was relatively innocuous. He was told to transport John to meet surreptitiously with his mother in nearby Jopie village.²⁷⁵ “George” helped facilitate several secret meetings for John Ngobeni, but always had the sense of being carefully observed by John.²⁷⁶ Eventually, he was asked to move from transporting fugitives to a much more delicate cargo: weapons. “George’s” career as N’wamitwa’s chief gun runner began somewhat inauspiciously. The comrades he was meant to rendezvous with never appeared and after a nerve-wracking night of waiting, “George” was forced to return home in defeat.²⁷⁷

In retrospect, “George” is certain that this event was yet another test. When asked if the guns ever did arrive, he laughed. “Lots of them.”²⁷⁸ From November 1989 onwards, guns began to flow into N’wamitwa at an astonishing rate. The weapons that “George” transported were

²⁷³ Here “George” almost certainly means the famous *Cry the Beloved Country* by Alan Paton.

²⁷⁴ Interview with “George,” February 26, 2018.

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

largely of Eastern Bloc origin. The cargo consisted mainly of the ubiquitous AK-47 and the Škorpión, a cheap Czech-made submachine gun.²⁷⁹ According to “George:”

We had hand grenades, we had landmines, and these ones that you put on electric pylons [likely some kind of limpet mine]. So we had those things. And lots of bullets of course for the Škorpións, for the AKs, they were there too.²⁸⁰

Naturally “George” and his cohorts took part in some unsanctioned target practice, behavior he later described as “naughty.”²⁸¹ Like many insurgents the world over, “George” had a particular fondness for the AK. The Kalashnikov Assault Rifle is simultaneously an exquisite piece of military engineering,²⁸² an international cultural phenomenon²⁸³ and perhaps, by number of lives taken, the single most devastating weapon in human history.²⁸⁴ For over half a century the AK-47 has established itself as the weapon of choice of revolutionaries, insurgents, militias, and criminals the world over.²⁸⁵ By the 1960s the proliferation of the AK-47 had become a cornerstone of Soviet foreign policy. The USSR sought to confront the Western influence in the rapidly decolonizing Global South by flooding the region with its signature rifle. This transfer in military technology served the dual role of cementing alliances with Third World revolutionaries, while frustrating Western ambitions for global hegemony.²⁸⁶ In 2010, journalist and historian C.J. Chivers estimated there are roughly 100 million AKs in worldwide circulation, making it easily the world’s most popular and infamous firearm.²⁸⁷

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

²⁸² C. J. Chivers, *The Gun* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 3.

²⁸³ Michael Hodges, *AK-47: The Story of the People’s Gun* (London: Sceptre, 2007), 224-225.; Chivers, *The Gun*, 11.

²⁸⁴ Chivers, *The Gun*, 13-14.

²⁸⁵ Hodges, *AK-47*, 2.

²⁸⁶ Chivers, *The Gun*, 203-204.

²⁸⁷ Chivers, *The Gun*, 12.

The ubiquity of the Kalashnikov is largely due to three factors that make it an exceptionally effective weapon for guerilla warfare. The AK is easy to make, easy to maintain, and easy to use.

In the words of journalist Michael Hodges:

With only eight moving parts, it is both cheap to manufacture and easy to use; indeed, so easy that any combatant, child or adult, can put down a devastating 650 rounds-per-minute ... after very basic training. The AK-47 can be stripped in under a minute and cleaned quickly in almost any climatic condition. Even if it isn't cleaned the AK-47 is still more likely to fire than any of its rivals given similar treatment.²⁸⁸

Hodges' observation was echoed by "George" who said that "Anyone could use an AK-47. Once it's automatic, you just go like that [miming holding and aiming a gun] and shoot until the magazine is finished."²⁸⁹ The methods the MK used to communicate the location of weapon caches were low tech yet effective. As "George" describes:

To fetch weapons ... they would give us a map and say on the road it will be marked ... He would make mark like this [miming an x] ... Then there will be a tree somewhere and under that tree there will be a mark and you'll start digging. You get the weapons and put them in the car and drive back.²⁹⁰

"George" would hide the guns in a discrete but easily accessible location.

It was very difficult but we just ... make it somewhere in the bush, far away from people, and we would try to make sure people wouldn't realize that the soil has been disturbed. We tried our level best and it was not easy.²⁹¹

As can be imagined, moving guns for an insurgency in an authoritarian state was a delicate undertaking. Caution could easily bleed over into paranoia. The MK cell in N'wamitwa was small

²⁸⁸ Hodges, *AK-47*, 1.

²⁸⁹ Interview with "George," February 26, 2018.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*

and tightly controlled by bonds of secrecy. It quickly becomes apparent from the TRC report that each member of the cell operated under a *nom de guerre*, obscuring their identities from their comrades.²⁹² “George,” as the man in charge of moving the weapons, operated largely independently from the rest of the cell. Due to constant fear of informers and police raids, he worked entirely from memory.

It was memory because there was soldiers all over, there was security branch all over. Anytime at some stage they recognized what we were up to, and we were marked people. So they could have arrested us, beaten us, and we could have said ‘there they are.’ They used to raid our places, they could have obtained documents, so you had to keep it in your head. If they killed us even John and the other guys would have forfeited the guns ... they never would have found where the weapons were.²⁹³

“George’s” description lines up precisely with that of Mac Maharaj, the architect of Operation Vula who noted that during his time as a covert operative in Natal, “Certain people had access to caches ... But only one person knew where every cache was.”²⁹⁴ Similarly, “George” knew very little about who else was working with the movement or their activities.²⁹⁵ Despite taking these precautions, the MK had at least one close call which cost their unit a cache of arms. Interestingly, this incident also plays into the perception voiced by many former combatants that older residents could not be trusted.

Those guys²⁹⁶ made an arms cache during the day and there was this old man looking after the cattle. He saw them digging that pit for the guns. He went back to tell his headman, his induna, and then the induna went to report to the soldiers here in N’wamitwa ... So they came with metal detectors and took everything.²⁹⁷

²⁹² *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Amnesty Committee*, “Attack on Rita Township and the Murder of Mr. Shingange,” Statement of John Khombomuni Ngobeni, Johannesburg, May 23, 2000.

²⁹³ Interview with “George,” February 26, 2018.

²⁹⁴ O’Malley and Maharaj, *Shades of Difference*, 283.

²⁹⁵ Interview with “George,” February 26, 2018.

²⁹⁶ It is unclear exactly who “George” is referring to here.

²⁹⁷ Interview with “George,” February 26, 2018.

From John's testimony at his amnesty hearing we can glean some tantalising details about the ANC's supply networks and command structure in the area. The war in N'wamitwa seems to have been run out of the neighboring Kingdom of Swaziland. According to John, the guns were coming over the border from Swaziland. The kingdom also played host, most likely unknowingly, to a mysterious figure operating under the nom de guerre Timen.²⁹⁸ Timen appears to have been John's direct superior and in charge of arming and coordinating the people's war from the relative safety of Swaziland. It seems that John was given a large amount of personal discretion as a commander. As he states,

When you are trained militarily ... you are taught to identify the enemy, then on that basis you know who to target and who not to target. Under certain circumstances, you can get orders to say that: "Deal with this person," but under certain circumstances, you as a commander on the ground, you choose which person to deal with, based on the information that you have.²⁹⁹

While John's superiors seem to have given him free rein to plan operations as he saw fit, he remained deeply tied to the ANC command structure. As he notes: "Each action that I participated in, no matter how minor it could have been, a report was sent back to my commanders."³⁰⁰ John makes reference to remaining in contact with his superiors through couriers, although he also notes he made the journey himself several times to meet with his commanders in person.³⁰¹

²⁹⁸ *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Amnesty Committee*, "Attack on Rita Township and the Murder of Mr. Shingange," Statement of John Khombomuni Ngobeni, Johannesburg, May 23, 2000.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*

During their period of activity from October 1989 to June 1990, the MK carried out several armed actions in N’wamitwa and the surrounding area. John’s cell targeted policemen and members of the security branch. One Ngabenziwa Thomas Shingange, a “notoriously cruel” member of the homeland police force, was assassinated when the MK felt he was getting too close to discovering their identities.³⁰² By examining his assassination, we can extrapolate how the MK in N’wamitwa chose its targets and operated. According to John’s testimony Shingange “was notorious for harassing political activists.”³⁰³ John determined an example was to be made “to show other black policemen not to follow in the footsteps of Shingange.”³⁰⁴ Through analysis of the TRC testimony of three of the combatants involved in the assassination that occurred in the spring of 1990, we can create something of a post-mortem on this act of political violence.

John decided the MK would hit Shingange on his way to his cousin’s memorial service. Shortly after picking up his sister, Shingange’s car was ambushed by two MK gunmen.³⁰⁵ In a burst of gunfire Shingange was killed instantly, while his sister Lilly Shingange was shot in the leg. She described the experience in a victim impact statement given to the TRC.

When we went out to the car after walking some meters ... we heard some shots. I was in the middle. Between myself and my brother two bullets passed. He was struck by the third bullet. After the shots went off, the car went off the road and inside another yard. ... I was crying by then. I was calling for my mother to come see us before we died. After that I can’t remember ... When I woke up I was in the hospital.³⁰⁶

³⁰² Interview with “George,” February 26, 2018.

³⁰³ Truth and Reconciliation Commission Amnesty Committee, “Attack on Rita Township and the Murder of Mr. Shingange,” Statement of John Khombomuni Ngobeni, Johannesburg, May 23, 2000.

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

³⁰⁵ Ibid.

³⁰⁶ Lilly Shingange, victim impact statement in *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Amnesty Committee*, “Attack on Rita Township and the Murder of Mr. Shingange,” statement of Stranger Jabulani Mbhalati, May 23 2000.

The Shingange assassination fits into the pattern of how MK hit squads tended to operate while on assignment in South Africa.³⁰⁷ There was a short burst of targeted violence against a high-profile individual. “George” also notes there were several skirmishes with security forces around the intersection leading to Tzaneen, the nearest large town.³⁰⁸ Fitting with the first stage of a people’s war, many of these can be considered acts of armed propaganda meant to dispel notions of the enemy’s invulnerability and to ignite the spirit of resistance in a downtrodden population, rather than to harm the state militarily. In the words of “George”:

We were sort of waging an arms [armed] propaganda struggle giving our people hope that it is possible to fight the regime even though it was so powerful, and we were not even closer to defeating them I must acknowledge. Although my friends wouldn’t like to hear this, the Afrikaners were heavily armed and prepared for war, more than prepared for war.³⁰⁹

As Lodge and others have noted, the power discrepancy between the MK and the South African security forces cannot be overstated. Still, as will be discussed further in Chapter Three, it seems that an important part of MK political training involved drawing on the triumphs of other successful Third World liberation movements for inspiration. It is also interesting that “George,” a product of the deliberately substandard Bantu education system, seems remarkably cognizant of world events. This trend seems common amongst former MK combatants that we interviewed. Given that anecdotal evidence suggests that the base level of education for people of “George’s” generation in the area is quite low, I would posit that this heightened level of political awareness

³⁰⁷ For one of the best descriptions of the day to day operations and procedures of MK assassination squads see *A Just Defiance: The Bomb makers, the Insurgents and a Legendary Treason Trial* by the South African human rights lawyer Peter Harris who painstakingly recreates the activities of his clients. Peter Harris, *A Just Defiance: The Bomb makers, the Insurgents and a Legendary Treason Trial* (London: Portobello Books, 2011).

³⁰⁸ Interview with “George,” February 26, 2018.

³⁰⁹ Ibid.

was a product of MK political education. “George” discusses how the successes of revolutionary movements in Cuba and Vietnam heavily influenced and encouraged him and his comrades.

Historically we knew that even if a regime was so powerful, it’s possible to defeat them. You will know about the Cuban struggle there, they managed to win back their country. You will remember about your country’s involvement in Vietnam.³¹⁰ A very, very small country, but it resisted the might of the USA, until the USA withdrew. So we studied those things, we knew about those things. That it is possible, as long as you win the support of the local population, you can win the struggle. But if you don’t win the support of the local population then you have a problem.³¹¹

As is to be expected in the context of a people’s war, the actions of Comrade John’s MK cell were a relatively small aspect of a much wider political effort to bring the Gazankulu homeland to its knees. The people’s war in Gazankulu closely follows the ANC’s playbook as described in Chapter One. Throughout the late 1980s, the ANC began to increase efforts to raise its profile among the inhabitants of the Gazankulu homeland under the guise of various civic organizations. At the time, non-political civic organizations were allowed freedom of assembly, enabling them to organize and recruit. Bennit Mkhari worked with a civic organization during this period that was ostensibly dedicated to improving the road system within the Gazankulu homeland. According to Bennit, “We’d be working on the pavement but really we’d be preaching the gospel. We’d say one, two, three, who wants to join ANC.”³¹²

In February 1990, student activists spearheaded by the Giyani Youth Congress began to rise up against what they perceived as a corrupt and sub-par educational system. At the same time, the civil service of Gazankulu began a stay-away from work demanding better pay and the

³¹⁰ It seems that in much of rural South Africa, Canada is relatively unknown as a sovereign nation and is often believed to be a state within the United States.

³¹¹ Interview with “George,” February 26, 2018.

³¹² Interview with Bennit Mkhari, February 23, 2018.

resignation of Gazankulu's Chief Minister Hudson Ntsanwisi.³¹³ The South African Institute for Race Relations' annual Race Relations Survey estimated that the stay-away was "virtually total."³¹⁴ These actions were coordinated with a large-scale boycott of businesses owned and operated by the Ntsanwisi family.³¹⁵ Many of these businesses were also burned to the ground, along with the homes of policemen and those unwilling to take part in the strike.³¹⁶ Within two months, most aspects of administration within the homeland had been paralysed and the government was unable to deliver even basic services to the people.³¹⁷ For the first time in his twenty-one years as Chief Minister, Hudson Ntsanwisi found himself fighting for his political life.

While these actions were largely popular grassroots responses to an unpopular and ineffectual political system, there was a hard edge of coercion. The hand of the MK can be seen in a series of grenade attacks, largely against the homes of policeman, as well as against businesses who refused to shutter their doors in solidarity with the strikers.³¹⁸ During this time, a pamphlet allegedly from MK circulated around the community threatening with execution, any civil servants who did not take part in the strike.³¹⁹ The *Cape Times* also reported several shooting incidents involving automatic weapons directed at the police in Giyani and the homeland's transportation networks.³²⁰

³¹³ *SAIRR 1989/90*, 497.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*; "4 Shot Dead in Gazankulu," *Star* February 22, 1990.; "Boycott and Stayaway Continues in Gazankulu," *Star*, February 23, 1990.

³¹⁷ *SAIRR 1989/90*, 499.; "Gazankulu Workers Urged to Return to Jobs," *Star*, March 8, 1990.

³¹⁸ "Unrest in Gazankulu Not Caused by ANC," *Cape Times*, April 6, 1990.

³¹⁹ *SAIRR 1989/90*, 500.

³²⁰ "Unrest in Gazankulu Continues," *Cape Times*, April 11, 1990.

The response on the part of the state to these disturbances was characteristically heavy-handed. By April 1990, the homeland police force had arrested over 2 000 people, and killed at least twenty.³²¹ Newspapers from the time record many incidents of the homeland police using deadly and overwhelming force on protesters during the unrest. The rapidly deteriorating situation within Gazankulu forced Ntsanwisi to call in outside help. On February 21, 1990, a detachment of SADF soldiers entered Gazankulu as an occupying force in order to help the homeland forces restore order.³²² The MK's response to the occupation has become the stuff of legend in N'wamitwa. On April 12, 1990, MK guerillas staged a brazen attack on a temporary SADF base at the stadium in Nkowankowa, as was described at the beginning of this chapter. Four national servicemen were injured.³²³ It is worth noting that even before the attack on April 12, the local SADF commander stated that the countryside was "dangerously uneasy" and that travel between villages at night was deemed extremely hazardous.³²⁴

As is typical of armed propaganda actions, the cultural and political impacts of the "battle of Nkowankowa stadium" far outweigh any effect on the military balance of power in the area. Still, the battle of Nkowankowa held tremendous symbolic importance for two reasons. Firstly, it marked the first time the resistance had directly attacked the hated army of the apartheid state within the homeland. Secondly, the stadium in Nkowankowa held symbolic value as a focal point of resistance. Before it was taken over as a temporary base by the SADF, it had been an important staging point for political rallies. For instance, on March 5 1990 the stadium had hosted 30 000 people for the highly politicized funeral of two young men who had died in clashes with the

³²¹ "Protest March Against Hudson," *Soweton*, April 5, 1990.

³²² "SADF Clamp: Troops Sent to Giyani as Youth's Body Found," *Soweton*, February 21, 1990.

³²³ *SAIRR 1989/90*, 498.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*

police.³²⁵ John also states that by attacking the stadium at Nkowankowa the MK sought to undermine notions of the SADF's invulnerability. In his words, "by attacking them [we were] showing them that the soldiers were also vulnerable."³²⁶

In the aftermath of the attack at Nkowankowa, "George" found himself in the crosshairs of the apartheid state. "I was banned by the soldiers. They said if they should see my bakkie anywhere near Nkowankowa they would shoot to kill."³²⁷ Similarly, those with suspected links to the insurgency faced constant raids on their homes.³²⁸ Despite increased pressure on the insurgency by the forces of the state, in the end internal dissention and ill discipline within the unit caused its downfall. It seems that sometime in mid-1990, a comrade by the name of Temba, one of the insurgents who had taken part in the attack on Nkowankowa, committed a senseless crime. Using weapons provided by the MK, Temba attacked a hostel for boarding students of Mahwahwa High School in the village of Nkambako, terrorising the students and raping two young women.³²⁹

Needless to say, John Ngobeni was furious. Temba's actions risked squandering the goodwill that John and the MK were trying so hard to build with the local community. Given the importance that the ANC put on winning over the local population, Temba's actions could not stand. Temba was given a stark choice: either go into exile or be executed.³³⁰ With Temba choosing the former, it fell to "George" to smuggle him down to Mpumalanga and over the border to

³²⁵ "Force Chief to Quit," *Sowetan*, March 5, 1990.

³²⁶ *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Amnesty Committee*, "Attack on Rita Township and the Murder of Mr. Shingange," Statement of John Khombomuni Ngobeni, Johannesburg, May 23, 2000.

³²⁷ Interview with "George," February 26, 2018.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*

³²⁹ *Ibid.*

³³⁰ *Ibid.*

Swaziland.³³¹ “George” notes that during the ordeal he didn’t sleep for two days.³³² If John Ngobeni thought the issue with Temba had been dealt with, he forgot one important detail: Temba’s wife.³³³ It seems that despite MK’s insistence on secrecy, Temba had shared considerably more about the membership of the movement with his wife than he should have. After his exile, possibly as an act of vengeance against the men who had forced her husband to leave the country, she turned informer.³³⁴

At the time, this was of course unknown to John who was already planning his next operation, a brazen attempt on the life of George Rasebotse, the police chief of the neighboring village of Rita.³³⁵ At around 10:00 PM on the night of June 15, John and three associates lay in wait near Rasebotse’s home.³³⁶ This time, however, it was the guerillas who were ambushed. As the four lay in wait, a spotlight mounted on a SADF armoured car illuminated their position.³³⁷ After a brief firefight, the insurgents were forced to scatter.³³⁸ John’s TRC testimony reveals a tragic post-script: as he sought to escape his pursuers John jumped the fence of a nearby technical school³³⁹ in search of a hiding place, dropping a hand grenade in the process.³⁴⁰ While he tried to

³³¹ Ibid.

³³² Ibid.

³³³ Ibid.

³³⁴ Ibid.

³³⁵ *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Amnesty Committee*, “Attack on Rita Township and the Murder of Mr. Shingange,” Statement of Stranger Jabulani Mbhalati, May 23 2000.

³³⁶ *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Amnesty Committee*, “Attack on Rita Township and the Murder of Mr. Shingange,” Statement of John Khombomuni Ngobeni, Johannesburg, May 23, 2000.

³³⁷ Ibid.

³³⁸ Ibid.

³³⁹ This is one of several points in John’s story where I have trouble reconciling his displays of athleticism with his apparent physical disability. According to Basani, my research collaborator, there are rumors that John underwent a medical procedure while in exile that increased his mobility.

³⁴⁰ *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Amnesty Committee*, “Attack on Rita Township and the Murder of Mr. Shingange,” Statement of John Khombomuni Ngobeni, Johannesburg, May 23, 2000.

retrieve the bomb it was lost in the tall grass in the chaos of his escape, later exploding and killing an unnamed civilian.³⁴¹

One can perhaps see the hand of Temba's wife in the ambush in Rita township. Whether or not the army knew about the attempt on Rasebotse's life, they knew who was responsible and sprung into action based on her information. "George," along with much of the MK membership in N'wamitwa, was arrested. "When that policeman was killed³⁴² the police had a list of us. So the policeman was killed in the evening, and in the morning I was running out of the house dressing myself while running away from the police because they were coming for me."³⁴³ "George" was taken to the police station and interrogated. However, he was released and told that there was insufficient evidence to hold him.³⁴⁴

As was mentioned previously, John Ngobeni was an excellent judge of character, and did not appoint "George" to his important role within the organization lightly. The police had continued to detain many others within the unit who had far less affiliation with the movement than "George" did.³⁴⁵ As such, "George" suspected that the security forces were surveilling him in the hope he would panic and lead the police to the MK's hidden weapons.³⁴⁶ Twenty-eight years later, "George" still grins mischievously as he describes his attempt to bore the policemen tailing him into submission. "I just went to the shabeen and drank and drank every day until they came

³⁴¹ Ibid.; *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Amnesty Committee*, "Attack on Rita Township and the Murder of Mr. Shingange," statement of Stranger Jabulani Mbhalati, May 23 2000.

³⁴² I found no evidence George Rasebotse was killed during the gunfight in Rita township. Given that "George" was not present during the operation, it is safe to assume that he is confused as to the outcome.

³⁴³ Interview with "George," February 26, 2018.

³⁴⁴ Ibid.

³⁴⁵ Ibid.

³⁴⁶ Ibid.

and took me away.”³⁴⁷ Despite the fact that “George” was far too canny an operative to fall into the trap set for him, the fact remains that by the end of June 1990 the police had successfully rolled up the MK’s entire operation in N’wamitwa. Even John Ngobeni was caught and incarcerated. According to “George,” when police raided the property where John was staying, they found several AK-47s hidden in the thatched roof of his rondavel.³⁴⁸

The South African state indicted “George” on six felonies including kidnapping, murder, arms trafficking, transporting fugitives, and intimidation.³⁴⁹ In the words of “George,” “If it was not ... 1990/91 I might have been hanged.”³⁵⁰ Despite the obvious fact the arrests were disastrous for the MK in N’wamitwa, they could not have come at a better time. On August 7, the ANC suspended the MK’s twenty-nine-year armed struggle, leading to the mass release of political prisoners.³⁵¹ Among the 1300 political prisoners released were John Ngobeni and “George,” after just over a month in prison. As will be discussed in Chapter Three, the suspension of the armed struggle in fact represented an escalation of MK activity within South Africa and a shift into the counterattack phase of the people’s war.

The first two stages of the MK’s people’s war in N’wamitwa lasted only nine months. However, in that time they achieved many of the goals that Mao articulated for the defensive phase. The MK had made their presence known through acts of armed propaganda. The mass movement, with help from the MK, had smashed the local civil service and education system.³⁵² These actions had also begun to shift perceptions of the ANC from being a group of unruly terrorists to that of a

³⁴⁷ Ibid.

³⁴⁸ Ibid.

³⁴⁹ Ibid.

³⁵⁰ Ibid.

³⁵¹ ““ANC Agrees to End Armed Struggle,” *Washington Post*, August 7, 1990.

³⁵² “Hundreds of Civil servants in Gazankulu Dismissed,” *The Star*, April 20, 1990.

government-in-waiting. Furthermore, they had fatally weakened the homeland government of Hudson Ntsanwisi who was able to secure his short-term political future only by negotiating with and ultimately endorsing the ANC.³⁵³ Lastly, they had forced the hated SADF to become involved in the affairs of the homeland. Upon his release, “George” bid goodbye to the armed struggle and moved into political work. John Ngobeni, on the other hand, was just getting started and with the increased liberalization brought about by the suspension of the armed struggle, his next move would be far more audacious.

³⁵³ “Five SA Homelands Support the ANC,” *Star*, May 6, 1990.

Chapter Three:

“If You Release a Bullet It Must Have a Meaning”

The dawn of the 1990s brought about new opportunities for a negotiated end to apartheid. The collapse of the ANC’s long-time patron, the Soviet Union, had a decisive impact on the willingness of both the ANC and the South African government to meet at the negotiating table, rather than on the battlefield. For the ANC, the decision by the dissolving USSR to abandon the international armed struggle was a devastating blow.³⁵⁴ However, while the collapse of the USSR made an all-out seizure of power by the ANC unlikely, it also robbed their foes in the National Party of a key discursive defence of the apartheid system. The apartheid government had long positioned itself as South Africa’s only viable alternative to a communist takeover.³⁵⁵ In the words of American journalist Patti Waldmeir, “deprived of their cherished ideologies, both sides were more amenable to reason.”³⁵⁶

The global political upheavals of the 1990s were matched with the culmination of a profound cultural transformation within South African society. According to sociologist Thomas Blaser, apartheid, the system of governance initially devised to uplift the Afrikaner people from a rural underclass to an urban bourgeoisie, was beginning to buckle under the weight of its own success.³⁵⁷ As South Africa’s Afrikaner population became more affluent and urbanized they “ceased to look upon themselves as a coherent group with unifying goals, based on an invented

³⁵⁴ Ellis and Sechaba, *Comrades Against Apartheid*, 194.; Waldmeir, *Anatomy of a Miracle*, 137.

³⁵⁵ Waldmeir, *Anatomy of a Miracle*, 135-137.

³⁵⁶ Waldmeir, *Anatomy of a Miracle*, 132.

³⁵⁷ Thomas Blaser, “I Don’t Know What I Am: The End of Afrikaner Nationalism in Post-Apartheid South Africa,” *Transformation: Critical Perspectives on Southern Africa* 80 No.1 (2012): 1-21, 8.

[nationalist] tradition, but instead developed an individualist and consumerist identity.”³⁵⁸ Waldmeir noticed similar cracks in the laager of Afrikaner nationalism. By 1990, white South Africans were tiring of economic stagnation and international isolation, and were becoming increasingly amenable to a negotiated settlement with the ANC.³⁵⁹ After decades as international pariahs, many white South Africans longed to re-establish their lost cultural and economic ties with the Western world.³⁶⁰ According to Waldmeir, by the early 1990s, “Afrikaners were quickly outgrowing their ethnic paranoia, and worried as much about their swimming pools as their language.”³⁶¹ This shift in Afrikaner sensibilities can be seen in the ascension of the reformist F.W. de Klerk, who in February 1989 replaced the hawkish P.W. Botha as leader of the governing National Party.³⁶²

Many within the anti-apartheid movement initially greeted the rise of de Klerk with skepticism.³⁶³ However, the reformer quickly set about dismantling many of the most hated “building blocks of apartheid” and greatly expedited the fledgling peace process.³⁶⁴ After years of secret meetings and negotiations, Nelson Mandela was released from prison on February 11, 1990.³⁶⁵ While Mandela’s release paved the way for peace talks and provided South Africa with a viable alternative to the racial conflagration feared by many, a negotiated settlement was far from a certainty.

³⁵⁸ Blaser, “I Don’t Know What I Am,” 8-9.

³⁵⁹ Waldmier, *Anatomy of a Miracle*, 134-135.

³⁶⁰ Waldmier, *Anatomy of a Miracle*, 134.

³⁶¹ Waldmier, *Anatomy of a Miracle*, 132.

³⁶² Waldmier, *Anatomy of a Miracle*, 116.; Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, 480.

³⁶³ Betty Glad and Robert Blanton, “F. W. de Klerk and Nelson Mandela: A Study in Cooperative Transformational Leadership.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 27, no.3 (3): (1997): 565–590. 566-567.; Waldmier, *Anatomy of a Miracle*, 109.

³⁶⁴ Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, 481.

³⁶⁵ Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, 491.

With the formal beginning of multiparty negotiations in 1991, the decades-long stalemate between the apartheid government and its opponents was thrown into a state of flux. It is almost axiomatic that the most determined and bloody fighting in wartime often occurs during peace negotiations. Often this upsurge in violence is a result of belligerents attempting to strengthen their position at the negotiating table to ensure their power and relevance in the emerging post-war order. The war against apartheid proved to be no exception. Between the beginning of formal negotiations in December 1991 and South Africa's first multiracial election in April 1994, the country was wracked by an unprecedented wave of political and ethnic violence. A bewildering array of liberation movements, ethno-nationalists both black and white, and shadowy right-wing vigilante groups with ties to the apartheid deep state emerged to vie for supremacy in the rapidly liberalizing nation.

The period of transition turned many of the established norms of South African politics on their heads and ushered in a period of great hope and uncertainty. The unbanning of political organizations in 1990 brought the long-clandestine networks of the liberation movements into the public sphere for the first time in three decades.³⁶⁶ While the process of liberalization was couched in lofty rhetoric, the period of transition opened up a Pandora's Box of political rivalry and ethnic grievance that spiraled out of control, leading to "the bloodiest period in South Africa's history as a political entity."³⁶⁷ South African writer and journalist Hein Marais estimated that throughout the period of transition an average of 250 South Africans were dying violently every month.³⁶⁸ Viewed through the prism of a people's war, this period of waning state control and waxing ANC

³⁶⁶ Guelke, "Interpretations of Political Violence" 248.

³⁶⁷ Guelke, "Interpretations of Political Violence," 241.

³⁶⁸ Marais, *South Africa Pushed to the Limit*, 134.

military and political power can be understood as conforming to the third stage of Mao's strategy: the counterattack.

While the period between the founding of Umkhonto in the 1960s and the start of negotiations in the 1990s had been defined by the ever-escalating conflict between the forces of liberation and the mechanisms of the apartheid state, the era of negotiations set the stage for "a more entangled fight among a wide variety of players with disparate motives, tactics, and objectives."³⁶⁹ According to the TRC:

The unbanning of political organizations ... and the possibility of democratic elections created an environment of intensified political competition as long-banned political organizations returned to re-establish themselves in the country while other organizations such as the IFP entered the national arena as a formal political party ... The stakes were very high. The open expression of diverse political opinions had been long suppressed and levels of political intolerance were extremely high.³⁷⁰

Being by far the largest and most influential of the liberation movements, the ANC and its UDF allies were both key targets and key perpetrators of this violence. During the era of negotiations, the ANC was determined to bring South Africa's rival liberation movements to heel and establish a hegemonic presence as South Africa's government-in-waiting. As is often the case with practitioners of a people's war, the ANC always preferred to co-opt opposition rather than destroy it. Still, the ANC's unshakeable self-perception as heirs to a future South Africa made it clear that any organization that could not be co-opted must be exterminated. The ANC's conception of itself as a "broad church,"³⁷¹ was mirrored in the writings of the people's war's most successful practitioner, Vo Ngyan Giap, who argued the revolution must be fought by a broad revolutionary

³⁶⁹ Timothy D. Sisk, "The Violence-Negotiation Nexus: South Africa in Transition and the Politics of Uncertainty," *Negotiation Journal* 1, no. 9 (1993): 77-94, 80.

³⁷⁰ TRC, vol 2. 671.

³⁷¹ Interview with "Daniel." February 27, 2018.

front while co-opting and eliminating potential rivals. This strategy was articulated by Giap in his blueprint *People's War People's Army*:

The National United Front was to be a vast assembly of all the forces capable of being united, neutralising all those which could be neutralised, dividing all those it was possible to divide, in order to direct the spearhead at the chief enemy of the revolution.³⁷²

If the National Party government had thought that Umkhonto would cease to exist as a militant organization after the suspension of the ANC's armed struggle in August 1990, they would be sorely disappointed. In theory, with the armed struggle suspended, the MK was prohibited from infiltrating men and material into South Africa, building up underground structures, and training within the country's borders.³⁷³ While MK terror attacks against apartheid state structures and South Africa's white population ceased, Umkhonto we Sizwe continued to operate with a vastly expanded mandate.³⁷⁴ During the period of transition, Umkhonto used the legal space afforded by its unbanning to drastically expand its presence within South Africa. From August 1990 onwards, MK cadres, many of whom had by this point spent decades in exile, began to flow back into South Africa, often with their weapons in hand.³⁷⁵ At the same time, MK began to recruit aggressively within areas under its control. Gwinyayi Albert Dzinesa, the foremost expert on veterans' reintegration in Southern Africa, estimates that MK membership more than doubled in the period between 1990 and 1994.³⁷⁶

³⁷² Giap, *People's War People's Army*.

³⁷³ "The D. F. Malan Accord," 12 February 1991.; Found on the *O'Malley Archives*. Accessed July 22, 2018, <https://omalley.nelsonmandela.org/omalley/index.php/site/q/03lv02039/04lv02103/05lv02109/06lv02110.htm>.; Simpson, *Umkhonto We Sizewe*, 477.

³⁷⁴ Davis, *The ANC's War Against Apartheid*, 22.

³⁷⁵ G.A. Dzinesa, Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration in Southern Africa: Swords into Ploughshares? (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) 134-135.; Jeffery, *People's War*, location 7554.

³⁷⁶ Dzinesa, "Demobilization into the Cold," 141.

There are three ways to read the expansion of MK activity in the aftermath of its unbanning. The first is the possibility that the suspension of the armed struggle represented a Machiavellian plot to use liberalization to push for a general insurrection and seizure of power within South Africa. The fact that many hardliners within the organization like Ronnie Kasrils and Chris Hanni openly advocated for this route lends this theory some credence.³⁷⁷ This approach would also fit within the general strategy of people's war which emphasises that negotiations are simply another front of the wider war. Dzinesa, on the other hand, argues that the expansion of MK membership was primarily in preparation to stack the new South African army with ANC loyalists.³⁷⁸ This perspective is also in line with the ANC's general view that they were the natural inheritors of South Africa's state institutions, especially the military.³⁷⁹ The final way to view the expansion of the MK during this period is as a rational response to the challenges it faced upon the organization's return to South Africa. Critics of the African National Congress, such as Adriaan Vlok, South Africa's Minister of Law and Order, noted that the ANC was the common denominator in the violence sweeping the country.³⁸⁰ This is certainly not untrue, but this view belies the fact that during the negotiations the ANC found itself fighting a low intensity civil war against various opponents on multiple fronts.

As the ANC began to assert itself in the public sphere, longstanding rivalries with other black liberation movements began to boil over into violence. The worst fighting occurred in areas with high Zulu populations between the ANC and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP).³⁸¹ The IFP

³⁷⁷ Jeffery, *People's War*, location 6930, Jeffery, *People's War*, location 6940.; Simpson, *Umkhonto We Sizwe*, 469.

³⁷⁸ Dzinesa, "Demobilization into the Cold," 134.

³⁷⁹ Dzinesa, "Demobilization into the Cold," 136.; Jeffery, *People's War*, location 9713.

³⁸⁰ Jeffery, *People's War*, Location 7625.

³⁸¹ A proper explanation of the ANC-IFP conflict is far beyond the scope of this project. For excellent analysis on this aspect of the freedom struggle see *A Revolution Deferred: The Painful Birth of Post-Apartheid South Africa* by Martin Murray, Chapter 13 of *Shades of Difference: Mac Maharaj and the Struggle for South Africa* and the

conceptualized itself as an African traditionalist alternative to the ANC based on Zulu ethnicity rather than the non-racial socialism of the ANC.³⁸² Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Zulu heartland of Natal descended into a state of civil war.³⁸³ It is estimated that by 1994, the fighting between the ANC and the IFP claimed 12 000 lives in Natal alone.³⁸⁴ As the conflict escalated, South Africa's economic and industrial hub of the Reef was engulfed in violence as ANC-and IFP- aligned migrant labourers battled for supremacy.³⁸⁵ Martin Murray notes that after the unbanning of political organizations, violence between the ANC and IFP skyrocketed as the conflict increasingly became a proxy war between the ANC and the South African state, with both sides arming militias and contributing to spiralling violence.³⁸⁶

Although the underlying motivations of the ANC leadership vis-a-vis the armed struggle remain unclear, it is evident that from 1990 onwards ANC rhetoric shifted from aggressive calls for insurrection to the language of self-defence. The ANC was at the very least an equal participant in the tit-for-tat bloodletting engulfing Natal, the Reef, and parts of the Vaal Triangle. However, the organization proved itself to be far more media savvy than its opponents, successfully casting itself as the wronged party despite its role in the violence.³⁸⁷ Regardless, it was clear that throughout South Africa ANC supporters were being killed en-masse and the formal structures of the state were either unable or unwilling to grant them adequate protection. In *A Revolution*

excellent biography of IFP leader Mangosuthu Buthelezi. Ben Temkin, *Buthelezi: A Biography* (London: Routledge, 2002)

³⁸² Murray, *A Revolution Deferred*, 97.; Welsh and Spence, *Ending Apartheid*, 98-99.

³⁸³ For example, Murray notes that between 1987 and 1990 twice as many people died violently in the Ntshongweni Valley outside of Pietermaritzburg as in Beirut during the same period. Murray, *A Revolution Deferred*, 98.

³⁸⁴ Welsh and Spence, *Ending Apartheid*, 99-100.

³⁸⁵ O'Malley and Maharaj, *Shades of Difference*, 293-294.

³⁸⁶ Murray, *A Revolution Deferred*, 97-98.

³⁸⁷ Jeffery, *People's War*, location 7619.; Kynoch, "Reassessing Transition Violence," 286-287.; Guelke, "Interpretations of Political Violence," 246-248.

Deferred Murray describes what became known as the “Seven Day War.” In the fighting outside of Pietermaritzburg in March 1990, quasi-militarized IFP impis³⁸⁸ killed hundreds of ANC supporters and evicted tens of thousands from their homes.³⁸⁹ The emergence of credible evidence showing that elements of the South African security forces were working with the IFP in attempts to undermine the ANC confirmed the worst suspicions of the organization.³⁹⁰

In the face of this onslaught, the ANC leadership began to insist on their right to arm and defend their supporters. In a public address in September 1990, Nelson Mandela stated that, “There is a widespread demand among our people that they should be armed. We regard that demand as reasonable and it is going to be difficult for us to oppose that demand.”³⁹¹ The ANC’s response to the drastic upsurge of violence was the creation of Self Defense Units (SDUs). The SDUs would operate as ANC-aligned militias operating on a local level, ostensibly to protect communities from crime and political violence. Another potential reason for the ANC’s insistence on creating self-defence forces was the fact that by 1990, the organization found itself in effective control of huge swaths of the country, particularly in the townships and rural homelands, and was obliged to make its presence known and consolidate its power.

The formation of SDUs was nothing new for the ANC who had used informal militias in the townships to maintain order and protect their supporters since the insurrections of the mid 1980s.³⁹² Still, the SDUs that emerged in the transitory period of the early 1990s were considerably

³⁸⁸ The Impi was the base unit of the formidable Zulu army in the 19th Century. The term was appropriated by the IFP during the struggle and used to reference IFP aligned militias.

³⁸⁹ Murray, *A Revolution Deferred*, 99.

³⁹⁰ Murray, *A Revolution Deferred*, 108.; Simpson, *Umkhonto We Sizwe*, 480.

³⁹¹ Jeffery, *People’s War*, location 7382.

³⁹² Pakiso Sylvester Rakgoadi, “The Role of the Self-Defence Units (SDUs) in a Changing Political Context,” Research report written for the *Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation*, 1995. Found on *Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation*, Accessed February 21, 2018. <http://www.csvr.org.za/publications/1466-the-role-of->

more aggressive, well led, and well-armed.³⁹³ The SDUs served a secondary purpose. As Anthea Jeffery describes, “These units [SDUs], though ostensibly intended to protect residents, would also make it easier to step up attacks on ANC adversaries while giving the organization significant power over civilians living under SDU control.”³⁹⁴ Both the IFP—the ANC’s main rival—and the South African government shared this view fearing that the formation of SDUs would further inflame the violence and strengthen Umkhonto We Sizwe’s terror networks within the country.³⁹⁵ Amongst former SDU members who we interviewed for this project there was also the subtext that the SDUs would form the nucleus of a broad-based, nationwide insurgency in the event that negotiations broke down.³⁹⁶

On April 24, 1991, SACP stalwart Jeremy Cronin delivered the blueprint for the creation of the SDUs in his speech “For The Sake of Our Lives.” Cronin began by framing the creation of SDUs as a response to the violence inflicted on the ANC supporters by their rivals.

In the wake of the ugly violence unleashed against our people by security forces, vigilante groups and hit squads, it is imperative that our liberation movement takes responsibility for guiding and building peoples' self-defence units ... No matter how strongly we develop ... democratic structures ... in the current climate of violent assault we need to establish specialised, broadly-based people's self-defence structures.³⁹⁷

the-self-defence-units-sdus-in-a-changing-political-context.; Cherry, *Spear of the Nation*, 40.; Murray, *The Revolution Deferred*, 53.

³⁹³ Rakagoadi, “SDUs.”; Jeffery *People’s War*, location 7591.

³⁹⁴ Jeffery, *People’s War*, location 7305.

³⁹⁵ Jeffery, *People’s War*, location, 7582.

³⁹⁶ Steve.; Interview with Bohani Mathebula, February 23, 2018.; Interview with “Daniel.” February 27, 2018. Interview with Hendrik Mohononi. February 22, 2018.

³⁹⁷ Jeremy Cronin, “For the Sake of Our Lives: Guidelines for the creation of people's self- defence units. Paper presented at the *Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation*,” 1991. Found on *Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation*, Accessed February 18, 2018. <https://www.csvr.org.za/publications/1447-for-the-sake-of-our-lives-guidelines-for-the-creation-of-peoples-self-defence-units>.

Cronin then went on to describe how of the community members would form the backbone of SDUs; potential candidates would have to be physically fit and over the age of sixteen.³⁹⁸ As will be illustrated in the case of Bohani Mathebula, a background in martial arts, such as karate, was desirable.³⁹⁹ In his speech, Cronin was careful to note that the SDUs were created as a broad-based community defence organization rather than a political private army explicitly linked to the ANC.⁴⁰⁰ However, he does state that “this does not mean that the ANC and its allies should not initiate and guide the process.”⁴⁰¹ The immediate goal of creating the SDUs was to protect areas under ANC control and to mobilize against the organization’s rivals. However, the ANC’s long-term objective was to use the SDUs as a nucleus, “to form the basis for a people's army and police force in the liberated, democratic, non-racial South Africa we are struggling for.”⁴⁰²

The need for high levels of technical training and discipline was repeatedly stressed. Cronin recommended that members of Umkhonto we Sizwe play a leading role in organizing and training the SDUs.⁴⁰³ Infiltrated MK operatives would provide recruits with political and practical military training.⁴⁰⁴ Cronin also acknowledged that the model of relying on informal localized militias required a great degree of decentralization. Individual commanders would be afforded an enormous amount of discretion. He declared, “comrades with practical experience will provide ideas far in advance of this pamphlet. We must let the creative energy and talent of our people come to the fore.”⁴⁰⁵

³⁹⁸ Cronin, “For the Sake of our Lives.”

³⁹⁹ Ibid.; Interview with Bohani Mathebula, February 23, 2018.

⁴⁰⁰ Cronin, “For the Sake of our Lives.”

⁴⁰¹ Ibid.

⁴⁰² Ibid.

⁴⁰³ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid.

Much of the scholarship around SDUs focuses on the descent into violence, criminality, and internecine rivalries experienced by certain SDU units during the transition. The TRC notes that “many of the violations committed by the ANC during this period were committed by paramilitary structures known as SDUs.”⁴⁰⁶ There are several recorded instances of ANC aligned SDUs engaging in criminal activity and occasionally going to war with one another in the townships over lucrative protection rackets.⁴⁰⁷ The image of poorly disciplined, daga-addled teenagers terrorizing their communities with a bizarre mix of traditional African weaponry and state-of-the-art Russian firepower is far too common and well-documented to completely discount.⁴⁰⁸ But are these tropes representative of how SDUs operated on the whole? The decentralized nature of the SDUs meant the effectiveness and conduct of these forces varied considerably from unit to unit and commander to commander. From interviews with former members of the SDU that operated under John Ngoben in N’wamitwa during the transition, we can determine how one SDU operated in a rural corner of South Africa during one of the most turbulent periods in that nation’s history.

It is hard to pinpoint exactly when the MK in N’wamitwa transitioned from an underground insurgency cell to a self-defence unit. However, we do know that the process began shortly after John’s release, in the summer of 1990. “George” remembers that “John was released before me and by the time I got out he had already raised his battalion.”⁴⁰⁹ This was well in advance of the formal creation of self-defence units almost a year later in April 1991. Therefore, either John

⁴⁰⁶ TRC, vol. 2, 681.

⁴⁰⁷ *Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa* vol. 3 (London: Macmillan Reference, 1998) 691-692.; TRC Vol. 2, 682.

⁴⁰⁸ See Jeffery’s *People’s War*.; Malose Langa and Gillian Eagle, “The intractability of Militarised Masculinity: A case study of former Self-Defence Unit members in the Kathorus area,” *South African Journal of Psychology* 38, no. 1 (2008): 152-175.

⁴⁰⁹ Personal Communication “George.”

acted on his own initiative or, more likely, the creation of self-defence militias in areas under their control was ANC policy well before 1991.

The N'wamitwa self defence unit operated from the summer of 1990 until the democratic elections in April 1994. Initially, the unit focused on tactical military training and political education. Training was carried out in secret, as former member Hendrik Mohononi remembers.

We did all these things secretly because we didn't want the state to know we are doing this. ... Every time we went to the "class," and we always called it the "class," never training, we would check that there were no traces of ... enemies before we start our class. That tells you something about the fear [we felt]. We had that fear because we knew if we were caught we would go to jail.⁴¹⁰ But we knew it was for a good cause.⁴¹¹

As the period of transition progressed, "the class," as several former members euphemistically referred to it, began to take on an increasingly active role in the community. Students from local high schools made up the bulk of the membership of the unit. Of the nine informants consulted for this project only one, Case Ngobeni, was over the age of eighteen when recruited.⁴¹² Former members estimate that at its height their unit comprised of between thirty and forty combatants. Several interviewees also made references to other "classes" operating in the Ganzankulu area.⁴¹³ Hendrik Mohononi, a former member of the "class," noted that "there was a very large number of youth that were ready for training."⁴¹⁴

What would cause a high school student to take on the very real risk of death or imprisonment by joining the militant underground? As with any organization, John Ngobeni's

⁴¹⁰ This is likely the best-case scenario for rank and file MK operatives. Many were executed by the state or killed by police aligned death squads during the struggle. See *Just Defiance: The Bombmakers, the Insurgents and a Legendary Treason Trial* by Peter Harris.

⁴¹¹ Interview with Hendrik Mohononi. February 22, 2018.

⁴¹² Interview with Case Ngobeni, February 24, 2018.

⁴¹³ Interview with Hendrik Mohononi. February 22, 2018.; Interview with Steve Ndlovu, February 23, 2018.

⁴¹⁴ Interview with Hendrik Mohononi. February 22, 2018.

guerilla unit was comprised of individuals, each with their own motivations and perspectives on the freedom struggle. In *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, political scientist Stathis N. Kalyvas argues that “joining a rebel army and collaborating with it result[s] from variable and complex sets of heterogeneous and interacting motivations.”⁴¹⁵ These factors can range from ideological commitment, to a desire for vengeance, to personal gain.⁴¹⁶ For the majority of recruits I spoke with, the injustice of the apartheid system was reason enough.⁴¹⁷ Hendrik remembers, “apartheid made me want to join [the MK] and fight it out ... The main fact is I wanted the apartheid regime gone, that’s it!”⁴¹⁸ Of course, when living under apartheid, a regime that denied any avenue for upward mobility to the vast majority of its population, ideological and material motivations went hand in hand.

For some, however, the reasons were deeply personal. Kalyvas notes that fighters often join the ranks of an insurgency as a “response to emotions such as anger, moral outrage caused by public humiliation and a desire to take revenge.”⁴¹⁹ Several interview participants had been the victims of violent attacks which had a radicalizing effect, as “Daniel” explains:

With me it is very unique because I happen to have [been] a casualty. Which I later read it was an apartheid act. ... I was beaten by some white guys. ... There's a farm next door, yeah they would just attack us sporadic. ... It was not only me but that day I happened to be unlucky, on their way and I was attacked. ... I was eight years I think?⁴²⁰

⁴¹⁵ Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 95.

⁴¹⁶ Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, 95-96.

⁴¹⁷ Interview with Steve Ndlovu, February 23, 2018.; Interview with Hendrik Mohononi. February 22, 2018.; Interview with Case Ngobeni, February 24, 2018.

⁴¹⁸ Interview with Hendrik Mohononi. February 22, 2018.

⁴¹⁹ Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, 97.

⁴²⁰ Interview with “Daniel.” February 27, 2018.

As will be discussed later in this chapter, groups of white men entering N’wamitwa and assaulting its inhabitants was a common occurrence. Out of nine interview participants, four had suffered random attacks at the hands of white outsiders.⁴²¹ Several interview participants linked this violence to activities by the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (AWB).⁴²² The AWB was a radical and violent Afrikaaner supremacist movement. During the uncertainty of the transitional period, the organization had gained momentum and risen to national prominence with its efforts to sabotage the peace process. It is hard to determine whether these incidents were truly acts of organized political violence orchestrated by an extremist group or violent manifestations of settler entitlement carried out by the bored inhabitants of nearby white-owned farms. I would posit that the AWB took on the role of a bogeyman representing white violence in N’wamitwa. It is beyond doubt the AWB was universally loathed in N’wamitwa. When discussing the AWB, “George” chuckled, “those were the guys we really wanted to have a go at.”⁴²³

The MK’s acts of armed propaganda during the previous phase of the people’s war inspired other recruits. In the words of Bohani Mathebula:

So one day in 1989 we're watching the news at home on TV. We saw a picture of a man on the most wanted list. This man used a petrol bomb to bomb something in Pretoria. They said he's an ANC member and he bombed people in Pretoria and he is wanted. That's when I heard about the ANC.⁴²⁴

Bohani then approached his uncle who was an underground ANC member at the time and marks this incident as the beginning of his political education.⁴²⁵

⁴²¹ Interview with “Daniel.” February 27, 2018.; Interview with Bohani Mathebula, February 23, 2018.; Interview with Case Ngobeni, February 24, 2018.; Interview with Bennit Mkhari, February 23, 2018.

⁴²² Interview with Hendrik Mohononi. February 22, 2018.

⁴²³ Interview with “George,” February 26, 2018.

⁴²⁴ Interview with Bohani Mathebula, February 23, 2018.

⁴²⁵ Interview with Bohani Mathebula, February 23, 2018.; Bohani’s story mirrors that of Joseph Makhura, who in 1978 read about a shootout between MK militants and the South African Police. This event inspired Joseph to go

The social makeup of apartheid South Africa might have helped facilitate John's ability to recruit in N'wamitwa. Due to limited economic opportunities within the homelands, many men were forced to seek work in the metropolis of Johannesburg or the mines of the Vaal Triangle. By design South Africa's restrictive pass laws made it incredibly difficult to bring one's family to the city, which meant that many men were forced to leave their homelands and families in search of work. Thus N'wamitwa, like much of rural South Africa, was a community of young men without father figures. It is interesting to note that although the mothers of many interview participants feature heavily in discussions about this period of their lives, not a single interviewee mentioned his father. Many former combatants interviewed for this project had been actively recruited by MK personnel, with John Ngobeni being chief among them. In the words of Bohani Mathebula:

When I was a kid in 1992 we used to watch action movies. So my friends and I decided to practice our karate everyday because this was the action we would see in the movies. But one day we were practicing and John [Ngobeni] who was very active in the MK and the ANC came to us. He told the younger kids to leave and go but the three of us had to remain. He asked us if we knew ANC and if we know MK. I said yes I know what MK is and he said are they terrorists? I said no these are my brothers who are fighting for the freedom.⁴²⁶

It seems that in N'wamitwa, local football clubs acted as mechanisms of recruitment for the insurgency. Steve Ndlovu, who joined the "class" at seventeen, used his role as captain of his football team to scout potential recruits and bring them into the MK.⁴²⁷ One of these youth was Boyisa Mkhari. Boyisa notes that by the time he was recruited, most of his team were already operating with the MK underground.⁴²⁸ Not all members of the "class" were actively recruited; at least one, Hendrik Mohononi, sought it out and asked to join. "We had heard there was a class

into exile and seek military training, as described by Peter Harris in *A Just Defiance: The Bomb Makers, The Insurgents, and a Legendary Treason Trial.*; Harris, *A Just Defiance*, 63.

⁴²⁶ Interview with Bohani Mathebula, February 23, 2018.

⁴²⁷ Interview with Steve Ndlovu, February 23, 2018.

⁴²⁸ Interview with Boyisa Mkhari, February 22, 2018.

around us down by the river, next to the Mswazi Dam ... I went there and everything started right there ... Let me say they found me because of politics, I found them because I was eager to train.”⁴²⁹

To be eligible to join the “class” certain requirements had to be met. In line with the blueprint for the creation of SDUs articulated by Jeremy Cronin, potential recruits had to be in good physical condition. Many, including Steve and Hendrik, came from sports backgrounds.⁴³⁰ While Cronin stipulated the SDUs were meant to be non-partisan entities, virtually every member of the N’wamitwa “class” was a card-carrying member of the ANC youth league.⁴³¹ By the age of fourteen “Daniel” was already highly active in underground ANC activity and by 1989 had already organized a group of friends into a cell.⁴³² As the people’s war in South Africa escalated, they listened to Radio Freedom and discussed liberation politics.⁴³³ As the struggle progressed, “Daniel’s” cell became increasingly militant. Developments within the country and the directives of the ANC leadership to swell the ranks of the MK inspired “Daniel” and his friends to take up the armed struggle.⁴³⁴ “Daniel,” who now operates as a local ANC party boss, believes John recruited him explicitly because of his political activity. As he remembers:

For me actually they just came to me and said that there is this thing, are you interested? But you must know that if you are interested there is no turning back. Then I said yes, I am interested and there was some few of my friends, then we joined together. But like I said it was because of political consciousness within the cell units, where you only deal with politics. Because in order to join MK you must first understand the politics.⁴³⁵

⁴²⁹ Interview with Hendrik Mohononi. February 22, 2018.

⁴³⁰ Interview with Steve Ndlovu, February 23, 2018.; Interview with Hendrik Mohononi. February 22 2018.

⁴³¹ Interview with “Daniel.” February 27 2018.; Interview with “George,” February 26, 2018.; Interview with Steve Ndlovu, February 23, 2018.; Interview with “David.” February 20, 2018.

⁴³² Interview with “Daniel.” February 27, 2018.

⁴³³ Ibid.

⁴³⁴ Ibid.

⁴³⁵ Ibid.

It also seems that John learned from the debacle with Temba's wife and stipulated that all recruits had to be single.⁴³⁶ In fact, several potential recruits were turned away because of their relationship status.⁴³⁷ Perhaps the most important quality that MK looked for in potential recruits was discretion.⁴³⁸ "Daniel" revealed, "They would not recruit anyone, they would just target specific people ... The number one quality you must have is to be able to keep a secret."⁴³⁹ While the increased liberalization of South African society had opened up a political space for dissent, in N'wamitwa the MK remained underground, at least initially. "There was a sense of freedom ... After 1990 the secret came out ... but we were skeptical because if the army knew it [affiliation with MK], if the police knew it, there would be trouble."⁴⁴⁰

None of the interviewees consulted for this project remember any coercive pressure to join the organization. As "David"⁴⁴¹ remembers:

There was a team who would go around and recruit people. They would check a few things, if you were an ANC member, if you were [physically] active, and if you keep a secret. They would ask once and if you said no they would leave you. It was not forced but they would ask you to keep their secret.⁴⁴²

That being said, the MK expected recruits to remain members for life.⁴⁴³ As will be illustrated later in the story of Boyisa Mkhari, the consequences for trying to leave the organization could be dire.

The ANC formally presented the creation of self-defence units as a purely defensive response to attacks on their supporters. However, recruits in John's "class" were given other

⁴³⁶ Personal Communication Hendrik Mohononi.

⁴³⁷ Interview with Case Ngobeni, February 24, 2018.

⁴³⁸ Interview with "David." February 20, 2018.

⁴³⁹ Interview with "Daniel." February 27, 2018.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁴¹ Pseudonym.

⁴⁴² Interview with "David." February 20, 2018.

⁴⁴³ Interview with "Daniel." February 27, 2018.

reasons. The testimony of several participants indicates they were promised that undertaking MK training would fast-track them into the new South African National Defence Force (SANDF). This opportunity offered recruits a sense of upward mobility in line with Kalyvas' observation about the importance of economic motivations for joining a rebel faction.⁴⁴⁴ For "David," the choice was vocational. "I wanted to be a soldier, that's all," he remembers.⁴⁴⁵ The expansion of the MK would also serve a political purpose by stacking the post-apartheid army with ANC loyalists.⁴⁴⁶ Many of the interviewees also believed that they were being trained, at least partially, as an insurance policy in the event of negotiations breaking down.⁴⁴⁷ For one, Steve states:

They told us there was an opportunity because in the process of transition, by then there were negotiations within the new regime. They were not sure about the product of the negotiation. They decided to make sure that as communities we were having self-defence. We were having people who were able to defend the community should the negotiations fail and we end up into war.⁴⁴⁸

The N'wamitwa "class" were part-time guerillas, meaning they were forced to balance their activity with familial and educational responsibilities. Due to the clandestine nature of the armed struggle, members of the MK lived a double life, hiding their affiliation with the movement from their friends and family. "I didn't tell my parents or my family that I had joined MK," remembers Bohani, "because I didn't want them to be in trouble. I knew that MK was going to lead to arrest, and when you get arrested they [one's family] get persecuted."⁴⁴⁹ Despite his best efforts, Bohani's mother discovered his militant activity when she found a Russian-made Makarov pistol while

⁴⁴⁴ Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, 97-98.

⁴⁴⁵ Interview with "David." February 20, 2018.

⁴⁴⁶ Interview with Boisa Mkhari, February 22, 2018.; Interview with "George," February 26, 2018.; Interview with "David." February 20, 2018.; Interview with "Daniel." February 27, 2018.

⁴⁴⁷ Interview with Steve Ndlovu, February 23, 2018.; Interview with Boisa Mkhari, February 22, 2018.

⁴⁴⁸ Interview with Steve Ndlovu, February 23, 2018.

⁴⁴⁹ Interview with Bohani Mathebula, February 23, 2018.

cleaning his room. In a panic, she threw the weapon down the family pit toilet and Bohani was forced to shamefacedly admit to John that his cover had been blown.⁴⁵⁰

Members of the class were also expected to carry on their studies, balancing their lives as high school students with their guerilla activities. In “David’s” words, “it was so difficult to have two lives. At school our friends noticed that all these people joined MK, they didn’t know it was MK, but they noticed we were different.”⁴⁵¹ “David” remembers his routine of training and patrolling the village at night until 4:00 AM and returning home to be at school by 6:00.⁴⁵² Steve was relatively fortunate in that his role as a sportsman allowed him to spend his evenings away from home with minimal suspicion.⁴⁵³

Members of the “class” were put through a variation of the MK training regimen known as MCW (military combat work).⁴⁵⁴ MCW was the colloquial shorthand used to describe the fusion of Soviet and Cuban theories of irregular warfare and Marxist political theory taught to elite MK cadres in the camps in Angola and Eastern Europe.⁴⁵⁵ At its core, MCW represented a blueprint for the creation of a “political army.”⁴⁵⁶ The training was multifaceted, combining combat drills and firearms training with instruction in underground tradecraft. Not surprisingly, the emphasis of MCW was as much political as it was practical. According to Thula Simpson, “the fundamental tenet underpinning MCW was that in its essence, war was a form of class struggle, with MK

⁴⁵⁰ Personal Communication Bohani Mathebula.

⁴⁵¹ Interview with “David.” February 20, 2018.

⁴⁵² Ibid.

⁴⁵³ Interview with Steve Ndlovu, February 23, 2018.

⁴⁵⁴ Interview with “Daniel.” February 27, 2018.; Interview with Hendrik Mohononi. February 22 2018.; Interview with “David.” February 20, 2018.

⁴⁵⁵ Davis, “*The ANC’s War against Apartheid*,” 146-146.; Thula Simpson, “Military Combat Work: The Reconstitution of the ANC’s Armed Underground, 1971–1976,” *African Studies* 70, no.1 (2011): 103-122, 7.

⁴⁵⁶ Simpson, “Military Combat Work,” 7.

combatants being taught ... [that the] ANC represented ‘the vanguard of the oppressed and patriotic forces.’”⁴⁵⁷

Stephen R. Davis argues that MCW had become something of a buzzword within the ANC underground by the 1990s. As he describes:

The training itself fits comfortably into the established pattern of fusing political education with military and tactical drills. Cadres, particularly the angry young students who went into exile for military training after Soweto, speak about MCW in tones of awe, almost as if it were Promethean fire. The hottest students describe the reception of MCW as almost an anointment into revolutionary personhood.⁴⁵⁸

Davis argues that expertise in MCW had an enormous amount of cachet within the ANC underground. Knowledge of MCW was used by returning exiles as a discursive tool to assert their authority over homegrown militants.⁴⁵⁹ The prestige granted to overseas training could partially explain the solidity of John Ngobeni’s position as undisputed leader of the MK underground in N’wamitwa.

Knowledge of MCW was a source of power for infiltrated cadres inserted into existing underground structures. Cadres deployed from the elite Angolan camps or elite cadres trained abroad had or at least assumed a stance of authority on all matters pertaining to ‘proper’ underground work.⁴⁶⁰

The training undertaken by the “class” resembles the classic MCW approach described by Simpson and Davis. “Daniel” remembers,

There is much drilling, issues of salute ... drills, ceremonial marches, and so forth. Secondly what was called the MCW. Military combat work, it’s actually the principles, the rules, the techniques in the army. How do we do like we do military tactics, how ... do you

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid., 12.

⁴⁵⁸ Davis, *The ANC’s War Against Apartheid*, 147

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid., 146.

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid., 149.

behave with people, the code of conduct, and the pledge that you make as a member of MK.⁴⁶¹

The physical training was grueling. Trainees were expected to run “fourteen kilometres or sixteen kilometres” or do “a hundred push ups.”⁴⁶² The recruits who came from sports backgrounds like Steve and Hendrik weathered the physical training better than others. As Hendrik describes, “I thought it was a continuation of what I was used to.”⁴⁶³ Steve remembers that “there were others who struggled in the physical training and it was hard. Because those commanders of us, they would punish you.”⁴⁶⁴ As one of the recruits who did struggle with the physical training Boya Mkhari remembers “the training was so hard.”⁴⁶⁵

The regimen of physical training was matched with a crash course in basic combat skills. Steve remembers: “You know, it was a little bit of fun actually. We were trained to use a gun ... We were also trained on how to run during battle and how to behave in the midst of shooting [and] how to crawl on our arms and legs.”⁴⁶⁶ “Daniel” recalls, “We were also taught what is called engineering, basically how to make petrol bombs or how to handle grenades.”⁴⁶⁷ Recruits instructed in the basics of clandestine organization. “How do you behave with people, the code of conduct, and the pledge that you make as a member of MK ... Through the MCW, we would train our comrades not to talk too much, drink too much, things like this.”⁴⁶⁸

⁴⁶¹ Interview with “Daniel.” February 27, 2018.

⁴⁶² Interview with Steve Ndlovu, February 23, 2018.; Interview with Hendrik Mohononi. February 22, 2018.

⁴⁶³ Interview with Hendrik Mohononi. February 22, 2018.

⁴⁶⁴ Interview with Steve Ndlovu, February 23, 2018.

⁴⁶⁵ Interview with Boya Mkhari, February 22, 2018.

⁴⁶⁶ Interview with Steve Ndlovu, February 23, 2018.

⁴⁶⁷ Interview with “Daniel.” February 27, 2018.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid.

Unsurprisingly, the emphasis of the “class” was on political education. Interestingly, at least at the beginning, John Ngobeni remained incognito but still played an important role in the political education of the N’wamitwa “class.” As “Daniel” remembers:

You know in the military you’ll be in a formation in lines. ... Then they would just give you instruction to turn around, then a car would arrive and he would address you, off he goes. You didn’t even see who was addressing you.⁴⁶⁹

As was noted in the case of “George,” much of the political education undertaken by the “class” centered around contextualizing the MK’s armed struggle within the wider process of African decolonization and the South African political struggle. “South Africa was the last hurdle in the whole of Africa.”⁴⁷⁰ Recruits were encouraged to view themselves as frontline soldiers in the final battle against colonialism in Africa and as members of a Pan-African revolutionary brotherhood.⁴⁷¹ In the words of “Daniel:”

MK played a very pivotal role if I can go throughout Africa, because you can’t talk about N’wamitwa without necessarily talking about the whole of Africa. You remember all the countries that got independence after 1961, after the creation of MK. MK was a part of their struggle and the people from those countries were also part of our struggle.⁴⁷²

For the most part, in terms of military impact, MK interventions in frontline states can be viewed almost universally as costly failures.⁴⁷³ Still, these actions afforded the ANC a sense of legitimacy as a pan-African liberation movement;

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid.

⁴⁷² Ibid.

⁴⁷³ See *External Mission: The ANC in Exile 1960-1990* by Stephen Ellis for an overview of the ANC’s attempts to influence events in the frontline states. For a harrowing personal account of the experiences of MK cadres taking part in the Angolan Civil War see *A Just Defiance: The Bomb makers, the Insurgents and a Legendary Treason Trial* by Peter Harris.

You can mention Tanzania where there was this organization, Chama Cha Mapinduzi; Mozambique, FRELIMO; you go to Namibia, SWAPO; to mention but a few. Including our own ZIPRA in Zimbabwe. You understand that when Zimbabwe won independence in 1980 MK was fighting along with the ZIPRA forces.⁴⁷⁴

To this day, “Daniel” sees his role as insurgent in N’wamitwa in a wider context, he believes the people’s war in N’wamitwa can be seen as a microcosm of both the anti-apartheid struggle and the wider push for decolonization in Africa.

So again the role that it played in N’wamitwa, there are a lot of activities that happened here, operations that happened, let me say around the Tzaneen. So with MK, we managed to fight back. Remember the battle at Nkowankowa Stadium where some soldiers were killed⁴⁷⁵ ... There were so many operations. So in the broader context those operations contributed to the National [and international] struggle.⁴⁷⁶

Furthermore, members of the class were educated on the role of the MK within the wider ANC “four pillars strategy.” As one of the four pillars, the armed struggle was considered an important, but not the paramount aspect of a broader political and social struggle. “Daniel” continues:

If you operate in the four pillars you will understand that you are not just a soldier, you are a political soldier ... In MK we believed 90 percent political work and only 10 percent military work ... Because we used to say the dangerous thing it is not the gun, the dangerous thing is the man behind the gun. So in MK if you release a bullet it must have a meaning, don’t just release a bullet. You release a bullet it must send a very important message to the enemy.⁴⁷⁷

Throughout their time as members of MK, the recruits found themselves under harsh military discipline. Corporal discipline was widespread and was used to punish the smallest of

⁴⁷⁴ Interview with “Daniel.” February 27, 2018.

⁴⁷⁵ As far as I can ascertain there were no deaths resulting from the battle at Nkowankowa Stadium. However, sources from the time note that four SADF soldiers were injured.

⁴⁷⁶ Interview with “Daniel.” February 27, 2018.

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid.

infractions, real or perceived. Members of John's unit remember being kicked and slapped often;⁴⁷⁸ others remember being dunked repeatedly into the water or thrown into thorn bushes while training at the Mswazi dam.⁴⁷⁹ Two punishments that seemed to be particularly feared were being forced to lie on the ground for the duration of the day and stare directly at the sun,⁴⁸⁰ or laying or being thrown onto in a bed of thorns.⁴⁸¹ The thorns left a particularly profound impression on the recruits. During the interview process one participant revealed his torso, still severely scarred over twenty years after he endured the punishment.⁴⁸² Another noted, "that is why some of us have scratches all over ... It was tough."⁴⁸³ It seems that there was no formal structure for instilling discipline or appealing punishments.⁴⁸⁴ Still there was something of a process, as "David" remembers:

After talking to you and telling you your mistake, if you don't show remorse, the punishment is gonna be real bad. Either they kill you or make you lie on you back and face the sun the whole day, they make you do march drilling all day alone, or kill you and your family.⁴⁸⁵

It is important to remember that John Ngobeni lived through the dark days of the 1980s as an exile in the camps in the frontline states. Given what we know about the camps during this period, it is safe to assume John had endured similar, if not much harsher treatment during his own

⁴⁷⁸ Interview with "David." February 20, 2018.; Interview with Steve Ndlovu, February 23, 2018.; Interview with Boyisa Mkhari, February 22, 2018.

⁴⁷⁹ Interview with Boyisa Mkhari, February 22, 2018.

⁴⁸⁰ Interview with Boyisa Mkhari, February 22, 2018.; Interview with "David." February 20, 2018.

⁴⁸¹ Interview with "David." February 20, 2018.; Interview with Hendrik Mohononi. February 22, 2018.; Interview with Boyisa Mkhari, February 22, 2018.

⁴⁸² Personal Communication Boyisa Mkhari.

⁴⁸³ Interview with Hendrik Mohononi. February 22 2018.

⁴⁸⁴ Interview with "David." February 20, 2018.

⁴⁸⁵ Interview with "David." February 20, 2018.; I never found any evidence of the MK retaliating against the families of members who transgressed against the organization. However, "David was not the only former member of the unit who voiced this fear as is evidenced by the upcoming story of Boyisa Mkhari.

training. I would argue that upon his return to N'wamitwa, John brought the culture of the ANC camps back with him and inflicted the treatment he had received as a recruit onto the next generation. Former combatants are divided on whether or not this level of brutality was necessary. To this day Steve Ndlovu, the soccer player, believes "it was necessary ... a soldier must be disciplined. A soldier must be able to be commanded and obey, they were training us to obey."⁴⁸⁶

Not all of John's former "class" agree with Steve's analysis. Of the interviewees consulted for this project, two were deserters from the organization. Both cited the harshness of discipline within the unit and the inconsistent way it was administered as the reason they left.⁴⁸⁷ In the words of Boyisa Mkhari, "[it was] too much." The harsh treatment would cause some of us to leave MK.⁴⁸⁸ When "David" was disciplined over allegations around drunkenly telling a joke about one of his commanders in the shabees, a charge he still denies, he decided his time with MK was up.⁴⁸⁹ He was allowed to leave and pursue work in Johannesburg after consulting with the leadership.⁴⁹⁰

Boyisa Mkhari was not so lucky. In his words: "You wouldn't say you were leaving, the only way to do it was to escape. If they see you were no longer coming, they would come to your house at night. They will take you and punish you. ... I was afraid they'd do something to my family."⁴⁹¹ For an undetermined period, Boyisa lived in the bush afraid of inviting reprisals onto his family. He remembers he would occasionally wait until dark before sleeping on the roof of his family home so that he could make a quick escape if the MK came looking for him.⁴⁹² Interestingly,

⁴⁸⁶ Interview with Steve Ndlovu, February 23, 2018.

⁴⁸⁷ Interview with "David." February 20, 2018.; Interview with Boyisa Mkhari, February 22, 2018.

⁴⁸⁸ Interview with Boyisa Mkhari, February 22, 2018.

⁴⁸⁹ Interview with "David." February 20, 2018.

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁹¹ Interview with Boyisa Mkhari, February 22, 2018.

⁴⁹² Ibid.

over two decades later, Boyisa claims to harbour no ill will towards the men who terrorized him and his family. “There are no hard feelings,” he says. “I’m glad they fought for our freedom.”⁴⁹³

Beyond the exertion of the physical training and the psychological trauma of the harsh discipline, the young men of John’s unit were forced to grapple with the moral ramifications of the fact they might be asked to kill in the name of the liberation struggle. When asked how they felt about the prospect of using violence, most of the men interviewed claimed they felt little compunction. “I felt like a soldier, so that did not terrify me. I was a soldier and had to fight for freedom,” remembers “David.”⁴⁹⁴ Steve feels that his training prepared him to bury his natural aversion to violence saying, “By then I could do anything. I could not reason. I would do anything I was told to do.”⁴⁹⁵

N’wamitwa being a deeply Christian area, two of the informants consulted for this study framed the debate over violence in theological terms. Despite both using the lens of Christianity to examine their participation in political violence, Case Ngobeni and Bohani Mathebula draw vastly different conclusions. Bohani remembers that “during training they said that if we do not get freedom, we will send you out to kill the white people. I remember saying to my friend ‘isn't it a sin to kill someone?’ The Bible says it's a sin.”⁴⁹⁶ Case Ngobeni, who now makes a living as a televangelist and thus can be seen as somewhat of an expert on the subject, has a different view:

In fact, it never had an impact on the Christianity part of it. Because you kill in order to remedy a situation, you kill in order to correct the situation, you kill in order to save one hundred, one thousand people. Because if you don't do that, if you don't kill, the later generations going to suffer.⁴⁹⁷

⁴⁹³ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁴ Interview with “David.” February 20, 2018.

⁴⁹⁵ Interview with Steve Ndlovu, February 23, 2018.

⁴⁹⁶ Interview with Bohani Mathebula, February 23, 2018.

⁴⁹⁷ Interview with Case Ngobeni, February 24, 2018.

For the first years of the transition, the MK in N’wamitwa focused on community defence and crime prevention. The cell would patrol villages in the area nightly, on the lookout for hostile elements. As “Daniel” put it, “patrolling was our daily bread, or should I say our nightly bread.”⁴⁹⁸ Due to the fact the MK was still operating in secret, patrols were carried out under cover of darkness and members of the unit often covered their faces.⁴⁹⁹ How non-combatants experienced the liberation struggle in N’wamitwa is beyond the scope of this project, and thus we have no evidence of how community members felt about their villages being patrolled nightly by heavily armed and masked teenagers. As far as the members of the cell are concerned, their presence was viewed positively. In the words of Bohani, “Those who knew we were patrolling felt grateful.”⁵⁰⁰

Hendrik Mohononi notes that the main target of the patrols was the marauding bands of white farmers described previously, a phenomenon Hendrik ties to AWB activity:

Prior to the elections in 1994, we had to patrol this village because of the challenge of whites living in the nearby farms. I mean neighboring farms. Because these guys, it was alleged they were members of the AWB ... The AWB were those extreme whites who could not accommodate blacks in their lives. So we thought they were going to destabilize everything, so we had to patrol this area.⁵⁰¹

According to Hendrik, the patrols did put a stop to the random attacks on residents experienced by “Daniel” and others.⁵⁰² For Steve at least, the patrols imparted to him an empowering sense of purpose. “It felt that we were doing it for the community. To us it felt good because we were defending our community.”⁵⁰³ As time wore on, the MK moved increasingly into the open and the

⁴⁹⁸ Interview with “Daniel.” February 27, 2018.

⁴⁹⁹ Interview with Bohani Mathebula, February 23, 2018.

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁰¹ Interview with Hendrik Mohononi. February 22, 2018.

⁵⁰² Ibid.

⁵⁰³ Interview with Steve Ndlovu, February 23, 2018.

methods of the N'wamitwa cell became more advanced. It seems that by 1994, the MK had become the de facto police force in N'wamitwa. They imposed a nighttime curfew and set up road blocks, keeping track of vehicles leaving and entering the area.⁵⁰⁴ Umkhonto also registered firearms within the community. "In the case a gun is fired we are able to know who is a suspect, and we would target him."⁵⁰⁵

As with any underground movement, within the MK fear of informers was rife. Almost every interview participant expressed the view that at the time, they were deeply concerned about the potential for members of the community to reveal their membership or reveal the internal workings of the cell. As a member of the intelligence unit within the wider SDU in N'wamitwa, "Daniel" explains "we were very much worried ... They [the army] will tell us we know this unit is commanded by this guy [John Ngobeni] ... They know names of people, yeah so it means there were informers."⁵⁰⁶ Interview participants were universally evasive when asked what happened to community members suspected of collaborating with the South African security forces. This attitude was typified by Hendrik Mohononi who only hinted "let me say there are certain things we cannot say to other people."⁵⁰⁷ Steve Ndlovu was somewhat more forthcoming, but still unwilling to discuss specifics:

There were operations that were being done in secret. Some of the targets were the police stations, some of the targets were the white farms, some of the targets were people they thought were informers. ... Sometimes wrong people died because of suspicions of being informers ... There were no proof and they killed a lot of people.⁵⁰⁸

⁵⁰⁴ Interview with "Daniel." February 27, 2018.

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁷ Interview with Hendrik Mohononi. February 22, 2018.

⁵⁰⁸ Interview with Steve Ndlovu, February 23, 2018.

It is worth noting that when pressed on the question of whether he felt remorse for serving in an organization that likely had innocent blood on its hands, Steve responded: “It was war my brother, in war there are casualties. As a soldier, a soldier must not be pitiful [merciful].”⁵⁰⁹

The fate of informers notwithstanding, N’wamitwa experienced little of the anarchistic violence that engulfed much of South Africa during the transition. There are likely several reasons for this, lack of viable competition to ANC hegemony chief among them. Throughout the transition period the homeland government had tried to nurture the creation of *Ximoko Xa Rixaka*, the whip, in Xitsonga. This political party was based on Tsonga ethnicity and modeled after Inkatha.⁵¹⁰ However, *Ximoko Xa Rixaka* never attracted any serious membership and none of the former MK operatives interviewed for this project saw it as a viable threat.⁵¹¹

Douglas Pike noted that the Vietnamese insurgents he studied divided their forces into combat and village guerillas.⁵¹² “George” and his comrades in the earlier phase of the people’s war, with their emphasis on armed propaganda and liquidation of collaborators, represented combat guerillas. By this model, the responsibilities of the N’wamitwa “class” are much closer to those of village guerillas. According to Pike, the responsibility of village guerillas was to assert control over communities friendly to the insurgency rather than stand and fight against security forces.⁵¹³ It seems that by the early 1990s, much of N’wamitwa had become what practitioners of a people’s war would refer to as a “liberated area.” Such areas are defined by Pike as a space in

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁵¹⁰ “Big Brother Alive and Well in Giyani.”

⁵¹¹ Interview with “George,” February 26, 2018.; Interview with “Daniel.” February 27 2018.

⁵¹² Pike, *Vietcong*, 235.

⁵¹³ Ibid., 235.

which insurgents could operate, regroup, and administer with little interference from security forces.⁵¹⁴

This study found evidence of very few clashes between the forces of the state and the MK during this period. According to the former combatants interviewed, the SADF rarely left the relative safety of the tar (paved) road and ventured into the villages proper. For their part, the MK in N'wamitwa were seemingly happy to enforce their authority over the villages and avoided conflict with the forces of the state. This lines up with Kalyvas' observation that when it comes to controlling territory, the military resources allocated to an area trump the population's pre-war ideological preference.⁵¹⁵ Put simply, the ANC took control of the villages in N'wamitwa by having the most boots on the ground and the most guns in the area. Furthermore, they showed a greater willingness to use both assets than the South African security forces did. By this logic, the nightly patrols undertaken by the "class" served the political purpose of establishing to the local population that the ANC was the dominant force in the area.

One possible reason for the apparent reluctance of the SADF to root out the insurgents was the formidable arsenal built up by the insurgency during the earlier stages of the conflict. Despite having one of the most operationally capable and battle-hardened armies in the world, years of economic sanctions had begun to detrimentally affect South Africa's army. The technical edge enjoyed by the liberation movements, many of whom were armed to the teeth with top-of-line Eastern Bloc weaponry, is a common theme when discussing this period with former SADF personnel.⁵¹⁶ "I think they were afraid of us," "Daniel" remembers, "because you know MK was

⁵¹⁴ Ibid., 271-272.

⁵¹⁵ Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, 111.

⁵¹⁶ The superiority of the Eastern Bloc weaponry supplied to Black liberation movements by their allies in the socialist world is a common theme in memoirs by former SADF personnel. See Justin Taylor, *A Whisper in the*

... using very big machines like the AK-47, the Makarov, Uzis, Bazookas,⁵¹⁷ and so forth. Which were bigger than their R4's and R5's and so forth.”⁵¹⁸

The fear of heavy weaponry was enough to save the “class” at least once from potential disaster, after an act of youthful bravado on the part of “Daniel” placed the unit in peril.

There was this hippo, an armored vehicle of the army with army personnel ... We just approached them, just me and one of the guys ... We just befriended them. Then they started to ask so many questions like specific names of people who are training. But because we were well-trained we were able to always defocus them. Maybe if they mentioned the name of somebody, we would say we don't know that person, or that person has long been in Joburg and so forth, something like that. We walked with them around the village and then came back with them.⁵¹⁹

It seems as if the fear of informers expressed by many MK operatives interviewed was not without cause. Despite his best efforts at deception, “Daniel’s” cover was blown by local informants. He continues:

They went back to the armored vehicles but immediately when we left them some people told them that in fact the people they were looking for were us. But unfortunately we had already went to what we had called “the class,” which is the training camp for that day.⁵²⁰

That was not the last the “class” would see of the army that day. Luckily for the unit, fear of potential MK firepower allowed a group of teenagers to face down the army of the apartheid state. “Daniel” explains,

Reeds-The Terrible Ones: South Africa's 32 Battalion at War (Warwick: Helion and Company, 2013). Jim Hopper, *Koevoet: Experiencing South Africa's Deadly Bush War* (Warwick: Helion and Company, 2013). Garry Baner, *South Africa's 'Border War' Contested Narratives and Conflicting Memories* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014)

⁵¹⁷ I suspect Daniel uses the term Bazookas and Uzis as a generalized shorthand for shoulder-mounted rocket launchers and submachine guns, rather than referring to the specific models.

⁵¹⁸ Interview with “Daniel.” February 27, 2018.

⁵¹⁹ Ibid.

⁵²⁰ Ibid.

So after realizing that we fooled them, they got directions to where we were training then they came that side. Fortunately, we had already reported the matter to our commanders, and then we'll say when we hear trucks coming we started singing loudly. But they believe we were having AK-47s and some other very big machines. They were afraid to approach us, so we sang very loud and they just stayed away and fired some shots. When we came back at night we saw many rounds have been fired there.⁵²¹

Fascinatingly, “Daniel’s” story mirrors a common tactic described by Douglas Pike in *Vietcong* dubbed the “shout in unison tactic.” “On signal [the insurgents] would shout and beat sticks on trees” in order to convince enemies they faced a large and well-organized group of combatants.⁵²²

In contrast to what is described in much of the literature on ANC-aligned SDUs, it seems the unit operating in N’wamitwa in the early 1990s was a well-disciplined, semi-professional paramilitary force. Or at least those who served in it perceived themselves to be such. During the transitional period, I found no evidence of any kind of a slip into criminality as described elsewhere in South Africa. Several of the former members of the unit interviewed for this project expressed pride in the disciplined behavior of their unit. Regardless of what one thinks of John Ngobeni’s methods, it is clear that over the course of several years, he transformed a group of predominantly teenage boys into a cohesive and disciplined fighting force.

As the period of transition lurched from one crisis to another and South Africa’s first multi-racial election approached, the role of the MK in N’wamitwa continued to evolve alongside the political situation. As elections approached the work of the MK in N’wamitwa became increasingly political. By 1993, the MK was operating with virtual impunity in much of the country, including N’wamitwa. Furthermore, the ANC had moved from trying to mobilize their

⁵²¹ Ibid.

⁵²² Pike, *Vietcong*, 235.

supporters to trying to rein them in, particularly after the murder of Chris Hani, the MK's immensely popular chief of staff.

I remember Nelson Mandela, particularly during the funeral of Chris Hani made the formal request ... because of the current situation which was volatile, and it means the ANC membership was growing daily, so there were going to be challenges when calling rallies because there would be public order, or disorder and so forth. So we need people to do the marshaling work to control the crowd so that the ANC does not get out of hand and so forth. And so from that point on we were dealing mostly with crowd control.⁵²³

From 1993 until the elections of 1994, the work of the MK in N'wamitwa revolved primarily around "marshalling," or ensuring the safety and good behavior of ANC supporters at mass rallies, of which there were many in the lead up to elections.⁵²⁴ "Daniel" lays out the basic security procedures followed by the MK:

First it would be if there was going to be a rally in a particular stadium or sports center, you go there maybe four [or] five days and do some rounds in terms of looking at the venue and just going around the village and seeing what people are saying, if there are any threats for attacks and so forth. But also maybe two days or a day before the rally you must be on the venue, then you must be doing security work. The general security work at the venue, including car parking because parking is part of security, if cars are not parked well, there will be security threats. But during the night before the rally, you would then be patrolling around the venue. So that there are not people who are planting anything suspicious and then in the morning before anyone can come into the venue, we'd do a sweeping and do checking whether things are fine. Then we'd look around the venues and all the access points and maybe the tents or where the seating arrangements are made.⁵²⁵

As elections approached, the ANC began to aggressively campaign nationwide, and even relative backwaters like Gazankulu attracted some of South Africa's highest profile figures. Paramount among them was Madiba himself who by 1993 had ascended to international superstardom. As "Daniel" remembers:

⁵²³ Interview with "Daniel." February 27, 2018.

⁵²⁴ *Ibid.*; Interview with Case Ngobeni, February 24, 2018.

⁵²⁵ Interview with "Daniel." February 27, 2018.

You'll then guard the leadership and usher the leadership into the venue and then guard them but also when they leave you must be careful because people would want to come closer to the leadership and then we have to control the crowd so that they are away. I remember at Matipane around to the South, when Nelson Mandela came it was chaotic when he was arriving, but we managed to control the crowd and also the convoy was moving at a very high speed so that it was unable to be hit or something fishy like that.⁵²⁶

Members of the unit were deeply involved in the elections process in N'wamitwa. Steve, "David," and Bohani went on to join the Independent Electoral Commission. Being new to democratic norms it seems there might have been some confusion in N'wamitwa over how independent the commission should be. "David" describes behaving in a manner those used to more established democracies would likely find inappropriate. "Every time I go to a person and help them register for elections I made sure to tell them who to vote for, ANC, and why they should vote for ANC."⁵²⁷ Others like "Daniel" and Hendrik worked security ensuring the safety of the throngs of first-time voters. In Hendrik's words, "All the people who trained in the MK, it was supposed to be our role to make sure all the voting stations are safe. Wherever you were sent to vote you were meant to make sure that particular voting station is safe."⁵²⁸ It seems that the last formal action of the armed struggle carried out by members of the N'wamitwa "class" was responding to reports of voter intimidation at the predominantly white Letsitele Junction. Several members of the unit responded, including "David," who having deserted the unit, was no longer a formal member. "David" remembers: "I worked for the IEC but inside me I knew I was an ANC member. ... I even went to the station where black people were being beaten up and I fought."⁵²⁹

⁵²⁶ Ibid.

⁵²⁷ Interview with "David." February 20, 2018.

⁵²⁸ Interview with Hendrik Mohononi. February 22 2018.

⁵²⁹ Interview with "David." February 20, 2018.

While they did play important roles in N’wamitwa during the period of transition, ultimately the “class” was trained for a war that never occurred. Other scholars who have done work with MK veterans describe a “stab in the back” mentality from former members of the organization who hoped to topple the South African state.⁵³⁰ This view was not reflected in my own interviews. The men I spoke with uniformly expressed relief they were never called up to fight. “David” remembers that “It made me feel happy. I felt that Africa was coming together ... I was always thinking there was going to be a war.”⁵³¹ Like “George,” Steve Ndlovu had realistic expectations of what would happen if the unit ever went on the offensive against the SADF in earnest. While many former members of the MK in N’wamitwa were proud of the discipline and cohesion within the unit, they also understood that in terms of combat effectiveness they remained thoroughly outclassed by their opponents until the end of the conflict. In the words of Steve,

We were happy, we were happy with the result because ... even if there was a war I don’t think we were that much ready to fight ... should the war have happened. We were to fight, [but] we [were] not that well trained, let me say that.⁵³²

The 1994 elections clearly illustrated the rehabilitation of the ANC’s image and their political dominance in the region. The Northern Province, of which N’wamitwa was a part, voted overwhelmingly for the ANC. Over three days of polling, the organization captured ninety-one

⁵³⁰ The MK was blindsided by the ANC’s decision to seek a negotiated settlement with the South African state. Many members of the organization were furious at this perceived betrayal. In an interview shortly before his death Chris Hani, the MK’s Chief of Staff, stated “I was angry and bitter that this decision was taken without comprehensive consultation. ... Why is it that there was no consultation with those who were involved in the actual psychical side of the struggle?”; Chris Hani, “I was Angry and Bitter:’ Chris Hani on the ANC’s Decision to Suspend the Armed Struggle” Found on *HRC Press*, Accessed January 12 2019. <http://hsrpress.bookslive.co.za/blog/2015/01/08/i-was-angry-and-bitter-chris-hani-on-the-ancs-decision-to-suspend-the-armed-struggle/>

⁵³¹ Interview with “David.” February 20, 2018.

⁵³² Interview with Steve Ndlovu, February 23, 2018.

percent of the popular vote.⁵³³ This far outstrips the ANC's support anywhere else in South Africa, even its heartland of the Eastern Cape.⁵³⁴ If the earlier distaste towards the organization in N'wamitwa articulated by the participants of this study is accurate, this marks a stunning public relations coup for the ANC. The armed struggle, which was the focus of this study, was an ancillary but important front of the wider push to assert ANC authority over one of South Africa's least developed regions.

⁵³³ "April 26-29, 1994 General Election Results, Limpopo" Found on *Election Resources on the Internet*. Accessed October 27 2018. <http://electionresources.org/za/provinces.php?election=1994&province=EC>

⁵³⁴ "April 26-29, 1994 General Election Results, Eastern Cape" Found on *Election Resources on the Internet*, Accessed October 27 2018. <http://electionresources.org/za/provinces.php?election=1994&province=EC>

Conclusion:

“This Freedom Did Not Come Like Rain”

In this thesis I have argued that we can see all three stages of a people’s war as articulated by Mao play out on the ground in N’wamitwa. In the early days of the defensive phase, John Ngobeni began to build up the MK presence in the area. It seems John’s initial focus was building up the strength of the insurgency through clandestine means. We can see many elements of this early stage in the work of “George.” The MK recruited and vetted “George” in secret. Following his enlistment into the MK, “George’s” contribution was facilitating the clandestine flow of weapons into N’wamitwa. As the organization began to recruit operatives and arm themselves, they moved into the stalemate phase.

It seems that John’s cell became increasingly active in the early months of 1990. The MK staged acts of armed propaganda targeting unpopular police officers and occupying soldiers. This armed propaganda struggle took place alongside a mass civil uprising against the homeland government. In my research I was able to confirm three armed propaganda actions carried out by the MK in N’wamitwa: the assassination of Ngabenziwa Thomas Shingange, the “Battle of Nkowankowa Stadium,” and the attempt on the life of George Rasebotse. This combination of targeted guerilla activity in support of mass action conforms to the ANC’s nationwide strategy as discussed in Chapter One. The stalemate phase was brought to a screeching halt by the disastrous fallout from the defection of comrade Temba’s wife and the ambush in Rita township. However, events occurring on the national level resurrected the MK’s presence in N’wamitwa.

The ANC’s suspension of the armed struggle and the nationwide process of liberalization provided the MK with an opportunity to expand its operation in N’wamitwa. After the unbanning

of political organizations, the MK began to form a self-defence unit in line with wider ANC strategy. The SDU that operated in N’wamitwa conformed to the model articulated by Jeremy Cronin in “For The Sake of Our Lives”: a paramilitary force training and operating under the watchful eye of a hardened MK insurgent.⁵³⁵ The role of the SDU in N’wamitwa was fluid, changing to adapt to the ever shifting needs of the ANC during the transition to democracy. From what I can tell, while the counterattack in N’wamitwa was largely non-violent, it represented a massive shift in the balance of power in the area. When John Ngobeni secretly re-entered N’wamitwa in 1989, the area was the private fief of the Ntsanwisi family. Furthermore, if my sources are to be believed the local population was deeply mistrustful of the ANC. Five years later, N’wamitwa had become a stronghold of ANC support and remains so to this day.

Through interviews with former members of the MK in N’wamitwa we can see that political indoctrination imparted to members of the SDU was in line with wider trends in the ANC’s political strategy. Insurgents were taught to view their armed struggle as one of the “four pillars” of a wider political struggle. “Daniel’s” assertion that “if you release a bullet it must have a meaning” can be seen as being representative of the role of the armed struggle within the wider context of a people’s war.⁵³⁶ Members of the MK in N’wamitwa understood their contribution was an aspect of a much wider, multifaceted political strategy.

We can also note that the running themes of Pan-Africanism, anti-colonialism, and Third World solidarity, which all featured heavily in ANC revolutionary discourse, were prevalent in the training the “class” received. Several interviewees including “George,” “Daniel,” and “David” positioned their activities as members of the MK in a wider international context. In the physical

⁵³⁵ Cronin, “For The Sake of Our Lives,”

⁵³⁶ Interview with “Daniel.” February 27, 2018.

training of the SDU, we can see both the legacy of the ANC camps in the frontline states and aspects of the MCW training discussed in the works of Davis and Simpson. Members of John Ngobeni's self defense unit received training in political mobilization, underground organization, basic combat tactics, and political and social theory.⁵³⁷ The importation of MCW training into N'wamitwa is a clear legacy of the training many MK operatives received abroad from their allies in the socialist world.

With the people's war won, the members of the N'wamitwa "class" were left to find a place for themselves in the new rainbow nation, with mixed success. Some like Steve, Hendrik, and "George," having achieved their goal of ushering in a new non-racial South Africa, left the struggle behind, choosing to pursue post-secondary education. Others like "David" and Bohani found that the promised posts in the SANDF and formal demobilization process never materialized. At present, both are un- or under employed and resent the lack of support for veterans of the struggle. Some but not all interviewees are still active ANC members. "Daniel" is now a local ANC party boss and has leveraged his time as a revolutionary into a successful political career. At present, he often travels to take part in international socialist solidarity events representing the ANC⁵³⁸ Regardless of their present circumstances, the former insurgents interviewed for this project are universally proud to have taken part in the freedom struggle. Furthermore, all are keenly aware that their actions and sacrifices deeply altered the course of South African history. In the words of Hendrik Mohononi, "This freedom did not come like rain. There are people who fought for it and those people should be remembered at all times."⁵³⁹

⁵³⁷ Interview with "Daniel." February 27, 2018.; Interview with Hendrik Mohononi. February 22, 2018.

⁵³⁸ Personal Communication "Daniel."

⁵³⁹ Interview with Hendrik Mohononi. February 22, 2018.

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