

THE GENESIS OF THE ANC'S ARMED STRUGGLE IN SOUTH AFRICA, 1948-1961

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ABSTRACT

Revelations made by veterans of the period and the opening of various archives have thrown significant new light on the origins of Umkhonto we Sizwe. It is now clear that the South African Communist Party (SACP) was the first component of the congress alliance to decide to launch an armed struggle against the apartheid state, in late 1960, having consulted the Chinese leader Mao Zedong in person. Only later was the issue debated in the senior organs of the African National Congress and other allied organisations. It has also become apparent that the first commander of Umkhonto we Sizwe, Nelson Mandela, was a member of the SACP. The main thrust of these observations is to demonstrate the degree to which the opening of the armed struggle in South Africa was inscribed in the politics of the cold war.

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On 16 December 2011, South Africa commemorates the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of hostilities by Umkhonto we Sizwe. The sixteenth of December 1961 is generally regarded as the formal beginning of the armed struggle that was to culminate in the 1994 election of South Africa's first majority government, led by the African National Congress (ANC). The following month, January 2012, marks the centenary of the ANC's own foundation. The coincidence of these two anniversaries is sure to be the occasion for much official celebration in South Africa and among friends of the ANC elsewhere.

Umkhonto we Sizwe was originally described by its leaders as an autonomous body formed by members of the ANC and members of the South African Communist Party (SACP) working in parallel. Key ANC leaders recognised Umkhonto we Sizwe as the ANC's armed wing within months of its creation, as this article will briefly describe. These days, Umkhonto we Sizwe — often known as MK for short — enjoys a prestigious position in official discourses on South Africa's liberation as the unit at the sharp edge of the long struggle against the apartheid state from which the ANC derives its historical legitimacy. Yet the story of Umkhonto we Sizwe's creation that emerges from recent research made possible by the opening of

previously inaccessible archives, by interviews with key participants¹ and by a spate of biographies and autobiographies² differs significantly from the version of events that was popularised by the ANC itself over decades.³ The most notable insights of new research concern the leading role played by the South African Communist Party in the creation of Umkhonto we Sizwe and the influence of the cold war context of the early 1960s more generally.

The accounts of Umkhonto we Sizwe's origin that have received the widest circulation reflect the version of events given by the organisation's first commander,⁴ Nelson Mandela, in his famous speech from the dock on 20 April 1964 during his trial by the Supreme Court in Pretoria. This oration is a modern classic of political rhetoric.⁵ At its core is a reasoned justification, by a man expecting to be sentenced to death, of his choice to adopt a policy of violence against a state that denied voting rights to the majority of the population and a government that had refused time and again to respond to appeals for dialogue made by the ANC and others. In the course of his speech, Mandela gave a brief account of the formation of Umkhonto we Sizwe. His first-hand version of events, given under such dramatic circumstances, was for many years used by the ANC to argue for the justice of its recourse to arms. Mandela's own legal training had taught him that a speech from the dock was not made under oath and was not subject to cross-examination in court. The value of his testimony as evidence therefore remained untested.⁶

Mandela implied that the decision to turn to armed struggle arose from discussions in the second quarter of 1961 that culminated in a decision taken by himself and others

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¹ Bernard Magubane et al, 'The Turn to Armed Struggle', in South African Democracy Trust (SADET), *The Road to Democracy in South Africa*, vol. I (1960-70) (Zebra Press, Cape Town, 2004), pp.53-145, may be regarded as the most complete account, and can also be considered as semi-official.

² These are too numerous to list, but several are cited elsewhere in this article.

³ E.g. Francis Meli, *South Africa Belongs to Us: A History of the ANC* (1988; James Currey, London, 1989), pp.146-7.

⁴ Noted by Joe Slovo, *Slovo: The Unfinished Autobiography of ANC Leader Joe Slovo* (1995; Ocean Press edn., Melbourne and New York, 1997), p.176.

⁵ Nelson Mandela, *I am Prepared to Die* (International Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa, London, 1979), pp.28-48.

⁶ C.J.B. Le Roux, 'Umkhonto we Sizwe: Its Role in the ANC's Onslaught against White Domination in South Africa, 1961-1988' (PhD thesis, University of Pretoria, 1992), p.47.

‘at the beginning of June 1961’, when he and some colleagues ‘came to the conclusion that as violence in this country was inevitable, it would be unrealistic and wrong for African leaders to continue preaching peace and non-violence’.⁷ The result was the establishment of Umkhonto we Sizwe, whose existence was announced to the South African public on 16 December of the same year. This was a highly symbolic date since 16 December figured in the ideology of the ruling National Party as Dingaan’s Day or the Day of the Covenant, commemorating the 1838 Battle of Blood River, prior to which a party of *voortrekkers* preparing to confront a Zulu army had taken a public vow.

It has now become clear that Mandela’s statement in his 1964 ‘I am prepared to die’ speech did not do justice to the role played in the inception of the armed struggle by the SACP, which had received promises of support from the two Communist superpowers of the time, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and China. Related to this omission is the fact that it is now possible to establish beyond reasonable doubt that Mandela himself was a member of the Communist Party for a period in the early 1960s, notwithstanding his own denials or evasions both then and subsequently,⁸ as will shortly be discussed. This throws significant new light on the recent history of South Africa. Accordingly, this article reconstructs the main outlines of how key figures in the congress alliance, the opposition formation that included both the ANC and the SACP, arrived at their momentous decision to found Umkhonto we Sizwe and to take up arms against the South African state.

The origins of South Africa’s armed struggle

The drift towards armed struggle in South Africa may be traced back to the late 1940s,⁹ when the end of the Second World War and the unexpected election of a National Party government in 1948 transformed South African politics. In 1950 the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), threatened with legal suppression by a ferociously anti-communist government, chose to dissolve itself. Many activists of

⁷Mandela, *I am Prepared to Die*, p.33.

⁸ Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela* (1994; Abacus edn., London, 1995), p.86.

⁹ Le Roux, ‘Umkhonto we Sizwe’, p.1. Raymond Mhlaba, a key participant in the armed struggle, makes a similar assessment in *Personal Memoirs: Reminiscing from Rwanda and Uganda. Narrated to Thembeke Mufamadi* (Human Sciences Research Council and Robben Island Museum, Pretoria, 2001), pp.56-7.

other persuasions feared that similarly draconian measures would soon be used against them. This, and the radical nature of the National Party's policy of apartheid more generally, caused some opponents of the government to wonder whether organised violence may not emerge as a real option within the foreseeable future. In 1952 Nelson Mandela, then beginning his legal career in Johannesburg, discussed the likelihood of a turn to armed struggle at some future date with his close friend Walter Sisulu.¹⁰ Both men were already leading officials of the ANC, Sisulu having served as secretary-general since 1949 and Mandela being president of the movement's Transvaal section. Like many other former members of the ANC Youth League who in earlier days had taken strongly 'Africanist' positions opposed to the influence of the Communist Party and other organisations that they thought to be dominated by minority ethnic groups, Mandela and Sisulu had come to appreciate the need for all who were opposed to apartheid to cooperate in their common interest. Both were leaders of the defiance campaign that provided the ANC with its first experience of mass, non-violent resistance and that received support from others in the emerging congress alliance.

In light of his experience of working closely with activists outside the ANC, Walter Sisulu had moved closer in particular to the Congress of Democrats, a body of white leftists that included many Communists in search of new outlets for their political activities following the dissolution of their party. In 1953, the same year that the small band of Communists secretly re-established the Party, this time under the name South African Communist Party, Sisulu's contacts in the Congress of Democrats provided him with funds emanating from the World Federation of Democratic Youth, a Soviet front organisation, that enabled him to embark on a lengthy trip overseas with others including his ANC colleagues Duma Nokwe and Henry 'Squire' Makgothi. It was while Sisulu was preparing for this journey, which was to take him among other places to Romania, Poland, Russia and China, that Mandela again raised the question of violence, 'ask[ing] him to discuss the possibility of armed struggle with the Chinese'.¹¹ This Sisulu duly did, putting the idea to members of the central committee of the Chinese Communist Party whom he met during his stay in Beijing.

¹⁰ Elinor Sisulu, *Walter and Albertina Sisulu: In Our Lifetime* (David Philip, Cape Town, 2002), p.146; Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, p.320.

¹¹ Sisulu, *Walter and Albertina Sisulu*, p.112.

His Chinese hosts are said to have responded in a non-committal way, commenting only that ‘you have to do it when the conditions are right’.¹²

Nor were Sisulu and Mandela alone in speculating about the eventual necessity for armed struggle. Oliver Tambo, who succeeded Sisulu as ANC secretary-general in 1955, later recalled that in that same year ‘the question of violence was raised but deferred because of [the] situation’.¹³ It was also around this time, according to Raymond Mhlaba, a member of both the ANC and the SACP, that ‘some of us even suggested the need to take up arms and engage the Boers militarily’.¹⁴ Mhlaba recalled discussing the matter with Mandela and in the mid-to-late 1950s he made a series of proposals on these lines at meetings of the underground Communist Party.¹⁵ Other people ‘urging armed resistance’ at this time included what Walter Sisulu termed ‘semi-gangster elements’, among whom he placed the Sophiatown organiser of the ANC Youth League, Joe Modise.¹⁶

Various accounts, then, suggest that by the mid-1950s a significant number of ANC leaders of the younger generation considered that a policy of armed struggle would have to be adopted at some future point even if it was inopportune at present. The most authoritative study of the matter concludes that some of them, including Sisulu and Mandela, regarded an armed struggle as inevitable.¹⁷

At this juncture, in 1956 the National Party government, reacting to the radicalism of the defiance campaign and to the emergence of a block of organisations allied in opposition to apartheid, indicted 156 people associated with the ANC and other organisations on charges of treason. Looking back many years later, a leading Communist, Lionel ‘Rusty’ Bernstein, described the treason trial as ‘the great underestimated factor in the history of the South African movement’.¹⁸ It brought

¹² Magubane et al, ‘The Turn to Armed Struggle’, p.54.

¹³ ANC minutes of Inkatha/ANC consultative meeting, London, 29-30 October 1979, 31 pp. Copy in Archive for Contemporary Affairs, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, H.J. Coetsee papers PV357, 1/A1/5.

¹⁴ Mhlaba, *Personal Memoirs*, p.107.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Magubane et al, ‘The Turn to Armed Struggle’, p.55.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.54.

¹⁸ Rusty Bernstein, ‘Comments on Francis Meli’s Manuscript? History of the ANC’, South African Historical Papers, Cullen Library, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, Bernstein Papers AL 3051, R4.1-4.4.

anti-apartheid militants of various persuasions into closer contact than ever before as they sat together in the dock facing long prison sentences.

Other events and currents both inside and outside the country were also leading to a growing radicalisation of opinion within the ANC and some other sectors of the extra-parliamentary opposition in South Africa. The emancipation of the colonised and subjugated peoples of what was then becoming known as the third world was emerging as a key theme of international affairs. Elsewhere in Africa, Algerian nationalists were fighting against France. In 1957 Ghana became the first colonial territory south of the Sahara to receive independence, and its prime minister and later president, Kwame Nkrumah, proclaimed himself the leader of a pan-African movement against colonial rule. Becoming steadily more militant during the course of his presidency, Nkrumah developed a close relationship with the People's Republic of China, which in time provided him with instructors for a training centre for guerrilla warfare where radicals from all over Africa could receive instruction.¹⁹ Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser, apostle of Arab unity and anti-colonialism, was another radical African hero of the period. The veteran general secretary of the South African Communist Party Moses Kotane, who also sat on the ANC's national executive, met some of the heroes of the anticolonial left, including Nasser, the Indian prime minister Jawarhalal Nehru and the Chinese foreign minister Zhou Enlai, at the Bandung conference in Indonesia in 1955.²⁰ The 1959 overthrow of the Batista government in Cuba by a guerrilla force led by Fidel Castro was an inspiration to militants of the left worldwide.

Within South Africa itself, violent disturbances in the rural areas of Zeerust and Sekukhuniland engaged the attention of the most militant ANC and SACP members, who were able to connect to local activists in those areas.²¹ The most important of this series of rural risings was an armed revolt by peasants in Pondoland, which 'profoundly influenced the whole orientation of the ANC leadership', in Bernstein's words, leading them to confront seriously the question of armed struggle, 'because

¹⁹ *Nkrumah's Subversion in Africa* (Ministry of Information, Accra, no date [1966]).

²⁰ Brian Bunting, *Moses Kotane: South African Revolutionary* (1975; revised edn., Inkululeko Publications, London, 1986), ch.12.

²¹ Le Roux, 'Umkhonto we Sizwe', pp.49-51.

there was the beginnings of an armed resistance movement'.²² According to Raymond Mhlaba,²³ some activists in the radical ANC stronghold of the Eastern Cape at this time formed a group of volunteers dedicated to armed struggle apparently without seeking permission from their national leadership.

In this changing climate advocates of armed struggle gained a more respectful hearing than in previous years. 'It was only later, towards the end of the 1950s, that Rusty Bernstein asked why my question was not taken seriously within the new Communist Party', Raymond Mhlaba recalled in old age. 'From then on we discussed the issue of orchestrating an armed struggle. We discussed the recruitment and training of soldiers, how to obtain assistance from abroad and how to acquire weapons and explosives'.²⁴ Within the ranks of the 450-500²⁵ members that the South African Communist Party had at the end of the 1950s, two specific streams of militancy emerged, one among the black trade unionists who had been a special target for recruitment by the Party since the 1940s, the other among white veterans of World War Two. One Communist militant, Arthur Goldreich, had experience of underground warfare with a Zionist group in Israel. Perhaps the most militant of all the combat veterans was Jack Hodgson, whose work as a miner had left him with an expert knowledge of explosives and whose wartime service had included front-line experience in North Africa. Hodgson not only began experimenting with bomb-making equipment but even, his widow later recalled, suggested that 'we should be robbing banks to raise money for our revolution'.²⁶

On 21 March 1960 a demonstration in front of the police station in the township of Sharpeville led to the police shooting an estimated 69 people, leading to worldwide condemnation. The government responded by proclaiming a state of emergency and banning several organisations including the ANC. Some of those detained during the state of emergency that lasted from March to August 1960 are said to have discussed

²² Bernstein, 'Comments on Francis Meli's Manuscript? History of the ANC'.

²³ Quoted in J. Buthelezi, 'The Struggle for Liberation still Continues', undated ms. [c.1971]. ANC archives, University of Fort Hare, Lusaka papers, additional material, box 53, folder 7.

²⁴ Mhlaba, *Personal Memoirs*, p.107.

²⁵ Vladimir Shubin, *ANC: A View from Moscow* (1999; 2nd revised edn., Jacana, Auckland Park, 2008), p.5.

²⁶ Rica Hodgson in an interview with Julie Frederikse: South African Historical Archive, Cullen Library, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, Frederikse collection, AL 2460.

the prospect of armed struggle even while they were behind bars.²⁷ Among the 300 or so SACP members still at liberty, a handful of the Johannesburg comrades discussed armed resistance as they moved from one safe house to another to escape detention in April and May 1960. According to one participant, the leading SACP theoretician Michael Harmel made a presentation to his comrades suggesting that ‘peaceful methods of struggle were over; that one had to now look at alternatives; and that the alternative was armed struggle — violence. And [the presentation] set this in the context of Marxist theory and communist theory, and revolutionary practice.’²⁸ In August 1960 Harmel proceeded to circulate a draft paper on armed struggle among a select group of Party members. This was subsequently adopted by the SACP central committee in the form of a document entitled ‘South Africa: What Next?’²⁹

As the authoritative chapter published in 2004 by the South African Democracy Trust states, there is ‘a good deal of evidence’ that the SACP embraced a policy of armed struggle before any other body.³⁰ This finding, however, requires elaboration.

International support

While the South African Communist Party was moving towards a policy of armed struggle, some of its leading members were able to discuss the issue extensively in Moscow, the home of international communism, and in Beijing, increasingly an alternative pole of influence in the communist world.

In July 1960, for the first time since the establishment of the SACP as an underground party seven years earlier, a delegation of South African Communists visited Moscow for talks with officials of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). SACP chairman Yusuf Dadoo and European representative Vella Pillay had a first round of meetings on their own.³¹ Thereafter, these two were joined by Michael Harmel and Joe Matthews, who came directly from South Africa before the end of August³² with a view to attending a congress of Communist and workers’ parties that was scheduled

²⁷ Magubane et al, ‘The Turn to Armed Struggle’, p.71.

²⁸ Ben Turok, quoted on the website of South African History Online: <http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/governance-projects/organisations/MK/MKframeset.htm> [accessed 30 December 2010].

²⁹ Shubin, *ANC*, p.12.

³⁰ Magubane et al, ‘The Turn to Armed Struggle’, p.80.

³¹ Shubin, *ANC*, pp.25-26.

³² Magubane et al, ‘The Turn to Armed Struggle’, p.81, state that they arrived in Moscow in July 1960.

for November 1960. Before the start of their conference the South African delegates³³ took the opportunity to visit Beijing, inferior to the Soviet Union in prestige in the communist world but increasingly asserting its political and ideological independence. The South African delegation was received by no less than Chairman Mao Zedong in person. Chinese officials are said to have lectured the South Africans on the errors of Soviet thinking, while Mao listened to Dadoo's views on armed struggle without comment.³⁴ The South Africans also discussed the armed struggle with Deng Xiaoping, Mao's deputy and eventual successor, to whom they made a request for military training.³⁵ It is not clear precisely what Deng's answer was, but subsequent events suggest that it was far more positive than when Sisulu had raised the matter for the first time in Beijing seven years earlier.

After the Chinese interlude, the South Africans returned to Moscow where they duly participated in the November congress of Communist and workers' parties and had more talks with government and party officials. Joe Matthews later recalled 'putting forward the policy of armed struggle' during this period.³⁶ According to Matthews, he and Harmel spent several months in the USSR and had extensive talks with Soviet officials and military officers at Stalin's former dacha outside Moscow, used by the CPSU to receive representatives of 'fraternal parties', especially clandestine ones.³⁷ However, Vladimir Shubin, the author of the most detailed study of relations between the South African and Soviet communist parties and himself formerly a senior official working on related matters, makes no mention of this. He refers to several of the matters discussed by the South African delegation with their Soviet counterparts, including notably an agreement by the CPSU to give financial aid to the South African party that amounted to \$30,000 before the end of 1960, but writes that the SACP raised the question of armed struggle with its Soviet counterpart 'for the first

³³ Irina Filatova, 'The Lasting Legacy: the Soviet Theory of the National-Liberation Movement and South Africa', paper presented to the Liberation Struggles in Southern Africa workshop, University of Cape Town, 4-6 September 2008, p.16, suggests that the whole group travelled to China. Shubin *ANC*, p.26, suggests that Dadoo went alone.

³⁴ Information contained in an unpublished manuscript by Essop Pahad quoted in Shubin, *ANC*, pp.26-27. In searching for the original manuscript in the ANC archive at the Mayibuye Centre, University of the Western Cape, Bellville, in February 2011, I was informed that it had been removed by ANC personnel.

³⁵ Magubane et al, 'The Turn to Armed Struggle', p.81, where Deng's name is written as Dang Tsia-Ping.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Filatova, 'The Lasting Legacy', p.16.

time' only a year later, on 21 October 1961.³⁸ The talks referred to by Joe Matthews thus appear to have gone undocumented, at least in the archives consulted by Shubin.

The South Africans' discussions on armed struggle in Moscow and Beijing in the second half of 1960 occurred at a time when Soviet perspectives on issues of national liberation were changing fast in response to world events. The CPSU central committee had recently appointed a group of advisors to work on theoretical issues concerning national liberation.³⁹ In late 1960, an Africa section was formed within the central committee's international department⁴⁰ in recognition of the continent's enhanced political importance as a result of its decolonisation. The convening of the 1960 conference of Communist and workers' parties from all over the world was itself a reflection of a growing conviction among the USSR's rulers that the decolonisation movement in Asia and Africa was a precursor to the collapse of the capitalist system worldwide.⁴¹

In developing a new perspective on African nationalist movements with a view to determining their suitability as allies, Marxist-Leninist theoreticians were able to draw on views expressed by Lenin himself and on ideas about a two-stage revolution that went as far back as the earliest debates within the Russian Social Democratic Party, the forerunner of the CPSU. In a series of speeches and articles starting with his contributions at the second congress of the Communist International or Comintern in 1920, Lenin had argued that national liberation movements could be allies of the Soviet Communist Party.⁴² In 1928 this line of argument was adopted by the Communist Party of South Africa after the Comintern's sixth congress had instructed CPSA delegates present in Moscow to campaign for the establishment of an 'independent native republic' in conformity with current thinking in the motherland of international communism. The decision caused consternation among the many CPSA members who had previously regarded South Africa's white proletariat rather than its black population as their main focus of action. In 1935, however, at its next congress the Comintern withdrew the independent native republic slogan as abruptly as it had

³⁸ Shubin, *ANC*, p.29.

³⁹ Filatova, 'The Lasting Legacy', p.7.

⁴⁰ Shubin, *ANC*, p.24.

⁴¹ Filatova, 'The Lasting Legacy', p.7.

⁴² *Ibid*, p.2.

introduced it.⁴³ Obedient to direction from Moscow, the CPSA then turned its attention away from black political emancipation to the struggle for workers' immediate interests, concentrating on work with trade unions. After the Soviet Union's entry into the Second World War on the same side as the South African government in 1941 the CPSA had even less strategic interest in encouraging nationalist activity among the country's black population. Accordingly, the CPSA's official programme published in 1944, and supplemented in 1947 and 1949, made no mention of a national liberation struggle. It proclaimed its goal to be 'the establishment of a Socialist Republic based on the common ownership of the means of production and the rule of the working class and providing equal rights and opportunities for all racial and national groups'. Nor did it make any substantial mention of race.⁴⁴

Only after the election of the National Party and the implementation of its apartheid policy did the CPSA once again begin to explore the idea of an alliance with black nationalists. At the CPSA's January 1950 conference, its last before its dissolution, discussion of an alliance between Communists and bourgeois proponents of a national-democratic revolution is said to have been greeted 'with great acclamation'.⁴⁵ Thereafter, the CPSA's underground successor, the South African Communist Party, was impelled to work with the ANC and other anti-apartheid organisations even in the absence of any clear ideological or strategic framework. Some Party members wanted to pursue an idea already apparent in the report of the CPSA central committee to the 1950 Party conference, namely that South Africa was itself a colonial power of sorts.⁴⁶ This notion was also being developed by the liberal academic Leo Marquard, president of the South African Institute of Race Relations, who argued that South Africa was by nature a colonial power, the country's African areas being its colonies.⁴⁷

⁴³ See Baruch Hirson 'Bunting vs Bukharin, the "Native Republic" Slogan', and other articles by the same author in *Searchlight South Africa*, nos 3 and 4 (1989-90).

⁴⁴ Document 82, p.188, in *South African Communists Speak: Documents from the History of the South African Communist Party 1915-1980* (Inkululeko Publications, London, 1981).

⁴⁵ University of Cape Town, Simons Papers, BC1081, 0.1: Jack Simons to Dirk Kotzé, 20 April 1991.

⁴⁶ Filatova, 'The Lasting Legacy', p.17. A substantial extract from the report is published as document 91 in *South African Communists Speak*, pp.200-211.

⁴⁷ Simons papers, 0.4: letter from Jack Simons to the editor of the *Cape Times*, 23 July 1993; Filatova, 'The Lasting Legacy', p.17, notes that Marquard's 1957 presidential address to the SAIRR was devoted to this subject.

Given the direction taken by their own Party over several years, therefore, the South African Communists who visited Moscow in 1960 were delighted to find an atmosphere in which national liberation was so clearly in vogue in the very home of their movement. The new theories on nationalism emanating from advisers of the CPSU central committee offered South African Communists a way of resolving the contradiction between their aspiration to bring about a socialist revolution and their efforts to resist the white minority government in partnership with others who were not committed to the same ultimate goal. It meant that South African revolutionaries could concentrate in the first instance on the task of liberating the black national majority, as in colonies elsewhere in Africa, in the knowledge that this was in conformity with Marxist revolutionary science. SACP theoreticians duly determined that South Africa was the site of a colonialism of a special type, remarkable for the fact that coloniser and colonised lived in the same national territory. This was to become the key analytical concept in the SACP's 1962 programme, *The Road to South African Freedom*.⁴⁸ Many statements in this manifesto were actually quotations from the documents of the meeting of Communist and workers' parties that Dadoo and his colleagues had attended in Moscow two years previously.⁴⁹ In order to be sure that its analysis was a correct one, the South African Communist Party sent the draft of its 1962 programme to the central committee of the CPSU for perusal before it was passed.⁵⁰

In short, it appears that towards the end of 1960, some leaders of the South African Communist Party had decided in principle to adopt a policy of armed struggle. They had raised the issue, officially or unofficially, with leading figures in both the Soviet Union and China, including in personal meetings with Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, the two most senior members of the Chinese Communist Party. Thereafter, the SACP seems to have moved quickly to adopt the new policy formally, adopting it at a Party conference at the end of 1960, when Michael Harmel was still in Moscow. Rusty Bernstein recalled that discussion on the issue was short,⁵¹ no doubt since it had already been extensively debated beforehand and was known to have at least the

⁴⁸ Document 115 in *South African Communists Speak*, pp.284-320.

⁴⁹ Filatova, 'The Lasting Legacy', p.15.

⁵⁰ According to Vladimir Shubin, cited in *ibid*, p.18.

⁵¹ Lionel Bernstein, *Memory against Forgetting: Memoirs from a Life in South African Politics, 1938-1964* (Viking, London, 1999), p.225.

unofficial approval of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Ben Turok has also provided a description of this meeting, which took place ‘towards the end of 1960’. He recalls Bernstein reading a draft resolution on armed struggle. After it was approved, Bernstein burned the document.⁵²

To be precise, the Party conference that took the momentous decision to launch an armed struggle is reported to have ‘instructed its Central Committee to devise a Plan of Action that would involve the use of economic sabotage’.⁵³

The Formation of Umkhonto we Sizwe

Even before March 1960, South Africans of various backgrounds had gone beyond debating whether they should take up arms against the government to actually organising small groups for the task, although they were pitifully ill equipped. Andrew Masondo, an academic who was later to be a leading member of both the SACP and the ANC, recalled that ‘the idea of the [congress] movement moving away from its non-violent stance was discussed within youth circles even earlier than 1960. I remember that a group of us at Fort Hare actually formed a group [sic] to prepare for the eventuality of an armed struggle taking place’.⁵⁴ This did not last, though, ‘because we were not a homogenous group ideologically’.⁵⁵ Radical young ANC members like these became particularly impatient with their organisation’s policy of non-violence after a split in 1958-9, when an Africanist wing broke away to form the rival Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC), threatening to outbid the ANC in radicalism.

After the Sharpeville massacre, South Africans of many persuasions were actively planning violent attacks in opposition to apartheid. On 9 April 1960, the day after the banning of the ANC and the PAC, a white farmer tried to murder prime minister Hendrik Verwoerd, firing two shots into his face. Nelson Mandela, as a leading ANC militant, was keenly aware of the upsurge of subversive activity. According to police sources, in May 1960 he persuaded some people who had been preparing to launch

⁵² Ben Turok, *Nothing But the Truth: Behind the ANC's Struggle Politics* (Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg and Cape Town, 2003), pp.122-3.

⁵³ Joshua N. Lazerson, *Against the Tide: Whites in the Struggle against Apartheid* (Westview Press and Mayibuye Books, Boulder, CO, and Bellville, South Africa, 1994), p.230.

⁵⁴ Andrew Masondo, ‘Sawing Electric Pylons’, *Dawn*, souvenir issue (1986), pp.21-3.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

acts of sabotage to postpone their plans in favour of a coordinated approach.⁵⁶ This is perhaps a reference to the existing body of ANC volunteers in the Eastern Cape who had been ‘able to go underground with the whole force still intact’ after the ANC’s banning.⁵⁷ There was a notable increase in radical activity after the lifting of the state of emergency in August 1960 had released thousands of militants back onto the streets. By this time some ANC radicals were making common cause with other networks to form *ad hoc* sabotage groups. The Trotskyite socialist Baruch Hirson recalled the rivalry of the time in his memoirs, writing that ‘we could see the possibility of one of these movements outstripping everyone else, leaving people like us behind’. He went on to recollect how ‘the only way to prevent our eclipse was to seize the moment’.⁵⁸ Some ANC radicals took initiatives of their own, like the former ANC Youth League activist Joe Modise, who joined a small group that tried to blow up the railway line between Soweto and Johannesburg in May 1961.⁵⁹ The PAC was advocating a style of radical populism that threatened to unleash a race war. Monty Berman, a Communist Party member who wanted to establish a broad front of anti-apartheid forces, worked with John Lang of the Liberal Party to set up a National Committee for Liberation (NCL). The NCL soon merged with yet another group to become the African Resistance Movement (ARM);⁶⁰ Berman, piqued at being excluded from any leading role in the Communist Party’s own incipient sabotage network,⁶¹ threw himself into this alternative. Although the ARM is generally said to have been established only in 1964, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of the 1990s reports that it existed already in 1961.⁶² A state intelligence file also claims that a predecessor of the ARM, known only as ‘the group’, existed in 1961.⁶³ Andrew Masondo recalled that ANC militants frustrated by their own organisation’s official policy of non-violence were attracted by the ARM.⁶⁴ Together, these reports suggest that many of the rather bewildering number of subversive organisations founded in

⁵⁶ ‘Kampanje vir die vrijlating van Nelson Mandela’, ‘uiters geheim’ memorandum, c.1981, H.J. Coetsee papers PV 357, 1/M1/48.

⁵⁷ Raymond Mhlaba, quoted in Buthelezi, ‘The Struggle for Liberation still Continues’.

⁵⁸ Baruch Hirson, *Revolutions in My Life* (Witwatersrand University Press, Johannesburg, 2001), p.301.

⁵⁹ Joe Modise, ‘The Happiest Moment in My Life’, *Dawn*, souvenir issue (1986), p.10.

⁶⁰ Chris Vermaak, *The Red Trap: Communism and Violence in South Africa* (A.P.B. Publishers, Johannesburg, 1966), pp.55-6.

⁶¹ Slovo, *Slovo*, p.152.

⁶² *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report* (5 vols., TRC/Department of Justice, Pretoria, 1998), 2, p.10.

⁶³ South African National Defence Force Documentation Centre, Pretoria, MID/MI group 6, L/04: African Resistance Movement.

⁶⁴ Masondo, ‘Sawing Electric Pylons’.

the early 1960s had a rather weak institutional identity. Many are probably better described as networks than organisations, arising from within a fairly limited pool of activists.

The government, meanwhile, faced the post-Sharpeville crisis with a show of bravado. Prime Minister Verwoerd, stung by a public warning from his British counterpart Harold Macmillan about the wind of change sweeping through Africa, rather than offer any concession that might be construed as weakness, began to prepare South Africa's departure from the Commonwealth and a declaration of its new status as a republic. He did not deign to consult any organised body of opinion outside the white community. In 1961 he appointed to the justice ministry the right-winger John Vorster, once a general of the paramilitary Ossewabrandwag. Vorster proceeded to introduce draconian laws permitting detention without trial. Yet it seems that neither the South African government nor any of the disparate groups and networks plotting campaigns of violence had any idea that before the end of 1960 the SACP had already had talks with senior officials of two superpowers on the opening of an armed struggle against the apartheid state.

The SACP's international connections were not the only asset it enjoyed, despite its small size. The Party had a discipline that no rival organisation could match. Its members had a ready guide to conspiratorial work in the form of texts by Lenin and other Marxist theoreticians of struggle. Like some of the white militants in rival groups, there were SACP members with combat experience, while others were professional engineers, like David Kitson and Dennis Goldberg, or had other skills that could be used for bomb-making.

So, reassured by Soviet theoreticians of the suitability of a nationalist alliance, the SACP set about preparing to launch its campaign. It was clear that it would need to prepare public opinion and, more specifically, that it would require some sort of arrangement with the ANC. This had to be achieved at a time when both organisations were outlawed and many individuals were subject to various legal restrictions. Furthermore, the ANC's president, Albert Luthuli, remained committed to a strategy of non-violence. He, too, almost certainly was uninformed of the talks in the USSR and China.

The only ANC members who definitely knew of the progress being made by the SACP towards organising armed resistance were those who were also senior members of the Party. Since ANC membership was formally open to black South Africans only, this meant that a crucial position was occupied by the handful of senior black Communists who were also ANC members. These included most notably Moses Kotane, who was the general secretary of the SACP as well as being an influential member of the ANC's national executive committee. Of the 15 people elected to the SACP central committee in 1958,⁶⁵ five were also members of the ANC. Other than Kotane, these included Walter Sisulu and Raymond Mhlaba, long-term advocates of armed struggle. It is notable that one of four other people coopted to the SACP central committee in mid-1960 was ANC member Joe Matthews,⁶⁶ who was to participate in the meetings in Moscow and Beijing later in that year that were so crucial to the decision to launch an armed struggle.

According to Matthews, another prominent ANC militant was also coopted by the Party's central committee at this time — Nelson Mandela. Near the end of his life Matthews stated that Mandela had sat on the Party's central committee at the same time as himself.⁶⁷

The police often suspected Mandela of being a SACP member. The prosecution at his trial in 1964 produced as an exhibit a 62-page manuscript entitled 'How to be a Good Communist' written in Mandela's own hand, one of the hundreds of documents found by police in their raid on Umkhonto we Sizwe and SACP headquarters at Lilliesleaf Farm, Rivonia, in July 1963. This four-part text appears to have been largely a translation of an original by Liu Shao-chi,⁶⁸ the president of the People's Republic of China from 1959 to 1968 who was eventually purged by Chairman Mao and died in prison. Mandela had apparently acquired it from Joe Matthews⁶⁹ or Rusty Bernstein.⁷⁰ When asked to explain this document, Mandela claimed that he had been asked to edit

⁶⁵ Shubin, *ANC*, p.7.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ In an interview with Irina Filatova on 4 November 2004, quoted in Apollon Davidson and Irina Filatova, *Rossia i Yuzhnaia Africa: Tri veka svyazey, 1960-2010 (Russia and South Africa: Three Centuries of Contacts. Part Two, 1960-2010)* (Publishing House of the Higher School of Economics, Moscow, forthcoming), ch.3.

⁶⁸ Anthony Sampson, *Mandela: The Authorized Biography* (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1999), p.189.

⁶⁹ Magubane et al., 'The Turn to Armed Struggle', p.55.

⁷⁰ Sampson, *Mandela*, p.189.

‘How to be a Good Communist’ to improve its readability.⁷¹ Whenever he was asked whether he was ever a communist, Mandela was somewhat evasive. ‘Well I don’t know if I did become a Communist’, he replied to a leading question from his own attorney towards the end of the marathon treason trial in 1960. ‘If by Communist you mean a member of the Communist party and a person who believes in the theory of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin, and who adheres strictly to the discipline of the party, I did not become a Communist’.⁷² From prison in 1966 he wrote to the department of justice to ‘emphatically deny that I was a member of the CPSA’⁷³ — a telling formulation, since he well knew that the CPSA had been extinct since 1950.

One of the historic leaders of the SACP, Joe Slovo, described in his autobiography his impression of Mandela in 1961. He noted that ‘ideologically [Mandela] had taken giant strides since we confronted one another in the corridors of the University during the early 1950s on the role of the Party in the struggle. His keen intelligence taught him to grasp the class basis of national oppression.’⁷⁴

We can interpret Slovo’s remark as a rather coy way of saying that Mandela had become a Communist, as at least three other prominent members of the SACP, including Matthews, have testified to Mandela’s Party membership, and others have hinted at it. In 1982 former central committee member John Pule Motshabi recalled during the course of a regular Party meeting that Mandela had been recruited at the time J.B. Marks was campaigning for chairmanship of the Party, in other words before 1962.⁷⁵ Hilda Bernstein was another leading Party member who was adamant on the question of Mandela’s Party membership. ‘Mandela denies that he was ever a member of the Party but I can tell you that he was a member of the Party for a period’, she told an interviewer in 2004,⁷⁶ and the same interviewer also received confirmation from Brian Bunting.⁷⁷ Two senior Party members arrested by the police told their

⁷¹ Police file on Nelson Mandela, confidential source. See also Shubin, *ANC*, p.44.

⁷² Sheridan Johns and R. Hunt Davis, Jr. (eds), *Mandela, Tambo and the African National Congress: The Struggle against Apartheid, 1948-1990: A Documentary Survey* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1991), p.71.

⁷³ Sampson, *Mandela*, p.136.

⁷⁴ Slovo, *Slovo*, pp.175-6.

⁷⁵ Simons papers, BC1081, 0.7.2: Minutes of SACP Africa group meeting, 13 May 1982.

⁷⁶ Hilda Bernstein interview with Pdraig O’Malley, 25 August 2004: The O’Malley archives, www.nelsonmandela.org/omalley [accessed 23 October 2010].

⁷⁷ Pdraig O’Malley, *Shades of Difference: Mac Maharaj and the Struggle for South Africa* (Viking, New York, 2007), p.63, noting that other sources are embargoed until 2030.

interrogators that Mandela had attended a SACP meeting in 1961 and a central committee meeting in 1962.⁷⁸

In light of this evidence it seems most likely that Nelson Mandela joined the Party in the late 1950s or in 1960 and that he was coopted to the central committee in the latter year, the same year as Joe Matthews. The fact that Mandela's name does not figure in the central committee membership list quoted by Shubin from his research in Soviet as well as South African archives⁷⁹ is by no means strong counter-evidence since, as the former SACP activist Ben Turok writes, 'few, if anyone, knew the entire membership'⁸⁰ of a Party that had organised itself in a series of hermetic cells to avoid detection and that operated on a need-to-know basis.

The fact of Mandela's Party membership throws an interesting light on the sequence of events after the Party had taken its formal decision to begin an armed struggle in the last weeks of 1960. In early 1961 Mandela took the lead in a public campaign urging the government to convene a national convention that would be a last chance to talk to the extra-parliamentary opposition. A close analysis of the campaign for a national convention concludes that this initiative was primarily intended to provide proponents of armed struggle with a paper trail that would justify their forthcoming change of policy.⁸¹ In other words, the SACP, having decided to organise a campaign of armed resistance and knowing that the government remained closed to dialogue, was concerned to present matters in the best possible light for public and international consumption. Mandela was the best person for this job.

The Party also looked to Mandela to bring the ANC round to the idea of armed struggle. For while the ANC had for years been home to militants in favour of taking up arms, its president, Chief Luthuli, was an advocate of non-violence, as were other leading lights of the multilateral congress alliance that constituted the broad nationalist movement that the SACP saw as its partner in struggle. Some leaders of the South African Indian Congress had learned methods of non-violent resistance

⁷⁸ Testimony by Piet Beyleveld (1964) and Fred Carneson (1966) quoted in 'Kampanje vir die vrijlating van Nelson Mandela', Coetsee papers PV 357, 1/M1/48.

⁷⁹ Shubin, *ANC*, p.7.

⁸⁰ Turok, *Nothing but the Truth*, p.49. Slovo, on page 130 of his eponymous autobiography, describes the ultra-secretive method of election to the central committee.

⁸¹ Le Roux, 'Umkhonto we Sizwe', pp.94-5.

from none other than Gandhi himself during the many years the Mahatma lived in South Africa.

It was in order to deal with the position of allied organisations that in mid-1961 the main advocates of armed struggle within the ANC, led by Nelson Mandela, set up a series of meetings within the decision-making organs of the ANC and its partners in the congress alliance. These were the meetings that Mandela referred to in his 1964 'I am prepared to die' speech as the pivotal moment in the decision to launch an armed struggle. Thus, after consulting Sisulu, Mandela convened a meeting of the ANC working committee in June 1961 where he presented the proposal for the formation of a military organisation.⁸² This meeting was secret, like all meetings of the banned ANC at that time.

It is most striking that one of the senior ANC members present at the working committee meeting who argued most strongly against the proposal to adopt a policy of armed struggle was Moses Kotane, who spoke in favour of continuing with non-violent protest. Kotane's reasoning was simply that the advocates of armed struggle were unprepared for the consequences. His stance is surprising due to the fact that he was the general secretary of the SACP as well as being a member of the ANC's governing body. How could he argue against a policy of armed struggle within the councils of the ANC when the Communist Party had already decided in favour, especially when the practice of democratic centralism required that once the Party's senior organ had decided on a policy, all members must concur? The most likely answer to this question is that Kotane managed the problem posed by dual membership by reasoning that he spoke within ANC fora as an ANC member, and was therefore entitled to articulate his personal view rather than that of his Party.⁸³ If so, this was a measure both of the depth of Kotane's conviction concerning the folly of armed struggle at this juncture and of his standing within the SACP, as his action carried the risk of him being stripped of his office. But despite his opposition to armed struggle, Kotane told the ANC's working committee that he could agree to the

⁸² Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, p.320.

⁸³ Magubane et al, 'The Turn to Armed Struggle', p.88.

issue being raised with the movement's highest authority, the national executive.⁸⁴ This led to a subsequent meeting, also in Durban, the following week.

Today, the ANC national executive committee meeting of June 1961, held in secret, at night, is presented in popular histories as the most dramatic of all those at which the issue of armed struggle, not least because of the presence of Luthuli.⁸⁵ Luthuli, recognising that there was a substantial current of opinion inside the movement in favour of taking up arms, accepted that a military organisation could be formed provided that it was separate from and independent of the ANC. The national executive committee agreed to this formula.⁸⁶ This meant that as from June 1961, the ANC remained formally committed to non-violence even though some of its leading members were engaged in preparing violent activities on behalf of another organisation, soon to be dubbed Umkhonto we Sizwe, Zulu and Xhosa for the Spear of the Nation.

The decision of the ANC's national executive to turn a blind eye to the formation of a new militant organisation paved the way for a further discussion to be held by the joint executive of the entire congress alliance, which met just a day later, also in Durban. This included representatives not only of the ANC but also the Indian Congress, the Coloured People's Congress, the South African Congress of Trade Unions and the Congress of Democrats. All of these organisations included members of the clandestine SACP in their ranks. This meeting too was a dramatic affair, although less momentous than that of the previous day as the congress alliance's governing body generally accepted ANC decisions in deference to the ANC's superior size and weight. According to Mandela's account, Chief Luthuli opened proceedings by saying that even though the ANC had endorsed the decision on the formation of a military unit, it remained a matter of such gravity that those present should consider the issue afresh. Once again Nelson Mandela made the case in favour and, after a night of discussion, he received a mandate from the organisations represented at this meeting.⁸⁷ The way was now open for militants to assemble the people and the resources to initiate a campaign of sabotage, secure in the knowledge

⁸⁴ Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, p.321.

⁸⁵ South African History Online, www.sahistory.org.za [accessed 10 Jan. 2011]. See also Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, pp.321-2.

⁸⁶ Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, p.322.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.323-4.

that they had substantial backing within organisations with a popular base far wider than that of the tiny SACP.

In a speech in 2010, President Jacob Zuma claimed not only that Luthuli supported the foundation of Umkhonto we Sizwe, but that he was actually the one who gave it its name.⁸⁸ Yet a study of Luthuli's writings concludes that he never renounced his personal commitment to non-violent methods,⁸⁹ on account of which he was awarded a Nobel peace prize in 1961, and that he never underwent a conversion to the cause of armed struggle. It is possible that both versions are accurate in the sense that Luthuli remained a partisan of non-violence while wishing to remain informed of events affecting the movement of which he remained the nominal president until his death in 1967. He continued to attend meetings that tracked the progress of the ANC abroad, without questioning the creation of Umkhonto we Sizwe.⁹⁰ Joe Slovo confirmed the strength of the support for non-violence within the ANC and allied movements when he stated that the main reason for making Umkhonto we Sizwe independent was 'that we had just emerged from a phase when the whole congress movement had not officially broken with old policies', the Indian congresses being especially deeply committed to non-violence.⁹¹ What is clear, however, is that once leading members of the ANC had committed themselves to a policy of violence, albeit under the flag of the nominally autonomous organisation called Umkhonto we Sizwe, the authority of Luthuli, banned by the government and presiding over a movement that was proceeding on a different path, drained away. Luthuli played little further role in ANC decision-making, which passed swiftly into the hands of members who went into exile.⁹²

The Durban Communist Rowley Arenstein interpreted the adoption of armed struggle by the ANC as 'the act of the Johannesburg SACP clique – a hijacking!'⁹³ In this

⁸⁸ <http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/Politics/Zuma-praises-Albert-Luthuli-20101124> [accessed 15 March 2011].

⁸⁹ Scott Everett Couper, "'An Embarrassment to the Congresses?': the Silencing of Chief Albert Luthuli and the Production of ANC History", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 35, 2 (2009), pp.331-48.

⁹⁰ Ronnie Kasrils, *Armed and Dangerous: My Undercover Struggle against Apartheid* (Heinemann Educational, Oxford etc., 1993), pp.49-50.

⁹¹ Joe Slovo, 'The Sabotage Campaign', *Dawn*, souvenir issue (1986), pp.24-5.

⁹² Couper, "'An Embarrassment to the Congresses?'".

⁹³ Attributed to Rowley Arenstein by Professor Colin Bundy: panel discussion of the history of the SACP, 18 January 1991, University of the Western Cape, Simons Papers, 0.1.

regard it is telling to note the key role played by the ANC's working collective in Johannesburg, which 'took the plunge into the new phase of revolutionary violence' in partnership with the SACP's central committee and piloted the decision through the ANC's structures.⁹⁴ The ANC's working collective in Johannesburg included Moses Kotane, J.B. Marks, Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and Duma Nokwe, all of whom may now be seen to have been prominent SACP members.⁹⁵ In other words, the Party had control over the decision-making process that led to the creation of Umkhonto we Sizwe both through its own organs and through the presence of Party members within a key committee of the ANC.

'Luthuli was simply brushed aside', Arenstein told an interviewer. 'He was told that MK was separate from the ANC, that the ANC should stay committed to non-violence but that he shouldn't expel individual ANC members who participated in MK'.⁹⁶ There is contemporary evidence to support the contention that the creation of Umkhonto we Sizwe as a nominally autonomous organisation was a purely tactical manoeuvre, as in May 1962, Mandela, together with two leaders of the ANC's external wing, Oliver Tambo and Robert Resha, wrote a memorandum to the government of Ghana describing Umkhonto we Sizwe as 'an armed organization formed by the A.N.C. to carry out planned attacks'.⁹⁷ Later in the year, after Resha had stated publicly in London that Umkhonto we Sizwe was the ANC's armed wing,⁹⁸ the ANC dropped the line that it was not committed to violence.

Joe Slovo subsequently explained the mechanics of creating the new organisation in pursuit of the agreements reached in mid-1961. 'To constitute the [Umkhonto we Sizwe] High Command the ANC appointed Mandela and the Party appointed me',⁹⁹ he wrote. Since in fact Mandela was also a senior member of the Party, this joint division of labour with the ANC was a mere form of words that disguised the degree of the Party's influence. Soon, few people remembered the legalistic contortion that the ANC remained committed to non-violence in spite of the fact that some of its

⁹⁴ Slovo, *Slovo*, p.173.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ Interview with R.W. Johnson in *London Review of Books*, 13, 4 (21 Feb. 1991), pp.22-23.

⁹⁷ 'Memorandum Presented to the Government of the Republic of Ghana by the African National Congress of South Africa', 10 May 1962, Padmore Library, Accra. I am grateful to Jan-Bart Gewald for supplying a copy of this document.

⁹⁸ Slovo, *Slovo*, p.177.

⁹⁹ Slovo, 'The Sabotage Campaign', pp.24-5.

leading members were also the commanders of a guerrilla force, and Umkhonto we Sizwe became regarded simply as the ANC's army. The bulk of ANC members never knew, then or subsequently, how their organisation had been bounced into adopting the armed struggle.

Members of the South African Communist Party were adept at backroom politics of this type. The Party was, as Rusty Bernstein put it, 'a sect'.¹⁰⁰ Since the original Communist Party had been banned by law in 1950, its members had adopted the practice of joining other organisations through which they could exercise their self-appointed role in the vanguard of revolutionary change. These were circumstances to which Leninist techniques of political organisation were perfectly adapted. Ben Turok was later to recall 'how easy it was for a small group like ours to exert much influence in the mass movement without giving away our existence'.¹⁰¹ In the many cases where Party members were also members of another organisation, such as the ANC or the Congress of Democrats, internal Party discipline required that 'at all times, the first loyalty of Party members is to their Party',¹⁰² the very rule that Kotane flouted in 1961 when he argued in ANC meetings against adopting a policy of armed struggle.

The armed struggle in cold war context

Armed with a mandate from the round of ANC meetings in June 1961, Joe Slovo and Nelson Mandela led the effort to form Umkhonto we Sizwe into a real organisation. Within six months the new outfit had some 250 members¹⁰³ drawn from both the ANC and the SACP. SACP member Mac Maharaj, at that time studying in England, had been 'approached...to go for training' as early as March 1961, and was sent to East Germany to train originally as a printer, and subsequently in sabotage.¹⁰⁴ Joe

¹⁰⁰ Bernstein papers, AL3051, R4.1-4.4: notes for an autobiography.

¹⁰¹ Turok, *Nothing but the Truth*, p.44.

¹⁰² South African Study Group, north-west London, 'On the Communist Party', 1959, 12pp. typescript, Simons Papers, 0.1.

¹⁰³ Le Roux, 'Umkhonto we Sizwe', p.126.

¹⁰⁴ Mac Maharaj interviewed by Hilda Bernstein in 1991: <http://www.nelsonmandela.org/omalley/index.php/site/q/031v03445/041v03996/051v04011.htm> [accessed 28 December 2010].

Modise, whose militancy had already led him to carry out sabotage actions, was enlisted by Communist Party members Duma Nokwe and Walter Sisulu.¹⁰⁵

Rival networks were also making their mark, with Monty Berman's group carrying out an arson attack in September 1961.¹⁰⁶ Tambo, Mandela and Resha claimed in their memorandum to the Ghanaian government that Umkhonto we Sizwe's first act of sabotage was an attack on Johannesburg's phone system in October 1961,¹⁰⁷ which in fact was almost certainly the work of one of the liberal groups that fused to form the ARM. The PAC was organising militant networks that were soon to result in the emergence of Poqo.¹⁰⁸ Straining to impose its own authority over the emerging sabotage campaign, the SACP infiltrated some of its own people into liberal networks.¹⁰⁹

The SACP central committee now implemented the plans for foreign training that it had been preparing since the visits to Moscow and Beijing by leading members the previous year. It gave highest priority to the training of those earmarked as future officers of Umkhonto we Sizwe, later referred to as the high command. In October 1961, the central committee sent a coded message to Raymond Mhlaba instructing him to leave for military training abroad. He slipped out of the country in company with Andrew Mlangeni.¹¹⁰ Travelling via Tanzania, Ghana and the USSR to his final destination in China, Mhlaba met others sent for military training in the same country. They were Joe Gqabi, Wilton Mkwazi, Patrick Mthembu and Steve Naidoo, the latter coming from London, where he had been living for some years.

After arriving in China the trainees were divided into two groups, one sent to Shen-Yon military academy, the other stationed in Nanjing.¹¹¹ They were visited by

¹⁰⁵ Modise, 'The Happiest Moment in My Life', p.10.

¹⁰⁶ Thomas Karis and Gail Gerhart, *From Protest to Challenge, V: Nadir and Resistance, 1964-79* (Unisa Press, Pretoria, 1997), p.22.

¹⁰⁷ 'Memorandum Presented to the Government of the Republic of Ghana by the African National Congress of South Africa', by Oliver Tambo, Nelson Mandela and Robert Resha, 10 May 1962, Padmore Library, Accra.

¹⁰⁸ Brown Bavusile Maaba, 'The PAC's War against the State, 1960-1963', in SADET, *The Road to Democracy*, I, pp.257-97.

¹⁰⁹ Vermaak, *The Red Trap*, p.57.

¹¹⁰ Mhlaba, *Personal Memoirs*, pp.111-2; Slovo, *Slovo*, p.173, gives the date as September 1961.

¹¹¹ Sifiso Mxolisi Ndlovu, 'The ANC in Exile, 1960-1970', in SADET, *The Road to Democracy*, I, p.454.

Chairman Mao Zedong in person, Mhlaba recalled.¹¹² In addition to seeking the South Africans' opinions on Sino-Soviet issues, Mao is said to have questioned them about class conditions in their region, about the terrain, and about the degree of military experience of opponents of the South African regime. Mao 'urged his listeners not to follow blindly the experience of the Chinese Red Army. He suggested to them that the experience of the FLN [Front de libération nationale] in opposition to French colonial rule in Algeria might be more relevant', according to Paul Trewhela,¹¹³ a Party member who gleaned information from key members of the underground. It is astonishing that this personal contact with such a senior Communist leader went undetected by the South African police, did not emerge at subsequent trials, and remained unknown outside a tiny circle until the present century.

So secret was the Chinese training that even senior ANC officer-holders remained uninformed. On his way back from Nanjing to rejoin his comrades in South Africa, Raymond Mhlaba passed through Tanzania where he met Oliver Tambo, leader of the ANC's external mission, soon to take over the effective leadership of the ANC as its internal structures crumbled in the face of government repression. Tambo 'did not know about our military training in China', Mhlaba noted.¹¹⁴ Most early military trainees, however, were sent to African countries. In June 1962, some 32 recruits left South Africa for this purpose,¹¹⁵ and a further 135 fighters from camps in Tanzania were sent to various countries for training in the half-year from September 1962,¹¹⁶ with larger groups to follow.

At the outset, Umkhonto we Sizwe's strategic thinking was based on the supposition that the apartheid state was brittle enough for a determined offensive to inspire a wider insurrection that would overwhelm it. This optimism was sustained by a Marxist-Leninist analysis that South Africa was just another colonial state, albeit of a special type, as proclaimed in the SACP's 1962 manifesto, and that the decolonisation of the West European colonial empires marked an incipient collapse of capitalism more widely. One internal Party document stated that the 'African Revolution'

¹¹² Mhlaba, *Personal Memoirs*, p.115.

¹¹³ Paul Trewhela's obituary of Raymond Mhlaba, *The Independent* [London], 23 February 2005.

¹¹⁴ Mhlaba, *Personal Memoirs*, p.117.

¹¹⁵ Modise, 'The Happiest Moment in my Life'.

¹¹⁶ Shubin, *ANC*, p.20.

spelled ‘the certain doom of apartheid in the near future’.¹¹⁷ Another maintained that Umkhonto we Sizwe ‘provides the basis for the rapid establishment of a people’s liberation army, should such a step become necessary in the future’.¹¹⁸ SACP leaders were inspired in particular by the recent Cuban revolution, which came about after a small body of guerrillas had been able to set up bases in the countryside from which it raised the population in support. Similarly, the aim of Umkhonto we Sizwe’s commanders was for trained guerrillas to return to South Africa within the near future with a view to setting up bases in remote areas, especially of the rural Transkei, from which they could launch attacks and train others.

By the last half of 1961 Umkhonto we Sizwe was ready for its launch. There was one premature attack on 15 December, but the campaign began in earnest the next day with a wave of bomb attacks on symbolic targets and on property. The fact that militants from other networks ‘struck simultaneously’ on 16 December¹¹⁹ and remained active makes it difficult to gauge the relative size of MK’s campaign. According to a later chief of security police intelligence, there were in total some 400 acts of sabotage by various groups in the years 1961-3.¹²⁰ In March 1966, the police chief, Lieutenant-General J.M. Kevvy, stated that there had been 409 acts of sabotage in South Africa since 16 December 1961.¹²¹

The launch of an armed insurrection in which Communists played a prominent role could not fail to cause concern in various capitalist countries, including notably Britain and the USA. Although no outside intelligence agencies seem to have been aware of the SACP’s requests for support in Moscow and Beijing, it was not difficult for them to detect communist influence in the growing agitation in South Africa. Just as hard evidence of the SACP’s precise relationship to its Communist superpower sponsors has emerged only over time, so too has documentation concerning the efforts made by capitalist powers to influence the course of events.

¹¹⁷ ‘Some Problems Before Us – a Discussion Document’, SACP document, no date [August 1961?], Simons Papers, 0.7.2.

¹¹⁸ ‘The New Year - Some Tasks and Perspectives’, SACP document, no date [December 1961?], Simons Papers, 0.7.1.

¹¹⁹ Bernstein, *Memory against Forgetting*, p.234.

¹²⁰ H.D. Stadler, *The Other Side of the Story: A True Perspective* (personal publication, Pretoria, 1997), p.23.

¹²¹ Vermaak, *The Red Trap*, p.43.

Following its rise to power in 1948, the National Party had brought in its own people into the police special branch, but it remained beholden to the British intelligence services for international contacts.¹²² Many of the Ossewabrandwag radicals who had advocated paramilitary action during the Second World War years and who had favoured a German victory now joined the National Party and became prominent on its right wing. Their influence inside the National Party increased during the crisis after Sharpeville. After the appointment of John Vorster to the justice ministry in 1961, another Ossewabrandwag veteran, H.J. van den Bergh, with whom Vorster had once been interned, received rapid promotion in the police to become head of the security branch in 1963.

From the start of his career in state security Van den Bergh, a prominent Anglophobe as well as an anti-communist, looked for support particularly from the US Central Intelligence Agency. In time, he formed a particularly close bond with the equally anti-communist CIA chief of counter-intelligence James Jesus Angleton.¹²³ Only later, after Van den Bergh had set up the Bureau for State Security (BOSS), South Africa's first modern intelligence service, did one of his staff unravel the details of CIA relationships with some of the liberal activists who had sustained sabotage networks in the early 1960s. Some of these connections appeared to implicate British intelligence as well, not least because many ARM activists became convinced that a dashing war veteran who trained them in sabotage techniques was a British agent. The BOSS analyst Piet Swanepoel produced a voluminous report showing in detail how from roughly mid-1960 a CIA front organisation provided funding to John Lang and others to finance a national convention movement and a number of other groups founded by them thereafter.¹²⁴ Some of this money may have found its way to the African Resistance Movement, whose John Harris planted a bomb at Johannesburg station in July 1964, killing an old lady, on account of which Harris was convicted and hanged.

¹²² James Sanders, *Apartheid's Friends: The Rise and Fall of South Africa's Secret Service* (John Murray, London, 2006), pp.9-17.

¹²³ Author's interviews with former BOSS operative, Pretoria, 15 October 2010.

¹²⁴ 'Kampanje vir die vrijlating van Nelson Mandela', Coetsee papers PV 357, 1/M1/48. The information contained in this memorandum was based on research subsequently published in P.C. Swanepoel, *Really Inside BOSS: A Tale of South Africa's Late Intelligence Service (and Something about the CIA)* (private publication, Pretoria, 2008), pp.138-87.

Since the CIA also had a close relationship to the leading PAC militant Potlake Leballo,¹²⁵ the US intelligence organisation in effect had at least three parallel lines of influence in South Africa, one aiding the state to improve its security apparatus, a second in the form of a connection to the radical-populist PAC, and the third a sophisticated strategy to develop influence inside the liberal-radical opposition to apartheid. The common denominator between all of these was, needless to say, anti-communism.

An appreciation of the extent and sophistication of the CIA's interest in South Africa throws some light on the persistent rumour that Nelson Mandela's arrest in August 1962 after his return from a trip abroad to raise support for Umkhonto we Sizwe was made possible by information provided to the South African police by the US intelligence agency. Gerard Ludi, a South African intelligence agent who succeeded in penetrating the SACP central committee, in later years claimed that Millard Shirley, the chief CIA operative in the country, had agents in the ANC and SACP at that time. Nevertheless, Ludi said that he didn't know whether the CIA had actually tipped off the South African police about Mandela's whereabouts.¹²⁶ Some reports suggest that Ludi eventually became more explicit about Shirley's role.¹²⁷ Ludi was a credible source as he and Shirley were so close that they later went into business together. According to one newspaper investigation carried out after Mandela's eventual release, CIA officers at the time of his arrest considered it one of their 'greatest coups'.¹²⁸ The US government has contested the story of CIA involvement, but more than one former South African security officer recalls Van den Bergh admitting that the CIA gave information leading to Mandela's arrest.¹²⁹ Three decades after Mandela's arrest, the story of a CIA tip-off was regarded as accurate by former diplomats who had served at the US embassy during that period.¹³⁰

¹²⁵ Author's interviews with former BOSS operative, Pretoria, 15 October 2010. This relationship has been widely reported by others also.

¹²⁶ 'CIA Linked to Mandela's 1962 Arrest', *Washington Post*, 6 November 1990.

¹²⁷ Jeff Stein, 'Our Man in South Africa', Salon Daily Clicks: www.salon.com/news/news961114.html [accessed 23 October 2010].

¹²⁸ See Joseph Albright and Marcia Kunstel's article in the *Atlanta Constitution*, 10 June 1990, p.A14. Also Peter J. Schraeder, *United States Foreign Policy towards Africa: Incrementalism, Crisis and Change* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994), p.202; Sanders, *Apartheid's Friends*, pp.17-20.

¹²⁹ Author's interview with former BOSS official, Pretoria, 15 Oct. 2010; Sanders, *Apartheid's Friends*, pp.19-20.

¹³⁰ Letter from former US diplomat to the author, 14 March 1997.

Conclusion

‘There is one part of our history that is not known’, Eric Mtshali, SACP and ANC member and founder-member of Umkhonto we Sizwe told an interviewer for the South African Democracy Trust project, which has sponsored pioneering work in this area. ‘That is that the South African Communist Party arrived at the decision [to commence an armed struggle] ahead of the ANC’.¹³¹ Joe Slovo also hinted at the Party’s leading role when he wrote that ‘there was perhaps no other period in our history when the Party played such a seminal role in the unfolding of the struggle as in the years between 1960 and 1963’.¹³² The SACP central committee is reported to have claimed the decision to introduce armed resistance as its own achievement in an internal Party document adopted in 1977.¹³³

In formal terms, the decision to adopt a policy of armed struggle appears to have been taken by an extended meeting of the central committee of the South African Communist Party, having the status of a Party conference, probably in December 1960, and was implemented during the course of the following year.¹³⁴ This conference appears to have been a small group of people, less than twenty. In present circumstances it is not possible to verify the issue by reference to the minutes of relevant Party meetings, as the archives of the South African Communist Party have not been made public.¹³⁵ However, in light of the available evidence it is reasonable to state that, after the police had raided the Umkhonto we Sizwe and SACP headquarters at Lilliesleaf Farm in Rivonia in July 1963 and found hundreds of documents, they were not mistaken in concluding that the central committee of the SACP was ‘the heart of armed resistance’.¹³⁶ How this came about is best understood by reference to the climate of cold war rivalry that marked international affairs at that time.

¹³¹ Magubane et al, ‘The Turn to Armed Struggle’, p.103.

¹³² Slovo, *Slovo*, p.170.

¹³³ Jackie Grobler, *A Decisive Clash: A Short History of Black Protest Politics in South Africa, 1875-1976* (Acacia, Pretoria, 1988), p.156.

¹³⁴ Magubane et al, ‘The Turn to Armed Struggle’, pp.82-3.

¹³⁵ Eddy Maloka, *The South African Communist Party in Exile, 1963-1990* (Research Paper no.65, Africa Institute of South Africa, Pretoria, 2002) is based on a study of SACP archives. It is unclear what has become of these papers subsequent to their examination by Maloka.

¹³⁶ Stadler, *The Other Side of the Story*, p.28.

As Magubane and others noted in their review of the literature concerning the respective roles of the ANC and the SACP in the adoption of armed struggle, ‘a common ploy is to aver that both did so “at about the same time”’.¹³⁷ The demonstration that Nelson Mandela was a prominent Party member in the early 1960s should cause us to reject the oft-told story of MK’s emergence from circles of ANC and SACP activists working more or less in parallel. In fact, it is clear that the Party took the decision first and then influenced the ANC, with Mandela playing a prominent intermediary role.

The Party was able to influence the ANC not least by its very effective use of its own particular style of legalism. Party members were bound by the discipline imposed by the rules of their organisation and the decisions of their own governing body. While they were also encouraged to join other organisations, including the ANC, they were at all times bound to uphold their loyalty to the Party.¹³⁸ At the same time, they made a careful distinction between actions undertaken on the formal instructions of the Party and those carried out in an informal capacity or while acting as a member of another organisation, in which case the Party as an institution could take its distance.

A good example is provided by another speech from the dock, this one by the former SACP chairman, Bram Fischer, during his trial in 1966. Fischer, like Mandela a highly principled man, stated that ‘it was not until 1963 that I knew that Slovo was a member’ of Umkhonto we Sizwe. He went on to claim that ‘there was no question of Umkhonto having to report to the Central Committee or of instructions being given by the Central Committee to Umkhonto’.¹³⁹ At first sight these assertions appear hard to credit, not least as they are contradicted by Slovo’s own statements concerning ‘the important role which the Party played in the creation and building of MK’.¹⁴⁰ Closer inspection suggests this to be an example of the Party’s formal legalism — it is indeed possible that Fischer was not officially informed, in his capacity as a Party functionary, of Slovo’s work with MK until 1963, even though he must have been made informally aware of it much earlier, as he conceded elsewhere in his trial

¹³⁷ Magubane et al, ‘The Turn to Armed Struggle’, p.50.

¹³⁸ See note 102.

¹³⁹ Statement at his trial by Bram Fischer: Mayibuye Centre, Yusuf Dadoo papers, box 2, file 4.

¹⁴⁰ Slovo, *Slovo*, p.177.

statement. In the same way, it is quite possible that the SACP central committee did not formally receive reports from the high command of Umkhonto we Sizwe since the latter was technically an independent body and not a Party organ. However this did not preclude individual members of the high command, every single one of whom was a SACP member with the exception of the coopted member Modise, from communicating with SACP colleagues informally, and nor did it prevent the central committee from discussing the armed struggle.

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During his years in prison Fischer often recalled Moses Kotane's words: 'if you throw a stone into the window of a man's house, you must be prepared for him to come out and chase you',¹⁴¹ uttered as a warning to comrades who wanted to raise the public profile of the underground SACP in defiance of the law. 'The backlash will be fantastic', Kotane had said. 'The police will go mad'.¹⁴² His prediction was still more applicable in the face of an organised campaign of sabotage.

Kotane, from a peasant family, with little formal education, in the end analysed the situation more accurately than the Communist Party's intellectual heavyweights.

¹⁴¹ E-mail from Paul Trewhela, 14 October 2010. Kotane's warning is also recorded as 'when you throw a stone at people they are going to come back and break your windows', quoted in Magubane et al, 'The Turn to Armed Struggle', p.73.

¹⁴² Quoted in Magubane et al, 'The Turn to Armed Struggle', p.73.