

Umkhonto We Sizwe (MK)¹: A critical analysis of the armed struggle of the African National Congress

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Introduction

This paper offers a critical analysis of the ANC's armed struggle. The core argument advanced is that the turn to armed struggle marked a strategic turn away from the masses, which was born out of a historical failure to organise and mobilise around the actual and potential militancy of the working/poor masses. The subsequent externalisation of the ANC, its alliance partners and MK situated the foundation of the liberation struggle, both in content and context, outside the mass of the movement's own constituency.

The political and practical result was that the armed struggle was prosecuted with minimal involvement of the oppressed sectors of the population", effectively side-lining specific working class struggle and organisation. In turn, armed struggle increasingly became largely an armed propaganda exercise; a pressure tactic for a larger accommodationist strategy that by necessity had to rely on international conditions and actors for sustenance.

This trajectory was cemented by the specific lack of coordination of political and military aspects of the struggle which cumulatively meant that the way in which the ANC prosecuted the armed struggle ensured there would be no insurrectionary seizure of power.

Setting the Scene

The African National Congress (ANC), formed in 1912, was the first serious attempt to establish a national organisation to address the political and economic situation of the oppressed black population of South Africa. However, the early dominance of a newly emergent black petty bourgeoisie and traditional chiefs amongst its leadership² – combined with a strong Christian influence – ensured that dominant thrust of the ANC's politics for the first three decades of its existence remained tied to its leadership's narrow class interests and to a macro-strategy of non-violence and incorporation.

The black petty bourgeoisie wanted to find ways to stem the assault on their own class interests, which, in the main, were focused on deracialising political and economic opportunities; the interests of traditional chiefs were tied to the availability and ownership of land by Africans. The main strategic priority thus became one of persuading the 'civilised' British colonial government

¹ Meaning - 'Spear of the Nation'

² This is widely chronicled. For example see: P. Walshe, *The Rise of African Nationalism in South Africa: The African National Congress (1912-1952)* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971); and, F. Meli, *South Africa Belongs to us: A History of the ANC* (Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1988).

that the educated, propertied and ‘civilised’ Africans could be incorporated into the mainstream of a (racially oppressive) South African capitalist society³.

For the first 40 years of its existence what this translated to, in practice, was a serious organisational and political gap between the ANC, the rapidly growing black working class movement and an increasingly impoverished (and diminishing) peasantry. The result was that the ANC and its budding alliance partner, the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), were unable (and/or unwilling) to respond to the more militant, largely organised working class struggles that were being waged against increasing racial and capitalist oppression, mostly due to their “common policy of subordinating mass action to legal lobbying”.⁴ Such struggles included a wave of strikes by industrial and commercial workers in the early-mid 1940s, culminating in the 1946 miners’ strike involving over 70 000 workers⁵

During the 1940s and 1950s however, and parallel to the formal institutionalisation of an even harsher apartheid-capitalist system, a younger generation of African intellectual and professional leaders emerged within the ANC (including Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo and Walter Sisulu). They desired to move the ANC beyond what they considered as an out-dated politics of mild-mannered petitions/deputations and (British-inspired) liberalism. Grouped together in the ANC Youth League, this new generation of leaders espoused the use of more direct forms of mass-oriented struggle - for example, through service boycotts, strikes and civil disobedience - around a rejuvenated and ‘pure’ African nationalist movement⁶.

Despite a strong anti-socialist/communist as well as black nationalist current, an informal alliance was forged with the small but influential Communist Party of South Africa (which had been banned in 1950), as well as with organisations that claimed to represent the progressive struggles of other racial groups in South Africa (i.e., the South African Coloured People’s Organisation, the South African Indian Congress and the [white] Congress of Democrats). This culminated in the establishment of what came to be known as the Congress Alliance and the adoption of the Freedom Charter (1955), which stated that ‘South Africa belongs to all who live in it’, called for ‘a democratic state based on the will of the people’ and made broad demands for (amongst other things) political, socio-economic and legal equality for ‘all’. The *Charter* was claimed as a broad expression of the ‘will’ of the ‘people’ of South Africa⁷.

The apartheid state – under the political control of the Afrikaner-dominated Nationalist Party – responded harshly to these developments. State security forces embarked on mass arrests (especially of working class leaders in the labour movement), strict enforcement of its notorious pass laws, intensified confiscation of land and property belonging to blacks, forced removals and eventually the arrest of almost the entire leadership of the Congress Alliance for ‘treason against the state’⁸. In turn, there was an upsurge in oppositional activity across the country. This took

³ Meli, *South Africa Belongs to us*, 47

⁴ R. Fine and D. Davis, *Beyond Apartheid, Labour and Liberation in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press), 46

⁵ *Ibid*, 10

⁶ . *Ibid*, 74

⁷ Freedom Charter, in N. Mandela, *The Struggle Is My Life* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1990), 50-54

⁸ Culminating in the infamous ‘Treason Trial’ in which over 156 leaders of the Congress Alliance were put on trial. The trial dragged on until 1960, but all of the accused were found not guilty for lack of evidence.

the form of service boycotts, limited strike action by organised workers, anti-pass campaigns, public demonstrations and rural revolts – some of which, like the Pondoland revolt in the Eastern Cape, involved the tactical use of violence for the first time since the last, larger-scale, anti-colonial conflicts of the late 1800s.

Women played a major role in the oppositional activity as did the much-forgotten rural communities. What was noticeable about this activity was that much of it took place without a great deal of direction from the ANC. Local organisations, many affiliated or sympathetic to the Congress Alliance, showed immense resourcefulness and courage in the face of heavy state repression. There were many factors that led to the lack of ANC involvement, among them being the leadership's general 'absence' as a result of the Treason Trial.⁹ But it was once again the ANC's strategic priorities - accommodating a wide range of ideological and class forces - that played a major role

One of the contributing factors underlying much of the ANC's approach to the militant activity underway was the decision to woo white liberal support for the anti-apartheid stance of the Alliance. As part of this accommodationist approach the ANC decided to support the (white) parliamentary opposition parties, the United Party and Labour Party, in the 1958 all-white elections. Fearing the alienating effects on white liberal and middle class opinion and seeking to preserve the unity of broad social forces within the Alliance, the ANC leadership consciously sought to curtail, manage and redirect more militant worker-led stay-aways to fit the overall strategy of forging a multi-class united front.¹⁰

Throughout this period, the ANC and its Congress allies continued to hold to a strategy of non-violent resistance against the intensified oppression of the apartheid-capitalist state, a strategy that remained wedded to limited and carefully planned acts of pressure which relied more on the favourable response of the apartheid enemy than on the people that the ANC claimed to represent and lead. However, when apartheid security forces massacred scores of unarmed anti-pass demonstrators in the black township of Sharpeville in March 1960¹¹, proceeded to crush subsequent country-wide protests, and decided to ban the ANC and the breakaway Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) it became clear that a new strategic direction was required.

The formation of MK and the early years of armed struggle

Shortly after the failure of the ANC's attempt to organise country-wide mass demonstrations to coincide with the apartheid state's declaration as a Republic in May 1961, *Umkhonto We Sizwe* (MK) was formed in secret by leading individuals within the ANC and the (reconstituted) South African Communist Party (SACP). A brief analysis of the events that preceded MK's formation reveals what lay behind the turn to armed struggle:

⁹ Tom Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1983), 279-284.

¹⁰ Fine and Davis, *Beyond Apartheid, Labour and Liberation*, 169-175

¹¹ The Sharpeville anti-pass demonstrations were orchestrated by members/sympathisers of the newly formed Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) – a group that had earlier broken away from the ANC, claiming that its liberal 'multiracialism' and association with 'communism' was undermining radical black nationalism.

- Armed struggles were being waged (e.g. Algeria) or had recently triumphed (e.g., Cuba) and these provided a source of inspiration for many South Africans. The success of Fidel Castro and his small band of guerrillas along with the writings of Che Guevara heavily influenced ANC and SACP members. Guevara suggested that dedicated revolutionaries could create the objective conditions for overthrowing the state through armed struggle and this was very appealing under the circumstances in which the ANC found itself.
- ANC leaders had been deeply affected by the armed rural uprising in Pondoland. Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Oliver Tambo and Govan Mbeki were all from the region where the revolt took place.. This uprising, in combination with other forms of violent resistance such as the struggles in Sekhukhuneland , led many in the leadership to see a growing gap between their non-violence and what they saw as the readiness of the masses to resort to violence.
- The ANC knew that a new armed formation, Poqo, as well as the newly-formed National Committee of Liberation (made up of various radicals, white liberals and Trotskyists), were gearing up for armed struggle.
- At its December 1960 congress the SACP resolved in favour of a campaign of sabotage (i.e. the targeting of key infrastructure) to precede guerrilla warfare¹². SACP members (all active in the Congress Alliance) no doubt influenced ANC leaders, and the eventual decision to launch MK was taken by a group of individual leaders rather than the ANC organisationally.
- The failure of years of a non-violent strategic approach framed by a politics of incorporation, had given rise to what has come to be known as a 'politics of despair', the effect of which was to 'leave people behind without any continuity in struggle'.¹³ A turn to armed struggle seemed the only option left, as has been confirmed by subsequent ANC historical explanation¹⁴.
- Much of the ANC and SACP leadership perceived that South Africa was becoming isolated internationally and that this development had put the apartheid state in a severe economic and political crisis. They also saw imperialism as being on the retreat elsewhere in Africa. The international situation was seen as 'ripe' for an armed assault on the apartheid state¹⁵.

MK was officially and publicly launched on 16 December 1961. Its inaugural manifesto declared that there:

... comes a time in the life of any nation when there remain only two choices: submit or fight. That time has now come to South Africa. We shall not submit and we have no choice but to hit back by all means within our power in defence of our people, our future and our freedom.¹⁶

¹² Fine & Davis, *Beyond Apartheid, Labour and Liberation*, 231

¹³ The quotes come from a personal interview conducted in 1992 with (the late) long-time Trotskyist militant and union activist, Baruch Hirson (1992).

¹⁴ See African National Congress, *Submit or Fight: 30 Years of Umkhonto we Sizwe* (Johannesburg: ANC Political Education Section, 1991); R. Kasrils, *Armed and Dangerous: My Undercover Struggle Against Apartheid* (Oxford: Heinemann Educational, 1993); and N. Mandela, *The Struggle is My Life*.

¹⁵ J. Slovo, 'South Africa – No Middle Road', in B. Davidson, D. Wilkinson and J. Slovo, eds, *Southern Africa: The New Politics of Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976), 181.

¹⁶ African National Congress, *Submit or Fight: 30 Years of Umkhonto we Sizwe* (Johannesburg: ANC Political Education Section), 5.

Although MK claimed to operate under the political guidance of the ANC, it was in fact composed of leading ANC and SACP members who were acting on what they, as individuals, believed to be in the best interests of the liberation struggle. It was only several months later, at the ANC's Lobatse Conference in October 1962 that MK officially became recognised as the military wing of the ANC.

The initial sabotage campaign of MK was limited to strikes against 'things that represented the economy like pylons ... and things that represented oppression like pass offices'.¹⁷ However, these efforts were extremely limited by lack of resources and military knowledge. Recounting these early days of sabotage Ronnie Kasrils, one of the first MK recruits and later a leading commander, tells how MK units constructed homemade bombs using condoms and gelatine capsules as timing devices.¹⁸ The sabotage campaign had little military effect on the apartheid state and its machinery, although it did create sensational media headlines and raised the expectations of much of the black population.

During the months after its inception, the MK leadership attempted to secure international support for the armed struggle. It was in this regard that the SACP proved particularly important to the ANC. The SACP already had extensive contact with the USSR and other friendly Eastern bloc countries that were, despite the support of some African countries, the only potentially reliable sources of military hardware and financial support. MK leaders went abroad to seek various forms of solidarity and assistance, visiting such places as East Germany, Algeria, Ghana, Tanzania and Zambia. Oliver Tambo, who had been sent outside the country soon after the ANC's banning to canvass support, succeeded in consolidating an external headquarters/mission for the ANC in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.¹⁹

This initial process of externalisation was beset by severe problems, both strategic and logistic. While the majority of the leadership remained under cover within the country, a few individuals were attempting to secure a launching pad for external guerrilla struggle far from the borders of South Africa. The only possible sites for such bases, as in the case of Tanzania, were not only far away from South Africa but were also under severe constraints as newly-independent nations in a Cold War world where political and economic pressure from Western powers sought to curtail any support for liberation movements. Under these kinds of geopolitical conditions, combined with the general administrative and strategic unpreparedness of the ANC and SACP to launch an armed struggle that would be predominately externally based but whose success depended on consistent internal operations, the chances of success were minimal.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 10

¹⁸ Kasrils, *Armed and Dangerous*, 39-40.

¹⁹ Many of the main figures in MK as well as in the externalised ANC, were members of the SACP - although there was no formal, non-African membership of the ANC at this stage. On the MK side these included Joe Slovo, Govan Mbeki, Ahmed Kathrada, Dennis Goldberg, and Jack Hodgson. Of the external mission complement, Tennyson Makiwane, Mzwai Piliso, and Moses Mabhida were party members.

Nelson Mandela (who had secretly returned to South Africa after leaving the country in early 1962 and was MK Commander-in-Chief) was arrested inside the country in August 1962.²⁰ It is a well-known fact that he was not to taste freedom for almost 28 years - until February 1990. Given his leading role in MK this was a major blow to both the nascent armed struggle and the ANC as a whole. Soon after, in early 1963, the South African police arrested almost the entire internal leadership of MK at a farmhouse in Rivonia just outside Johannesburg. Subsequently most of that leadership, including Mandela, were sentenced to life imprisonment.

During the police raid at Rivonia, numerous papers were found including Operation Mayibuye²¹. This document, among other things, revealed that MK was planning a sustained guerrilla war financed and operating from outside the country. It was hoped that this would spark an internal uprising and crisis leading to eventual liberation. One of the methods contemplated was the use of planes to drop leaflets over the country calling on the people to rise up in struggle. Cuba was stated as a model in this regard.²²

Although this document has subsequently been criticised as hopelessly adventurist and utopian²³, its basic outlines were to be followed once the ANC/MK had set up in exile. Many ANC leaders and activists, including Slovo, later argued that the objective conditions present in 1962/63 were not properly appreciated; however, none has ever seemed to question the strategic correctness of this document.

Throughout this period the ANC's programme of mass struggle virtually ceased to exist inside the country. Although the 1963 Lobatse Conference reaffirmed the emphasis on mass action most efforts were being directed towards the embryonic armed struggle and international support. The Conference instructed the internal ANC, 'as a matter of urgency', to 'carry out the national programme of political education' and to implement 'the "M" Plan (the "Mandela Plan" of house-to-house, street-to-street cell organisation)'.²⁴ While there was some underground activity that focused on assisting those on the run from the security forces, facilitating communication and gathering information, the main activity during the mid-late 1960s was recruiting the best labour and community activists to join MK outside the country.²⁵

The 'M-Plan' never really got off the ground and the ANC leadership resorted to its old tactic of attempting to stimulate mass struggle by its own example. Different to the 1950s was that these examples now consisted of acts of sabotage instead of non-violent civil disobedience, noting that the ANC was now a banned organisation inside South Africa. The sabotage campaign, by its very character, relied on highly secretive organisation and minimal involvement of the oppressed

²⁰ Although there is no documentary 'proof', it is widely believed that the United States Central Intelligence Agency provided the apartheid state with assistance in tracking Mandela down.

²¹ South African History Online, 'Operation Mayibuye 1963' - <http://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/operation-mayibuye-1963>, accessed 25 November 2017.

²² Fine and Davis, *Beyond Apartheid, Labour and Liberation*, 236

²³ *Ibid*, 236-237

²⁴ Meli, *South Africa Belongs to us*, 153

²⁵ R. Suttner, 'The African National Congress underground between Rivonia and 1976', Paper presented to ICS/SOAS conference, 'Looking at South Africa Ten Years On', London 10-12 September, 2004. Starting in 1967, a key 'presence' of the ANC and MK inside the country came in the form of daily broadcasts from Radio Freedom, that were beamed into South Africa from ANC havens in Southern Africa.

sectors of the population. Where those sectors could have been involved (for example, within the organised labour movement) the ANC leadership's style of centralised direction of campaigns seriously impeded potential action.

Although the stated intention of the ANC and MK was to reinforce and spur mass struggle²⁶, the way in which armed struggle was adopted, conducted and justified made this almost impossible. The decision taken to turn to armed struggle had been justified by the lack of peaceful and/or legal means that supposedly made the old tactics no longer feasible.²⁷

However, much as this was or was not the case, the justification ignored the continued possibilities of 'legal and peaceful' struggle on the one hand, and mass struggle (which was not 'legal' anyway) on the other. By ruling out the possibilities and potentialities of long-term internal mass mobilisation and organisation and opting for armed propaganda (which, under the objective conditions pertaining at the time, logically could only end up being externally based) to stimulate the same, the ANC and SACP situated the context and content of their struggle outside the masses. As one leading ANC member, Ben Turok, noted perceptively:

Sabotage had the effect of isolating the organised movement from the mass who felt unable to join in this new phase or even to defend the actionists when they were seized ... The sabotage campaign failed on the main count - it did not raise the level of action of the masses themselves ... they were left on the threshold, frustrated bystanders of a battle being waged on their behalf....²⁹

One step forward, two steps back

In April 1969, in Morogoro, Tanzania, the ANC held its 'Third Consultative Congress'. The Congress came on the back of an explosive memorandum (popularly known as the 'Hani Memorandum') signed by Chris Hani and six other MK members. Hani and two other signatories had only just returned to the external ANC HQ in Zambia after being part of a valiant, but failed, attempt to infiltrate a group of MK fighters into the country through the then white-ruled Rhodesia - the 'Wankie Campaign'. The attempt ended in the deaths and/or capture of most of the fighters. Hani – who was later to become MK Chief of Staff - was one of those who managed to escape – spending two years in a Botswana goal before being released.³⁰

In the memo, Hani and his comrades stated that the ANC was in 'deep crisis'. They accused much of its leadership of creating 'a machinery which has become an end in itself', of 'being professional politicians rather than professional revolutionaries' and alleged that there was some leaders who were engaged in corrupt activities. The memo further accused the ANC's security department of "suppressing and persecuting dedicated cadres of MK" and carrying out 'secret trials and executions'. Even though Hani and the other co-signers of the memo were detained and

²⁶ Umkhonto we Sizwe Manifesto, 1961 in N. Mandela, *The Struggle is my life*, 122-123.

²⁷ This was the essence of the ANC's later justifications for the decision to turn to armed struggle contained in their 1969 'Strategy and Tactics' document adopted at the Morogoro Conference in Tanzania.

²⁹ B. Turok, 'South Africa: The Search for a Strategy', in R. Miliband and J. Seville, eds, *Socialist Register 1973* (New York: Monthly Review Press), 360.

³⁰ H. Macmillan, 'The "Hani Memorandum" – Introduced and Annotated', <http://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/%26lsquo%3Bhani-memorandum%E2%80%99-%26ndash%3B-introduced-and-annotated-hugh-macmillan>, accessed 10 December 2017.

suspended for a short period, they were released after the intervention of Oliver Tambo and were present at the conference.³¹

The conference lasted for seven days and most of the delegates were members of MK. Much of the conference debate centred around the need for organisational and leadership reforms and as a result the decision was made to establish an internal commission to hear grievances, as well as an oath and code of behaviour. It was decided further that MK and all military affairs would now come under the responsibility of a Revolutionary Council, subordinate only to the ANC's National Executive. More importantly, though, was the adoption by the conference of a new 'Revolutionary Programme', commonly known as the 'Strategy and Tactics' document.

Since its embracing of the 1955 Freedom Charter the ANC had not produced a written policy and strategy document that took into account the completely new situation of being an exiled liberation movement conducting an armed struggle. The "Strategy and Tactics", in placing the question of the seizure of power firmly at the strategic centre, argued that 'it is surely a question of whether, in the given concrete situation, the course or policy advocated will aid or impede the prospects of the conquest of power'.³² It then went into detail about the history of the armed struggle and the 'special' circumstances of South Africa that made guerrilla warfare both appropriate and necessary - both in the rural and urban areas.

In a related document also produced at the conference, 'Development of the South African Revolution', the centrality of armed struggle was linked to the rejection of reforms:

... there is not one single factor to justify any expectation that reform could even lead to any amelioration of our conditions. The only correct path for the oppressed national groups and their democratic supporters ... is armed revolutionary struggle. This is not altered by the problems and difficulties that confront us in developing the revolution³³

Assessing the 'strength and weakness' of the enemy, the 'Strategy and Tactics' document followed the classic guerrilla warfare scenario of weaker forces conducting a war of attrition on superior enemy forces, reminiscent of a Cuban-style struggle. Although it argued that the working class constitutes a 'distinct and reinforcing layer of our liberation and Socialism' (the only place in the document where the word 'socialism' is identified as a goal of struggle), the document made it clear that the thrust of the struggle should have a national focus.³⁴

On the ground however, the practical pursuit of this armed struggle had not been proceeding according to the theory. Besides the 1967 'Wankie Campaign' and the Sipolilo campaign which lasted into 1968 there were several partially successful attempts to infiltrate MK cadres through the Botswana border, the explosion of leaflet 'bombs' in some major South African cities and at least one ill-fated plan to land guerrillas on the South African coast.³⁵ It was a far cry from the revolutionary guerrilla onslaught called for at Morogoro.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² African National Congress, 'Strategy and Tactics of the African National Congress', in B. Turok, ed., *Revolutionary Thought in the 20th Century* (London, Zed Press, 1980), 147.

³³ A. de Braganca and I. Wallerstein, eds, *The African Liberation Reader*, Vol 3 (London: Zed Press, 1982), 73.

³⁴ African National Congress, 'Strategy and Tactics...', 156

³⁵ Kasrils, *Armed and Dangerous*, 112-113

Inside South Africa, it was the newly formed Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) along with new labour formations that came to represent the main focus of internal struggle during the early to mid-1970s. Although the newly combative mood of the youthful BCM and a revived workers movement, combined with the 1975 independence of neighbouring Mozambique, opened up new spaces for MK, the exiled ANC's preoccupation with its own external problems and plans resulted in little practical movement on the armed struggle front. However, there was some rebuilding of underground structures that took place under the guidance of those ANC members recently released from Robben Island (for example, Joe Gqabi), and initial steps were taken to build underground structures by an MK group based in Lesotho and led by Chris Hani.³⁶

The 1976 student uprisings in Soweto, which galvanised widespread internal resistance to the apartheid state, took place with little serious involvement of formal ANC/MK structures and leadership. Regardless, it presented the ANC (and MK in particular) with both opportunities and challenges. Thousands of young people crossed over the borders, the vast majority of whom wanted to join the armed struggle. Despite the political, organisational and military weaknesses and problems of the ANC and its armed wing MK, they represented the only viable 'home' for the young guerrillas-in-waiting and it was to the ANC/MK that they turned.

With 'new blood' in its ranks, paralleled by high expectations of intensified MK activity inside the country, the ANC's main strategic focus of armed struggle was faced with a major test. In its efforts to meet this test the ANC formed the Special Operations Unit (OU), which was designed to enhance the overall strategic, tactical and logistical co-ordination of MK so that the armed struggle could become more intensive and influential. This unit was however, to create further problems for MK. There already existed the Revolutionary Council (RC - responsible for the overall prosecution of armed struggle), the Politico-Military Strategy Commission (PMSC - responsible for 'reviewing' ANC strategy and tactics) and another sub-body, the Internal Reconstruction and Development unit (IRD - responsible for political work). With the formation of the OU it appeared that one hand did not necessarily know what the other was doing, and there arose serious problems in carrying out joint military and political work - as called for in the 'Strategy and Tactics' document from Morogoro. .³⁷

Indeed, a 1978 meeting of the ANC National Executive Committee (NEC) emphasised the need to combine armed activity with legal and semi-legal internal activity in order to spur 'general mass uprisings'.³⁸ However, it took the ANC four years before its armed struggle registered substantially increased activity. Over the 1977-80 period the amount of guerrilla activity inside the country totalled 82 'incidents', and from 1981-84 there was a total of 194 'incidents'.³⁹ Much of the armed activity mirrored the sabotage campaign of the early 1960s, with small units attacking military and administrative targets.

³⁶ H. Barrell, *MK: The ANC's Armed Struggle* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 29; and, S. Ellis and T. Sechaba, *Comrades Against Apartheid: The ANC and the South African Communist Party in Exile* (London: James Currey, 1992), 72-73.

³⁷ Barrell, *The ANC's Armed Struggle*, 32

³⁸ *Ibid*, 37-40

³⁹ T. Lodge, 'State of Exile: The African National Congress of South Africa, 1976-86', in P. Frankel and M. Swilling, eds, *State, Resistance and Change in South Africa* (London: Croom Helm, 1988), 230.

Despite their overall, limited military threat to the apartheid state, MK did manage to pull off a few spectacular attacks that contributed to both the apartheid state's fears of a revolutionary onslaught and to raising the ANC's symbolic appeal among the masses. Between 1980 and 1982 MK launched mine and rocket attacks on the Sasolburg coal-to-oil refinery in June 1980, the Koeberg nuclear power station in Cape Town in December 1982 and the South African Defence Force's (SADF) Voortrekkerhooftge headquarters in May 1983, .

Under the direction of MK's Special Operations Unit, these attacks no doubt provided P.W. Botha with the excuse to launch his own raids and destabilisation campaigns in neighbouring Mozambique and Angola where MK was now based. The apartheid offensive was, of course, also directed at taking away the capacity of the ANC to carry forward its armed struggle. Mozambique had been the only secure base from which MK could directly infiltrate South Africa, and what successes MK had managed were in no small part due to the use of Mozambique as a forward base of operations. All that changed when Mozambique signed the Nkomati Accord with the apartheid state in 1984. This stated that, in return for barring MK from its turf, Mozambique would receive Botha's assurance that South Africa would end its support of RENAMO. The Accord turned out to be a chimera. MK lost its forward base but RENAMO was kept well-oiled by the clandestine efforts of the apartheid military.⁴⁰

For all its plans and activities, MK's prosecution of an armed struggle remained a victim of the ANC's own misdirected strategies. Still clinging to the centrality of a guerrilla strategy designed to ignite mass resistance and seize power from the apartheid regime, the organisation appeared blinded by the realities of its failure. The international and internal 'changes' that the ANC saw as strengthening their strategy were, if anything, confirmation that an externalised guerrilla strategy could be little more than what it had become - armed propaganda.

The apartheid state was nowhere close to being militarily threatened, the geo-political obstacles remained formidable and the internal conditions necessary for successful guerrilla-type operations were tenuous at best. In the words of Howard Barrell : 'It remains the fundamental tenet of revolutionary armed activity that its success depends on political mobilisation of the populace at large. It depends not merely on popular support, but popular involvement'⁴¹

Towards negotiated compromise

One of the results of the destabilisation of the Frontline States was that much of the energy and resources of the exiled ANC became increasingly taken up with internal organisational challenges and problems.. Often too busy with international diplomatic commitments and at the same time trying to cope with the apartheid state's counter-revolutionary campaign, much of the leadership lost touch with what was going on inside its own organisation. The organisation's leadership became increasingly paranoid and its security department - Mbokodo ('the stone that crushes') - began to arrest and interrogate many cadres suspected of being apartheid agents. The

⁴⁰ Joseph Hanlon, *Apartheid's Second Front: South Africa's War against Its Neighbours* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), 104-109

⁴¹ Barrell, *The ANC's Armed Struggle*, 7

latter included extremely harsh techniques and interrogations were carried out at newly established detention camps/centres.⁴² The effects of this were particularly acute within MK. While the leadership continued to make administrative adjustments (a new Political-Military Council was formed in early 1983 to coordinate the armed struggle with activity on the political front) and issue new plans for a people's war, large numbers of MK rank-and-file became increasingly demoralised.

By then, the vast majority of MK recruits were situated in Angolan camps where many of them had lived for years ever since fleeing South Africa. Living under difficult conditions, unable to fight inside their own country and increasingly engaged in major battles on the side of the Angolan government (MPLA) against the apartheid-supported UNITA rebel movement, a growing number of MK cadres began to criticise openly and challenge the leadership. These developments eventually resulted in a series of mutinies within the Angolan camps in which there was armed confrontation between 'loyalist' and smaller 'dissident' MK forces, followed by the detention of most of the mutineers⁴³.

Meanwhile back in South Africa, community organisations and the union movement were spearheading a proto-insurrection against the apartheid state. Thousands of youth joined the fray in pitched battles with apartheid security forces often without any formal leadership or structure. While many were no doubt responding directly to the ANC's well-publicised call in early 1985 to make the townships and ultimately the country ungovernable, neither the ANC/MK nor its internal ally, the United Democratic Front (UDF), were able to exercise much control or direction over the often spontaneous expressions of resistance from the grassroots.

This was despite the formal adoption of a 'people's war' strategy at the ANC's 1985 Kabwe (Zambia) conference and the reaffirmation that 'victory' could only come through the 'seizure of power'.⁴⁴ While this position was consistent with past ANC strategic formulations, it was no doubt given added impetus by the intensity of internal struggles. The debate over the prosecution of a people's war had been taking place within ANC and SACP intellectual circles since the late 1970s, but with the onset of serious internal resistance it was now married to the idea of insurrection.

Indeed, the idea of a people's war was premised on a strategic approach which sought to use MK and key internal activists to act as 'scholar/soldiers' in rural and urban communities as the best way to mobilise and activate the masses. Instead of seeking to conduct classic guerrilla warfare the movement's cadres would now seek to arm and train people in their communities. In theory, this strategy was intended to give people the means to launch effective armed and mass resistance to the apartheid state, culminating in an insurrectionary seizure of power.⁴⁵

⁴² These events took place between 1981 and 1984. The largest and most infamous was Quatro (named after a notorious Johannesburg prison known as No.4) a camp situated in northern Angola. It was only after the ANC's unbanning that news of Quatro and the subsequent mutinies came to light. See Paul Trehwela, *Inside Quatro: Uncovering the exile history of the ANC and SWAPO* (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2009); and Stephen Ellis, *External Mission*, chapter 5.

⁴³ See Paul Trehwela, *Inside Quatro*, 8-45; and Stephen Ellis, *External Mission*, chapter 5.

⁴⁴ T. Lodge, 'The Second Consultative Conference of the African National Congress', *South Africa International*, 16, 2 (1985), 82.

⁴⁵ SACP, 'Does Insurrection Need People's War?', *Umsebenzi*, Vol.2, No.1. (1986)

The 'new' approach to the prosecution of the armed struggle was concluded with the revamping of the Politico-Military Council - that had been particularly ineffective since its formation - which was given the task of setting up Regional Politico-Military Councils (RPMC's - to be set up in all the major areas of operation) in order to implement the move towards a people's war. However, a committee consisting of ANC NEC and PMC members which was set up to revise the Kabwe report on strategy and tactics, had still not completed its work by early 1989, nor is there any official record of it ever completing its work.⁴⁶

The notion of people's power and the idea that dual power (parallel institutions controlled by the masses) was on the verge of delivering national liberation, confused hope with reality. Although resistance had certainly made substantial inroads into the apartheid state's control of the black townships and to a lesser degree in some of the rural areas, the national authority and coercive capacity of the apartheid state was nowhere near being threatened with disintegration. The key ingredients for a potentially insurrectionist seizure of power in the South African context - strategically organised, armed and nationally consolidated organs of people's power - were absent. As it stood, the apartheid state, although facing a serious economic crisis and a political crisis of legitimacy, was not fundamentally undermined.

Practically, the way in which the ANC continued to prosecute its armed struggle virtually ensured there would be no potential insurrectionary seizure of power. Despite the substantial increase in the number of MK attacks during the township uprisings from the mid-late 1980s⁴⁷, and their positive effect on the ANC (and its internal allies) ability to gain political hegemony amongst the majority of South Africans, these attacks remained confined overwhelmingly, to hit-and-run sabotage operations. The development of autonomous internal armed formations based among the general populace and linked with grassroots structures, was minimal. To make matters even worse for the ANC's armed struggle, the December 1988 New York agreement (between the US and USSR over Angola after the battle of Cuito Cuanavale) meant closing down all of MK's bases in Angola. Already far from their country, MK cadres would now have to retreat even further to places like Uganda. The armed struggle had come full circle.

These developments represented more than just a severe body blow to the hopes of MK rank and file and internal movement militants who continued to believe that armed struggle, through a 'people's war', was the pre-requisite for seizing power and revolutionising South African society. They signalled the completed logic of the ANC's externally based struggle for national liberation. Having adopted a theory and strategy that resulted in an externally driven armed struggle whose *raison d'être* was the seizure of power and whose practice militated against the development of a politically organised and armed internal underground, the ANC was caught out.

⁴⁶ Barrell, *The ANC's Armed Struggle*, 59

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, chapter.4. According to Barrell, from 1985-1988 the number of MK attacks inside the country increased dramatically over previous years. For example, in 1988 MK launched 281 attacks, almost five times more than in 1984. By the end of 1987, MK had trained more than 12 000 guerrillas since the 1976 uprising - more than half had been deployed into the country, and of those, some 694 had either been killed or captured, thirty percent abandoned their missions while others had gone over to the enemy.

In the midst of these events, senior ANC and SACP leaders had undertaken a plan for building up an internal underground. Named *Operation Vula* and practically kick-started in 1988, it involved senior ANC and MK leaders clandestinely re-entering South Africa to systematically set up a core political and military cadre. While Operation Vula represented part of the long-awaited plan for a sustainable underground capable of directing revolutionary armed struggle, its potential was ostensibly undermined through exposure.

Whatever gains Operation Vula had managed to secure (for example, to rejuvenate organisational and military connections between MK and internal activists), it is questionable what commitment the externalised ANC leadership had to utilise those gains. On the political and diplomatic front, the activities already underway only served to confirm that the ANC leadership had already decided for a negotiated settlement. The ANC NEC's (October) 1987 statement⁴⁸ set the organisation firmly on a negotiations course. By setting out publicly maximum conditions for negotiations the ANC leadership sent a clear signal that it was prepared to engage in serious compromise. At the same time, in order to strengthen its hand at any future negotiating table, the ANC insisted that the 'struggle' be intensified 'on all fronts'.⁴⁹

It was thus not surprising that one of the NEC's next statements stressed the 'centrality of the armed struggle,' and urged followers to 'transform our offensive into a general people's war'.⁵⁰ No doubt such rejoinders were partly designed to reassure the rank and file that they were not being sold out, but they fundamentally revealed that the ANC would now utilise mass struggle and armed action for two specific purposes: to act as pressure levers on the apartheid state in the lead up to any future negotiations; and to ensure that the mass base was involved in the macro-strategy of a negotiated settlement.

The issuing of the Harare Declaration in August 1989 further reflected the multitude of pressures and influence of international forces for a negotiated settlement. Ever since the insurrectionary potential of the internal uprising had been crushed effectively and the apartheid state had wreaked havoc through its policy of regional destabilisation, a troubled ANC leadership had turned more than ever to its international pillar of struggle. The pressures for a negotiated settlement had correspondingly increased from all quarters: from the battered Frontline States; from Western governments; from international and domestic capital; from a rapidly disintegrating USSR; and from liberal 'supporters'. With any hopes for a seizure of power having progressively diminished along with the organisation's ability to build a viable internal underground linked to armed struggle, the ANC's negotiations strategy was a *fait accompli*.

ANC leaders, in an effort to present the *Harare Declaration* as a popular expression of the desires of the oppressed, began to make a virtue out of what was, in reality, a specific strategic choice. Negotiations were now presented as a 'new terrain of struggle' for power, whose character and direction would be 'determined by the masses'.⁵¹ It was stressed that negotiations should be seen not as replacing armed and mass struggle, but rather as complementary to them.

⁴⁸ 'Statement of the National Executive Committee of the African National Congress on the Question of Negotiations', October (Lusaka: ANC, 1987)

⁴⁹ *Umsebenzi* (4th Quarter, 1987)

⁵⁰ ANC NEC Statement, August 17 (Lusaka: ANC, 1988)

⁵¹ C. Carolus, 'Nothing Less than the Transfer of Power', *New Era*, 3, 4 (October, 1989)

The ANC had passed the point of no return. Given the general state of the external organisation and the combined international and regional pressures it now faced, a negotiated settlement was really the only route it could take. As if to confirm this, on 18 January 1990 ANC Secretary-General Alfred Nzo mistakenly read out to a group of journalists an internal document that admitted that the ANC did not have 'the capacity within our country to intensify the armed struggle in any meaningful way'.⁵²

Soon thereafter, on 2nd February 1990, the apartheid state President, F.W. de Klerk publicly announced the unbanning of the ANC (alongside the SACP and the PAC), the release of Mandela and the state's willingness to enter into negotiations for, 'a new democratic constitution'.⁵³ Despite large-scale violence unleashed by the apartheid state on ANC supporters, the ANC leadership had decided - on 6th August 1990 - to unilaterally suspend the armed struggle, 'in the interest of moving as speedily as possible towards a negotiated peaceful political settlement'.⁵⁴ The armed struggle was over.

A 'negotiated political settlement' leading to South Africa's first-ever democratic elections was eventually 'delivered' in late 1993. The elections were held in April 1994 and the ANC won with a commanding majority. However, from 1990-94, tens of thousands of South Africans died or were seriously injured in politically-motivated violence⁵⁵, most of them ANC supporters/sympathisers and including many key political leaders and activists in the very communities that provided the ANC with most of its support. This gives lie to the oft-repeated claim that South Africa's 'negotiated settlement' was 'peaceful' or that it represented some sort of 'miracle'⁵⁶.

The final push towards South Africa's first-ever democratic elections came, ironically, as a result of the assassination of MK commander and hero, Chris Hani; it was not the direct result of a victorious armed struggle waged by the ANC and MK. While there is no doubt that MK as a 'liberation army', alongside many individual soldiers and political militants, played a crucial role that helped bring an end to formal apartheid state, the armed struggle that was waged on behalf of the majority of South Africans for thirty years did not advance, in either political or military terms, beyond the realm of armed propaganda. Necessarily then, the possibilities of an armed, revolutionary, people's 'seizure of power' with the potential to lay the foundation for a fundamental political and socio-economic transformation in South Africa, never saw the light of day.

⁵² 'ANC Admits Inability to Intensify Armed Struggle', *Independent* (UK), 19 January 1990

⁵³ F.W. de Klerk, 'Address by State President F.W. de Klerk at the opening of the Second Session of the Ninth Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, Friday 2 February 1990 (S.A. Embassy, London, media release)

⁵⁴ 'The Pretoria Minute' in Institute for Black Research, *The CODESA File: Negotiating a Non-Racial Democracy in South Africa* (Durban: Madiba Publishers, 1993), 281-283.

⁵⁵ 'How SA emerged as a democracy from the crises of the 1990s', South African History Online, <http://www.sahistory.org.za/article/negotiations-toward-new-south-africa-grade-12>, accessed 25 November 2017

⁵⁶ For example see Alister Sparks, *Tomorrow is another country* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1995)