

A Rich and Tangled Skein: Strategy and Ideology in Anti-Apartheid Struggles

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Introduction

There are at least three good reasons why this chapter— an historical account of how South Africans fought against and ultimately unseated the institutionalized racism of apartheid— should not be written.

First and foremost, such an account must be selective. Every author will shape the narrative, deciding when the story begins and how it unfolds and where its high points are. Regardless of its academic rigor and research, the story will reflect the views and understanding of an individual implicated in myriad ways with its telling.

Second, the vocabulary available for telling the story imposes its own limitations. The disciplines of history and political science operate with concepts of causality, agency and significance that have their own logic; their familiar categories include organizations, movements, leaders, followers, ideologies and campaigns. But these are constructs, tested and licensed vehicles for social science narrative and analysis. They confer coherence on the past and provide points of departure for explanation. But they are much less useful when it comes to dealing with the fluidity, ambiguity, and messiness of politics lived and experienced.

Third, a chapter commissioned to review the ideologies and strategies of those who have fought against racism, “mainly the liberation movements and their allies,” is guaranteed to privilege certain forms of politics and to muffle others. The most obvious bias is that urban movements typically deposit more archival records than their rural counterparts. In South Africa, those who lived in “Native Reserves” or on White farms lacked the social and political power to mount frontal attacks on the sources of their subordination. They deployed the “weapons of the weak,” and a defining feature of this frail arsenal was its invisibility (Scott 1985). Hidden forms of peasant protest “succeeded only if they remained clandestine” and when successful “rarely left a paper trail for historians” (Isaacman 1990, 17, 38). Similarly, urban social movements tend to be recorded only if they are dramatic enough or large enough in scale to make their way into city newspapers. Inevitably, a history of the struggle against apartheid that focuses on liberation movements will fail to do justice to other forms of resistance, especially the stubborn, undramatic, and persistent efforts of ordinary people to improve their lives, evade controls, and preserve their dignity.

Acknowledging these difficulties does not dispose of them. Perhaps, however, it helps define what is possible. My own selectivity and framing choices may briefly be stated. This chapter concentrates on 50 years of organized forms of anti-apartheid resistance from the early 1940s to the early 1990s. Accordingly, it deals only in the most perfunctory way with the previous half-century of anti-racist thought and struggle— and not at all with their precedents. While it tries to identify the range and diversity of organizational forms, the chapter perforce operates with an existing lexicon and taxonomy. In doing so, it simplifies the story it tries to tell. It tidies up a history far more complex, heteroclitic, and perverse than this chapter can begin to reveal.

It may also be charged with a kind of teleology. Because the anti-apartheid forces were led most effectively by “Charterist” politics,¹ the African National Congress (ANC) and its allies are treated more extensively than any of their rivals. Hindsight—the view from 1999— may justify this emphasis, but it runs the risk of conferring retrospective rectitude on the Congress movement. It is important to identify such moments: when the United Nations and the Organization of African Unity accorded the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) with status identical to the ANC, when the Black Consciousness movement became “the most politically significant black political organization in the country” (Gerhart 1978, 270), or when a shop-floor socialism— dubbed “*workerism*”— tussled in the early 1980s for theoretical hegemony against Charterism.

And it is guilty of the bias built into the archival record and the existing literature. Like them, it deals almost exclusively with *organized* politics— with parties large and small and predominantly with the texts of their leaders. I have tried to

recognize some of the less visible and more transient forms of social and political resistance to apartheid. Popular disaffection and collective forms of protest—“informal, often covert, and concerned largely with immediate, de facto gains”—co-existed with more institutional politics—“formal, overt, concerned with systematic, *de jure* change” (Scott 1985, 33). The full history of such grassroots politics remains largely untold because it is barely audible in the records. This chapter hopes to capture at least some of its echoes and their insistent, off-stage susurrations.

Watershed Years: the 1940s

There is no doubt that the 1940s mark “a watershed in the development of African politics in South Africa” (Lodge 1983, 1). Resistance quickened and diversified. New bodies were formed, and older ones staked out fresh ideological ground. Political developments included efforts to unify African, Coloured, and Indian political structures or to build radical popular fronts of all races, including Whites; an unprecedented influence attained by the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA); the passive resistance campaign by the Natal Indian Congress in 1946; and the formation of the South African Indian Congress (SAIC). But the greatest long-term significance lay in the revitalization of the ANC and the injection of programmatic urgency delivered by its Youth League.

This quickening of the political pulse during and immediately after World War II was part of a larger history of social and economic change. The South African economy recovered rapidly from the Great Depression because the price of gold rose after 1934. Industrial output and employment rose rapidly, as did Black urbanization. With a quarter of a million Whites diverted into the armed services or war-related occupations, Black workers moved into factory jobs at an unprecedented rate. For a few years, Black real wages grew more rapidly than those of White workers did, and trade union membership and strike action mushroomed. At the same time, the influx of Black workers and their families simply outran the provision of housing, basic services, and infrastructure in urban areas. Overcrowding, privation, and insecurity heightened concerns over the cost of rents, transport, and food. The Smuts government blew hot and cold, announcing restrictions on worker activism that it could not implement and making concessions on pass laws that it could not control.

These stimuli evoked a complex ensemble of popular struggles and movements: strikes, squatter movements, and land occupations—cost-of-living protests that animated whole communities such as the Alexandra bus boycotts of 1940 and 1943-44. In township after township, this

welter of pressures from below radicalized local structures such as Advisory Boards and Vigilance Associations. In turn, these impulses affected national bodies such as the CPSA and ANC.

Several hundred African notables founded the ANC in 1912: professional men, traditional leaders, landholders, and businessmen from across South Africa’s four provinces. It represented the anxieties and interests of a literate elite: teachers, clerks, journalists, and a handful of doctors and lawyers. Its program was to win rights for Africans within an existing, White-controlled state, and to secure exemption from the color bar for Africans of respectable social standing. Its approach was self-consciously constitutional and cautious. The years 1930-36 saw the ANC at its nadir. Politically conservative, narrowly based socially, and organizationally almost defunct, the movement was ill-equipped to resist the legislation of 1936, which snuffed out the African franchise in the Cape,² created new segregated institutions such as the Native Representative Council, entrenched some 87 percent of the total land in South Africa as White-owned, and permitted African ownership of land only in designated ‘Reserves’ (the geographic forerunners of the Bantustans).

The inability of the ANC to mount any defense against these laws gave birth in December 1935 to a new umbrella organization, the All-African Convention (AAC). Although some elements within the AAC called for a boycott of the new institutions, they failed to carry the day, and the AAC saw out the 1930s with “wordy protests ... delegations, vague calls for African unity, and national days of prayer.” (Lodge 1983, 11). In the following decade, the AAC changed its character. It was led by a group of African Marxists, including Isaac Tabata, and it waged a number of campaigns in the Transkei.³ It affiliated with the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM), a left-wing group strongly hostile to the CPSA and which operated mainly in Cape Town.

In December 1943, at its founding conference, the NEUM adopted a 10-Point Program that called for:

The liquidation of the National Oppression of the Non-Europeans in South Africa, that is, the removal of all the disabilities and the restrictions based on grounds of race and color, and the acquisition by the Non-Europeans of those rights which are at present enjoyed by the European [white] population (Karis 1973, 355).

The 10 points included universal suffrage; free and compulsory education; the guarantee of basic civil liberties; reform of criminal, tax and labor laws; and repeal of the Land Acts to enable a new national division of land.

Matching the more assertive politics of the NEUM's 10-Point Program, the ANC in 1943 also adopted the vocabulary of equal rights for all. The ANC had begun to renew itself as a more credible national body from 1940, with the election of A.B. Xuma as its president. Xuma brought unruly provincial factions to heel, strengthened the authority of the center, and made funds available for full-time organizers at branch level. A new constitution scrapped ex officio membership for traditional chiefs and gave full equality to women members. In December 1943, the ANC at its annual conference adopted an important policy statement, Africans' Claims in South Africa. This document took the Atlantic Charter as a point of departure and spelled out its implications for South Africa. It called for a Bill of Rights that would entrench the following:

Full citizenship rights such as are enjoyed by all Europeans in South Africa... the extension to all adults, regardless of race, of the right to vote and be elected to parliament ... the right to equal justice in courts of law... Freedom of movement and the repeal of the pass laws ... The right to own, buy, hire or lease and occupy land... The right of every child to free and compulsory education (Karis 1973, 211-23).

In April 1944, members who sought a more radical outlook and approach further galvanized the ANC. Some two dozen-founder members of the ANC Youth League (YL) were in their mid-20s or early 30s, and most were university graduates. The most dynamic intellectual leadership came initially from Anton Lembede, who formulated a philosophy of Africanism, at once a romantic nationalism—

Nationalism has been tested in the people's struggles and the fires of battle and found to be the only effective weapon, the only antidote against foreign rule and modern imperialism... Africans are the natives of Africa and they have inhabited Africa, their Motherland, from times immemorial; Africa belongs to them (Karis 1973, 317).

— and a call to psychological emancipation. Lembede believed that African society was being sapped by “pathological phenomena such as loss of self-confidence, inferiority complex, a feeling of frustration, the worship and idolization of White men, foreign leaders and ideologies.” (Karis 1973, 318) To counter this, he prescribed “a new and aggressively positive self-image compounded of pride in the past, confident expectations for the future, and an emotional, burning love for the African's God-given blackness” (Gerhart 1978, 58).

Politically, this intensity of emotion translated into impatience with the ANC Old Guard and a promise that the YL would become “the brain trust and power station of the

spirit of African nationalism.” The YL's main strategic innovation was an advocacy of mass action and civil disobedience. In December 1949, the ANC adopted the YL's Program of Action calling for boycott of segregated political institutions and the use of “immediate and active boycott, strike, civil disobedience, non-cooperation and such other means as may bring about the accomplishment and realization of our aspirations” (Karis 1973, 338). The corollary of this program was that the ANC should seek to become a movement with a mass membership.

For the CPSA, the 1940s were roller-coaster years. The Communist Party entered World War II only a few hundred members strong, with waning African support and vestiges of influence in the trade union movement. By 1943, the party won local government seats in Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban, and East London. It became the most influential political organization in a number of Transvaal townships. It led the largest African trade unions and played a central role in the 1946 strike by Black mineworkers. And its members held leading positions in the ANC as well as in the Indian Congress movement. But after the war ended, the party fell foul of the Smuts government. In 1947, a number of its activists were charged with sedition— and the May 1948 election of the National Party government led directly to the 1950 Suppression of Communism Act and the party's decision to disband.

Yet in its final months as a legal entity, CPSA arrived at a theoretical position that was to shape ANC politics and the national liberation strategy for the next 40 years. As David Everatt has persuasively argued, party members in the Transvaal “began to evolve a new ideological framework within which, they argued, resistance politics should be analyzed” (Everatt 1991, 43). And the final report of the CPSA Central Committee, in January 1950, envisaged a national movement (presaging the ANC) whose “objective is national liberation, that is, the abolition of race discrimination,” distinct from the Communist Party, but cooperating closely with it (South African Communist Party 1991, 211). As we shall see, this was the essence of a more fully formulated alliance formed in the early 1960s.

Defiance, Charter, Africanism, and Sharpeville

The previous section introduced most of the dramatis personae of the liberation struggle: African nationalists of liberal or nonracial and of “orthodox” persuasions;⁴ rival movements; African, Indian and Coloured bodies engaging in tentative joint campaigns; socialists and trade unionists; and largely anonymous social movements in townships

and countryside. All played their part in the protest politics of the 1950s. During these years, even while the National Party state began to close down the space for legal political action, “the possibilities of mass mobilization and political action existed,” and “a series of major campaigns against state policy were organised” (Wolpe 1988, 66-67).

There are a number of accounts of these campaigns,⁵ and they will not be recapitulated here. Instead, five developments that shaped the ideologies and strategies of the anti-apartheid struggle will be identified and discussed:

- the reconstitution of liberation politics in the form of the Congress Alliance;
- the reformulation of the vision and aims of the movement in the form of the Freedom Charter;
- the Africanist response to these organizational and ideological shifts;
- popular forms of protest by workers, women, and urban and rural communities; and
- state repression and early experiments in extra-legal resistance.

The ANC edged toward the politics of the Congress Alliance over half a dozen years. The “Doctors’ Pact” of 1947 saw Xuma, Naicker, and Dadoo agree to joint action between African and Indian bodies. In 1950, national stay-aways (a form of political strike) were coordinated across ANC, SAIC, trade unions, and other organizations. The Defiance Campaign of 1952, which triggered a dramatic increase in ANC membership and morale, was shot through with the symbolism of concerted resistance by leaders across the country’s racial divides. In 1953, this logic culminated in the establishment of the Congress Alliance. This linked the ANC and SAIC with two bodies expressly created to mobilize White and Coloured sympathizers with Congress leadership—the Congress of Democrats (COD) and the South African Coloured Peoples Organization (SACPO)—and with Congress-aligned workers’ and women’s organizations—the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) and the Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW).

This alliance was open to criticism from various quarters. It was contested by formation of the nonracial Liberal Party in 1953. Led by Alan Paton, the Liberal Party was strongly anti-Communist and bitterly hostile to the COD. The NEUM and other left groupings excoriated the “multi-racialism” of the Congress Alliance for preserving racial divides in its separate structures. And it was disliked by ele-

ments within the ANC suspicious of the influence exerted by Whites and Indians on the Congress leadership.

The new Alliance led directly to a campaign of mobilizing its members and its constituent partners around an explicit ideological position. The Congress of the People culminated in the adoption of the Freedom Charter on June 25-26, 1955. Its preamble declared:

We, the people of South Africa, declare for all our country and the world to know:

That South Africa belongs to all that live in it, black and white, and that no government can justly claim authority unless it is based on the will of the people... That only a democratic state, based on the will of the people, can secure to all their birthright without distinction of color, race, sex or belief.

South Africa belongs to all that live in it . . .

The other clauses of the Charter combined the language of basic civil rights (all national groups shall have equal rights, all shall be equal before the law, all shall enjoy

human rights) with social democratic tenets (the people shall share in the country’s wealth, there shall be work and security, the doors of learning and culture shall be opened, there shall be houses, security and comfort). The precise interpretation placed on each of these clauses was minutely debated at the time and subsequently for 40 years, but the overall significance is plain. It committed the ANC to the ideal of nonracialism or an inclusive nationalism, and it yoked universal suffrage to basic demands for redistribution and social equity.

It also precipitated a lasting divide in Black opposition to White minority rule. From the early 1950s, there remained within the ANC adherents of Lembede’s Africanist vision. They jibbed at each step toward cooperation with other races, insisted that they were the true defenders of the YL’s Program of Action, and revived the slogan “Africa for the Africans.” The formal rupture between this grouping and the ANC took place late in 1958, and the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) was formed a few months later. The Freedom Charter, and especially its declaration that South Africa “belonged to all,” was grist to the mill of those who believed that “multi-racialism” diluted African nationalism. The PAC orthodoxy held that “the African masses constitute the key to liberation and can be organized only under the banner of African nationalism,” and it denounced the Congress Alliance as “the ‘capture’ of a portion of the black leadership of South Africa by a section of the white ruling class” (Karis and Gerhart 1977, 519).

In addition to campaigns and stay-aways mounted by ANC,

the 1950s also witnessed a variety of popular struggles—more localized, less formally organized, and in several instances less wedded to legal and peaceful methods. This was especially true of a series of episodes of rural resistance in the areas designated as Reserves. These sought to stave off two forms of intervention by the state:

Rehabilitation policies, with implications of cattle culling and land limitation, and implementation of the Bantu Authorities Act, which sought to make chiefs effectively agents of the apartheid state.

Such episodes included the Witzieshoek Rebellion, the Hurutse rising, the Sekhukhuneland Revolt, and the Pondoland Revolt,⁶ all of which led to declarations of States of Emergency. Similar turbulence gripped the Zoutpansberg region, the Ngutu district in Zuland, the Ciskei, and Thembuland (Chaskalson 1987). Each incident involved people fighting to preserve a social order under threat of erasure, they opposed chiefs who had accepted their posts on the terms of the Native Affairs Department, and their participants resorted to direct action and violence. They also used petitions, boycotts, lawsuits, and appeals to potential allies, but their tactics were not restricted to these familiar forms. Fences were cut; huts were burned; suspected collaborators were chased off, assaulted, and in some cases killed; and policemen and other officials were attacked.

Even larger numbers took part in a series of protests by African women, especially against the extension of the pass laws to women. The best-known single event was the march by 20,000 women to the Union Buildings in August 1956. This dignified and emotionally charged protest, planned by FEDSAW and the ANC Women's League, involved high-profile leaders such as Lillian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph, Lily Diedericks, and others. Of arguably greater significance was the sustained pattern of more spontaneous anti-pass protests between 1953 and 1958—in several instances linked organically with the rural uprisings described above. One of the most militant campaigns was the outbreak of rural violence in Natal following the slum clearances in Cato Manor in 1959. "Across Natal women attacked Bantu Administration huts, smashed dipping tanks, burnt cane fields and stoned police" (Chaskalson 1987, 55).

There is a tendency in the more hagiographical histories of the struggle to conflate all such activities as instances of Congress Alliance leadership. "Throughout the 1950s, the ANC began in earnest to sharpen the weapon of mass direct action, which took the form of boycotts, mass demonstrations of women and political strikes... There were also peasant revolts all over the country" (Meli 1988, 129). In fact, relations between national organizations and local

struggles were tenuous and often contradictory. In many cases, the ANC responded hesitantly and awkwardly to grassroots stimuli. It failed to establish a significant presence in the countryside. And at times, the leadership actually acted to restrain popular energies. It would, in fact, be surprising had this not been the case. The ANC leadership was urban, largely male, and committed to legal forms of struggle. It was not structurally positioned to link effectively with brushfire rural protests or militant women's movements.

Moreover, from mid-decade the Congress Alliance was increasingly hamstrung by state repression. Banning orders immobilized individual activists and leaders. Following the Congress of the People, the state charged 156 Alliance leaders with high treason. Although the prosecution failed to prove a case, the trial dragged on for five years and effectively removed the top echelons of the Congress movement at a moment when large numbers of Black South Africans showed themselves ready to fight for their liberation.

State tightening of controls on extra-parliamentary politics was one aspect of the first (pre-Sharpeville) phase of apartheid. The NP government did not introduce segregation nor invent institutionalized racism. It codified, entrenched, and extended racial discrimination. It ensured exclusively White participation in electoral politics, enforced spatial segregation and control over Africans' movements to cities, divided the labor market more rigidly on lines of race—and harried and punished those who challenged this agenda. The mounting level of social and political control certainly circumscribed the ability of the Congress Alliance, or other bodies, to mount effective large-scale protest activity.

Sharpeville and the Turn to Armed Struggle

The mounting tensions between state repression and mass protest politics reached a bloody climax on March 21, 1960. On the first day of a PAC Anti-Pass Campaign, police fired on demonstrators at Sharpeville, killing 69 people and wounding 200. As a pithy summary recounts:

This event sparked strikes and demonstrations throughout the country. The regime wavered but then, to regain control of the situation, invoked the provisions of existing legislation to declare a state of emergency, arrested and imprisoned thousands of political activists, and called out the police and army. The significance of Sharpeville, however, goes well beyond these immediate events (Wolpe 1988, 68).

The dynamics set in motion by the Sharpeville shootings are clear enough. The state shifted decisively to a more authoritarian mode. It banned the ANC and the PAC, thus defining African nationalist struggles as illegal. Over the next few years, it wrote into law draconian measures— solitary confinement, detention without trial, sweeping definitions of sabotage and treason— and conferred wide new powers upon the police force, particularly the Special [security] Branch. For their part, liberation movement organizations accepted the new terms of struggle by creating clandestine structures and by launching explicitly violent forms of struggle.

Within the Congress Alliance, the Communist Party set the pace. Three years after its banning, the party had reconstituted itself as the South African Communist Party (SACP) and in 1959 announced its underground existence. In December 1960, the party resolved in favor of a sabotage campaign as a prelude to guerrilla war.

On December 16, 1961, explosions were detonated in several cities, together with the distribution of a leaflet announcing the formation of Umkonto we Sizwe (Spear of the Nation) or MK. The leaflet must count as one of the more moderate declarations of war ever issued. It recalled a half-century of nonviolent politics and continued:

That time has now come to South Africa ... we have no choice but to hit back by all means within our power in defense of our people, our future and our freedom... We ... have always sought to achieve liberation without bloodshed and civil clash. We do so still. We hope— even at this late hour— that our first actions will awaken everyone to a realization of the disastrous situation... We hope that we will bring the Government and its supporters to their senses before it is too late (Karis & Gerhart 1977, 716-17).

The MK sabotage campaign was directed against symbolic and economic targets, with strict instructions by the high command that no deaths or injuries should be caused. Some 200 explosions took place, most of them incendiary devices, over 18 months. In July 1963, the MK high command was arrested when police swooped down on Lilliesleaf Farm in Rivonia. MK— unlike the racially separate structures of the Congress Alliance— included members of all races. With the ensuing Rivonia trial, MK was effectively beheaded. The PAC's Poqo movement, which carried out sporadic attacks on White officials

and civilians, and also tiny groupings of saboteurs from liberal and left tendencies, were similarly dismembered. More than 3,000 ANC and PAC activists were rounded up and imprisoned. By the mid-1960s, internal resistance largely had been snuffed out. For the next decade, the politics of national liberation were conducted almost exclusively in exile.

Both the ANC and PAC were recognized by the Organization of African Unity as legitimate vehicles of national liberation, and both faced similar challenges. They sought to win diplomatic support and recognition, to develop the capacity to wage armed struggle, to re-establish some internal presence and activity, and to survive in the sour soil of expatriate politics, so often schismatic and demoralized. In all respects, the ANC was markedly more successful. It had several advantages. Prior to Sharpeville, it sent Oliver Tambo overseas to set up an external mission. Tambo

But the people's patience is not endless. The time comes in the life of any nation when there remain only two choices: submit or fight.

demonstrated his capacities as a leader for the next 30 years, gathered around him outstanding lieutenants, and in the SACP the ANC possessed an ally with theoretical, human, and diplomatic resources that were not available to the PAC.

In 1962, the SACP approved a new program, The Road to South African Freedom, which served as its central policy for a quarter of a century— and which also profoundly influenced the ANC in exile. Its defining thesis had been intimated in 1950 but was now spelled out more fully. South Africa combined the worst features of imperialism and colonialism in a single national frontier— Colonialism of a Special Type (CST). The Black population experienced typically colonial forms of national oppression, poverty, exploitation, and political exclusion. This promoted strong national identity with “no acute or antagonistic divisions among the African people.” From these premises, the party's immediate task was defined:

The immediate and imperative interests of all sections of the South African people demand the carrying out of ... a national democratic revolution, which will overthrow the colonialist state of White supremacy... The main content of this revolution is the national liberation of the African people.

The ANC, hailed as the bearer of such a struggle, was “representative of all the classes and strata which make up African society” and the vanguard organization of “the

national liberation of the African people" (South African Communist Party 1981, 284-315).

By 1965, the ANC, SACP, and MK were in severe disarray. Their leaders were in prison or in exile, their political base in South Africa had crumbled under state pressure, and their potential supporters were intimidated and subdued. The exiled leadership now sought to prosecute the liberation struggle from afar by infiltrating trained guerrillas back into the country via Rhodesia and Mozambique, linking with ZAPU and FRELIMO troops in those areas. None of the three campaigns mounted in 1967 and 1968 succeeded in returning a single MK combatant to South African soil, but the experience undoubtedly hardened the resolve of the ANC in exile.

In 1969, the ANC convened a Consultative Conference at Morogoro in Tanzania, which marked a turning point in the history of the exiled movement. First, the conference permitted criticism of the exiled leadership—particularly from the MK cadres. The leadership (it was charged) had isolated itself from the rank and file and devoted too much time to international work. Second, the conference acknowledged that the ANC's organization within South Africa had been shattered. Such recognition was an essential preliminary to rebuilding an internal presence. Third, Morogoro also restructured the political and military leadership of the ANC by creating a Revolutionary Council, open to non-Africans, in a significant departure from the "multi-racial" practice of the Congress Alliance.

The ANC also adopted a new program at Morogoro, a statement of Strategy and Tactics. This sketched the history of the armed struggle and identified guerrilla war as a "special" and, in South Africa's circumstances, only appropriate form of struggle. It also defined the character and desired outcome of struggle:

The main content of the present stage of the South African revolution is the national liberation of the largest and most oppressed group— the African people... [I]t demands ... the maximum mobilization of the African people as a dispossessed and racially oppressed nation... It involves stimulation and deepening of national confidence, national pride and national assertiveness...

What is the broad purpose of our military struggle? Simply put, in the first phase, it is the complete political and economic emancipation of all our people and the constitution of a society that accords with the basic provisions of our program— the Freedom Charter (Karis and Gerhart 1997, 387-92).

In Strategy and Tactics, CST's central tenets were adopted: the national liberation of Africans as the mainspring, guerrilla war as the strategy, and a democratic state with guaranteed rights as the outcome.

In fact, over the next half-dozen years, MK guerrillas made no further incursions. Modest numbers of soldiers trained in Russia and Eastern Europe and were based in camps in Tanzania and Zambia. The first steps were taken to set up a rudimentary underground ANC organization in the country. Some modest progress was made in this direction, signaled by arrests and trials and the surfacing of ANC pamphlets and newsletters. By 1975, the ANC had reactivated a number of cells, especially in Johannesburg and Durban. ANC veterans released from Robben Island between 1972 and 1975— men like Joe Gqabi, Harry Gwala, Martin Ramokgadi, and Jacob Zuma—played a key role. But "the lack of generational depth could be seen in the fact that 77-year-old Ramokgadi was named as the chief internal organizer" at the very moment that Black Consciousness was attracting large numbers of youthful militants (Davis 1987, 28).

These were harsh years for the ANC. Its main achievement was that it persisted. It did not fall apart into factionalism as did other exiled movements, and it won an increasing level of international recognition and support. The real change in its fortunes by the mid-1970s stemmed not from its own efforts but from important developments in the southern African region. First, the geopolitics of the region shifted decisively with the 1974 fall of Caetano's fascist regime, the rapid disintegration of Portuguese control of its African colonies, and the assumption of power by the ANC's old allies, FRELIMO and the MPLA in Mozambique and Angola, respectively. Second, new currents of internal resistance began to flow within the country. The Black Consciousness movement took root and flowered in the early 1970s, a wave of strikes by Black workers and the rebuilding of trade unions saw a renewal of working class political struggles, and the June 1976 youth uprising that began in Soweto detonated explosive new energies.

Black Consciousness, Worker Struggles, and Soweto

The apartheid state never appeared more impregnable than in the second half of the 1960s. Internal opposition was negligible. In the 1966 elections, the NP won 126 of 166 seats. Middle-class Whites dabbled in a spectacular share boom as real growth rates averaged 7 percent a year, and in the hectic high noon of apartheid, South Africa was

"regarded by foreign investors as a gold mine (gushed the journal *Fortune* in July 1972), one of those rare and refreshing places where profits are great and problems small."

This bonanza was underpinned by force. The apparatus of pass laws, influx control, labor bureaus, and forced removals reached Orwellian proportions. This ruthless machinery exacted a terrible cost in political suffering. It also carried a political price tag. It ensured that exclusion, deprivation, and coercion defined the everyday experience of Black South Africans. This drove opposition into new forms, demanded of it new strategies, and helped equip it with a new militancy. These expressed themselves on two axes, both mapped by the course of the apartheid juggernaut. Harshly segregated education incubated a generation of young Black intellectuals whose utter hostility toward the status quo voiced itself as Black Consciousness (BC). The economic boom accelerated the numbers and the shop-floor influence of a militant Black working class.

Bantu education and ethnic universities made the education of Blacks cheaper and separate. But they also created a critical mass of educated young people. Black school enrollment rose from 1 million in 1955 to more than 2.5 million in 1969, and the Black universities created after 1960 produced "hothouse conditions for the growth of a new spirit of resistance" (Karis and Gerhart 1997, 90). Black students walked out of the nonracial National Union of South African Students conference in 1967, when they were housed off campus. Two years later, they formed the South African Students Organization (SASO).

A cluster of talented individuals, including Steve Bantu Biko, who was the most charismatic and influential, led SASO. It initially eschewed confrontation with the state, violent means, and anti-capitalist rhetoric. Instead, it provided an eclectic, intense ideology of psychological emancipation, Black self-reliance, and assertiveness. It drew upon international intellectuals such as Fanon, Cabral, Nkrumah, and Nyerere as well as contemporary American Black Power theorists. SASO's political base was on university and college campuses, but its message ramified through a larger population of high school students and urban youth, creating "an entire generation of energetic leadership" (Karis and Gerhart 1997, 112).

The effervescent BC ideology threw up new structures. In 1972, Black theology groupings launched the Black Community Program as a series of self-help initiatives. That same year, the Black Peoples Convention was founded as a "political movement" whose stated aim was "to unite and solidify the black people of South Africa with a view to mobilizing the masses toward the struggle for liberation

and emancipation, both from psychological and physical domination" (Marx 1992, 54). In 1974, SASO held a series of "Viva Frelimo" rallies and attracted immediate state repression, resulting in the banning of some of its leaders and a high profile trial of nine others.

Different dynamics animated the other major vector of opposition in the early 1970s. A trickle of wildcat strikes by Black workers became a flood in 1973, when a rolling wave of stoppages engulfed Durban and other centers in Natal. These strikes were largely spontaneous and lacked identifiable leadership. However, they fused with fledgling advice offices and worker education initiatives to create the impetus for the rapid rebuilding of a trade union movement that was to play a significant role in the defeat of apartheid.⁷ The new unions formed in the aftermath of the Durban strikes eschewed overtly political positions. They concentrated on bread-and-butter issues such as wages, working conditions, unfair dismissals, and health and safety matters. This pragmatism won them legal space, ensured them a foothold on the factory floor, and opened the door to negotiation with employers for worker gains. It also meant that a new generation of trade unionists was in place to take advantage of the changed political climate after the storms of the Soweto youth revolt of 1976 (Lewis 1997, 208-09).

The actual events of the Soweto uprising, which began on June 16, 1976, and ebbed and flowed for 15 months, have been described and analyzed at length⁸ and need not be rehearsed here. But they did galvanize entire Black communities, uniting them in grief and outrage at the unequal contest between police bullets and school students' stones. They re-created the possibility of mass-based protest politics. They reverberated in major cities and in Bantustans. They linked African protest with Coloured defiance. And they broke the mould of South African politics cast after Sharpeville.

A great deal of ink has been spent to argue the respective contributions to the youth uprising of Black Consciousness and the exiled movements. Without adjudicating between these claims in detail, two conclusions seem clear. First, BC did not organize the Soweto revolt but created the conditions in which it occurred. As Biko put it, "The boldness, dedication, sense of purpose, and clarity of analysis of the situation — all of these are a direct result of BC ideas among the young" (Marx 1992, 70). Second, the ANC had but vestigial links with the Soweto activists but was a major beneficiary. International revulsion at the events ensured greater diplomatic anti-apartheid leverage. More crucially, several thousand young men and women left South Africa

determined to avenge fallen schoolmates, to fight back, and to join an organized national liberation force.

Overwhelmingly, the militant refugees gravitated toward the ANC. By mid-1978, South African security sources estimated that some 4,000 new military recruits were training in Libya, Angola, and Tanzania.

Decade of Defiance: 1979-89

With hindsight, it now is easier to see how beleaguered the apartheid state was when P.W. Botha became state president in 1978 and his government set out on the deeply ambivalent program labeled "Total Strategy." Botha's presidency was an exercise in authoritarian reform, an attempt to redefine and stabilize the apartheid project. It sought to make certain concessions (and so win new allies in the Black middle class) while insisting on centralizing government security forces to control the direction of change from above. What appeared then as a formidable show of strength (the militarization of society, the role of the National Security Council, the National Security Management System) was also a set of defensive reactions to a treble-layered crisis. The crisis comprised economic recession, internal resistance, and a fundamental shift in the geopolitical balance of power in Southern Africa. By the end of the 1980s, the combined weight of economic decline, internal resistance, and external sanctions proved too great for the White minority regime to bear.

Total Strategy was confronted and outflanked by two decisive developments within resistance politics. One was the emergence of localized, radicalized community-based protest. The other was the re-entry by the ANC from the wings of exile to center-stage domestic politics. While analytically distinct, these trends fused in 1983 in the formation of the United Democratic Front (UDF).

In October 1977, the government banned 18 (mainly Black Consciousness) organizations and publications. But the political energies released by the Soweto revolt could not be contained by repression. In 1979, a number of new organizations were formed, including the Congress of South African Students (COSAS), the Azanian Peoples Organization (AZAPO), the Soweto Civic Association, and the Port Elizabeth Black Civic Organization. The moment of civic activism, the "civics," had arrived. During the next few years, township associations, youth and student organizations, women's groups, and others mushroomed. The civics typically grew out of existing residents' associations but quickly distinguished themselves in terms of scale, scope, and vigor. They mobilized larger numbers and did so on more militant terms.⁹

The civics became prominent and ubiquitous vehicles of resistance during the 1980s, typically acting in concert with trade unions and student/youth bodies. Together, they spearheaded a politics of refusal, with a repertoire of consumer, rent, and transport boycotts; rallies; marches; and stay-aways. The continued growth in Black trade union organization and militancy was dramatic. Production losses due to strike activity doubled in 1980 compared with 1979, doubled again in 1982, and doubled yet again in 1985. Strike activity in 1985 was more than 10 times greater than the annual average from 1973-78 (Price 1991, 164). Student protests and school boycotts added further voltage to an already highly charged circuit. Like similar movements elsewhere, student and youth politics were typically militant and dynamic— and by nature impatient, unsophisticated, and inexperienced (Bundy 1987).

In 1983, the Pretoria government unveiled constitutional proposals, designed to create a new tricameral legislature with separate chambers for Whites, Indians, and Coloreds— but excluding Africans entirely. This precipitated the formation in August 1983 of the UDF, an umbrella body of more than 500 organizations. The guidelines for this united front organization stated that it would be dedicated to the "creation of a non-racial, unitary state undiluted by racial or ethnic considerations." Apart from its program:

The UDF articulated a 'culture of liberation' in which local struggles for the redress of specific grievances were portrayed as the basic components in a nationwide struggle to end white minority rule... The UDF provided a linkage for ongoing local struggles, not only forward to a 'liberated and democratic' South Africa, but also backward to the tradition of the multi-racial Freedom Charter and the ANC (Price 1991, 180).

This linkage was evident in the patrons and officers of the UDF and in its campaign to popularize the Freedom Charter, adopted in 1985 as embodying the guiding principles of the UDF. By 1985, the youthful subculture that dominated mass protests had incorporated into its banners and songs an iconography provided by the heroes of Robben Island and the soldiers of MK.

To understand how this happened, it is necessary to pick up the second major theme of this section: how the ANC re-emerged as a major internal political force in the first half of the 1980s. The movement's official, and somewhat formulaic, explanation was to cite the Four Pillars of the anti-apartheid struggle: armed struggle, underground activities, mass political struggle, and international solidarity work. From 1978 on, the ANC leadership placed new emphasis on the need to combine armed activity with legal and semi-legal internal activity to spur "general mass upris-

ings" (Barrell 1990, 37-40). But the most potent appeal of the ANC to township youth was its resumption of active armed struggle. From 1977-80, more than 80 guerrilla incidents were attributed to MK, and from 1981-84, 192 such incidents occurred. The most spectacular and sophisticated military attacks took place between 1980 and 1982— the rocket attack on Voortrekkerhoogte, the Sasol and Koeberg explosions, and attacks on fuel depots, rail lines, and power stations. Their psychological impact was probably more important in the long run than the damage they caused. Indeed, by mid-decade, the ANC itself began to refer to such attacks as "armed propaganda."

From about 1978 to 1983, the ANC shifted from defining its armed struggle as guerrilla war to conceiving of "a protracted armed struggle which must involve the whole people and in which partial and general mass uprisings would play a vital role" (Barrell 1990, 41). But in the last quarter of 1984, analysis was overtaken by events. As in other instances during the half-century under survey, "the initial spark ... came from below" (McKinley 1997, 63). On the day that Botha's tricameral Parliament was installed, the townships in the Vaal Triangle (Sebokeng, Sharpeville, and Boipatong) began the conflagration. Residents attacked municipal buildings and killed local councilors. They set up roadblocks and barricades and attacked police with petrol bombs and homemade weapons. From September 1984 until late 1986, mass political activism took on a quasi-insurrectionary character. The relatively disciplined stay-aways peaked in November 1984, when more than 1 million workers and most school students paralyzed the industrial Transvaal for two days. However, more confrontational, less organized, more violent, and less coherent forms of struggle increasingly superseded such tactics.

Price characterizes two linked but distinct processes at play during these turbulent two years: "chaos" and "transformation." The first involves the obliteration of established authorities; the second the emergence of embryonic forms of new authority— local alternatives to state power (Price 1991, 191-92). The UDF and its affiliates strove to harness transformational energies such as street committees, alternative structures of local government, educational programs for boycotting students, and the like. The urgent rhythm of the *toyitoyi*¹⁰ orchestrated the street fighting, the people's courts, self-defense units, and vigilante structures. There was no mistaking the prominence of youthful

zealots in many of the areas where resistance was most intense. "It was children who built the roadblocks, children who led the crowds to the administrative buildings, children who delegated spokespersons, and children who in 1984 told the older folk that things would be different, that people would not run away as they had in 1960" (Lodge and Nasson 1991, 76). Analysts since have argued the extent to which this call was responsible for or merely in response to the mass mobilization of mid-decade. For Davis, it was the exiled movement that had embedded "a nationwide infrastructure of anti-apartheid resistance":

Responsibility for the radical intensification of protest must be assigned largely to the ANC... It had expanded, professionalized and safeguarded a network of below-ground cells capable of sparking political mobilization activities above ground (Davis 1987, 113).

In contrast, Murray was more skeptical of the capacity of the ANC to control, let alone precipitate, mass internal protest. He endorsed a journalist's assessment: "What is taking

shape across the country, without any help from Moscow and very little from Lusaka, is a loosely organized, radical mass movement of youngsters who operate outside any law and without identifiable leadership." The ANC's call for ungovernability did not initiate the uprising but sought to be associated with it (Murray 1987, 232). Neither Davis nor Murray capture the two-way dynamics between popular struggles and organized political leadership. While the tempo and geography of the rolling insurrection was defined from below by local struggles, the ANC's underground operatives acted strenuously to link such flash points, to provide an ideological and programmatic coherence, and to subsume particular grievances under the rubric of national liberation.

Heightened resistance was met by intensified repression. The state imposed a partial state of emergency in 1985 and then a second, more stringent state of emergency in June 1986 (renewed annually for the next four years). More than 25,000 people were arrested and detained without trial. Activists were beaten, tear-gassed, and peppered with buckshot. The South African Defense Force troops occupied many townships. National Security Management System securocrats drafted shadowy vigilante allies, armed them, and set them upon UDF structures. In Natal, virtual civil war was waged between forces allied with the UDF/ANC on one hand, and the Inkatha Freedom Party and the state, on the other. The UDF was beheaded of

In January 1985, the ANC in Lusaka issued a call to "make the apartheid system more and more unworkable and the country less and less governable."

leadership, its campaigns were fragmented, and many of its followers intimidated or demoralized.

Yet if the state had managed to reimpose a shaky peace by force majeure, it had suffered as much if not more than the liberation forces. Capital flight and sanctions intensified. The currency collapsed, and an international credit squeeze ensued. Elements of the White establishment effectively deserted the government. Delegations of big business, Afrikaner intellectuals, church leaders, and others made highly publicized trips to Lusaka and Dakar to meet with ANC leadership. The NP lost support to its left and right, and splits opened in the cabinet. In 1989, these led to the unceremonious dumping of President Botha and his replacement by F.W. de Klerk.

In short, there was by the late 1980s what an exiled academic identified as an “unstable equilibrium” (Wolpe 1988, 103). The South African state remained militarily powerful but was becoming politically weak. It could repress but not persuade. The liberation movement led by the ANC remained politically powerful but militarily ineffectual. The exiled leadership acknowledged in 1987 that its expectations of an insurrectionary seizure of power were untenable. The state was unable to reimpose legitimacy from above, and popular forces were unable to seize power from below— and both came to a reluctant recognition of this stalemate.

In March 1989, a handwritten letter by Nelson Mandela was delivered to President Botha and to the ANC headquarters in Lusaka. Its crucial section proposed that:

The key to the whole situation is a negotiated settlement, and a meeting between the government and the ANC will be the first major step towards lasting peace in the country.. Any other approach would contain the danger of an irresolvable stalemate.

By the end of the same year, De Klerk had ended the State of Emergency, dismantled the National Security Management System, permitted mass rallies and marches, and released Walter Sisulu and other Rivonia leaders. On February 2, 1990, at the opening of Parliament, De Klerk announced the unbanning of the ANC, PAC and SACP and committed the NP to negotiations. De Klerk’s speech and Mandela’s letter voiced the same logic. Together, they are the foundation documents for the negotiated settlement that culminated in the democratic elections of April 1994.

... the achievement of an “economic order which shall promote and advance” the well being of all is not something that can be legislated or wished into being.

The ANC entered those negotiations with clear statements of its basic positions. The Harare Declaration of August 1989 resonated directly the Freedom Charter in calling for “a new constitutional order based upon the following principles”:

- South Africa shall become a united, democratic and non-racial state.
- Its entire people shall enjoy common and equal citizenship and nationality, regardless of race, color, sex, or creed.
- All of its people shall have the right to participate in the government and administration of the country on the basis of a universal suffrage.
- All shall enjoy universally recognized human rights, freedoms, and civil liberties, protected under an entrenched bill of rights.
- South Africa shall have a new legal system that shall guarantee equality of all before the law.
- There shall be created an economic order that shall promote and advance the well being of all South Africans (Johns and Hunt Davis 1991, 305-6).

The extended negotiations of 1990-94 have been narrated extensively elsewhere.¹¹ They involved concessions and compromises by all parties. But the new legal and political order and the Constitution finally adopted in 1997 are indeed democratic and nonracial, dedicated to the protection of civil liberties, and unambiguously committed to the formal equality of all its citizens. However, the achievement of an “economic order which shall promote and advance” the well being of all is not something that can be legislated or wished into being. It remains the major challenge confronting the ANC government under the presidency of Thabo Mbeki.

Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed 50 years of struggle that culminated in unseating the world’s most notorious minority rule based on racial domination and replacing it with a democratic and nonracial order. But what patterns emerge from this history? One is obtained by a teleological reading— an ascription of the outcome to the struggle as a whole. Julie Frederikse, for example, celebrates a “popular democratic, and nonracial, tradition” that gave rise to a mass movement

dominating resistance politics and claims that “non-racialism runs like an unbreakable thread throughout the movement’s history” (Frederikse 1990, 6).

In fact, the history of national liberation is more complex and contradictory than is supposed by the motif of a single seamless thread. A skein of complementary and competing threads might be a more apt metaphor. First, the ANC’s own arrival at the nonracialism of the Harare Declaration involved a complicated journey with staging posts of intense Africanism and “multi-racial” practices. Only at its Kabwe conference in 1985 was the ANC’s National Executive Committee opened to members of all races. Nonracial rank-and-file membership dates from Morogoro in 1969. Second, at various moments, individuals and organizations that explicitly repudiated nonracialism as a mobilizing basis gave crucial impetus to anti-apartheid struggles. Third, nonracialism has meant different things to different people within the same organizational and ideological traditions at different times. They will surely continue to do so in current debates over affirmative action, Black empowerment, and what it means to be African.

Other patterns are discernible to those who view the same history through the lens of ideological certitude. If one is concerned that the Congress Alliance has essentially fought against apartheid over the years and failed to sustain a similar struggle against capitalism, then an entirely logical argument can be pressed. “The ANC-led struggle for the liberation of South Africa has ignored the very people in whose name that struggle was conducted ... the bottom line is that the ANC has failed its mass constituency.” This also can be demonstrated for each decade under review (McKinley 1997, xi, 135). The mirror image of this position is available when the lens is reversed. If one is concerned that the ANC has been highjacked by the SACP, then their relationship resolves itself into one in which the SACP regarded the ANC mainly “as a pool from which to recruit” its own key cadres. In the process, this transformed the ANC “from a broad-based nationalist movement— which it was from 1912 to 1960—into something more closely resembling a socialist party” (Ellis and Sechaba 1992, 6, 201).

Finally, one of the most widely accepted patterns of resistance history is that which takes literally the claims of political organizations that they “speak for the people” or “represent the people.” At best, this is convenient shorthand; at worst, it is mystification. Political movements affect their members and potential supporters in ways that defy straightforward formulae. They can inspire people, confuse them, and disappoint them. Similarly, popular struggles can confirm national programs, confound them, lag behind or outpace them, or largely escape them. This

chapter has accorded pride of place to organized forms of national liberation. They have directed and led the struggles over the decades, acting as instruments of political centralization. But it has also attempted to indicate moments when the pace was set and the agenda modified by city dwellers and rural people alike— when history was made by the anonymous many, and when the struggle for human rights and personal dignity was conducted by precisely those whose rights and dignity were most at risk.

END NOTES

- 1 In the 1950s, the African National Congress entered a form of united front politics (the Congress Alliance), and the 1955 adoption of the Freedom Charter was the defining moment and most durable programmatic statement of the anti-regime mobilization of that decade. In the 1980s, the term Charterist was used widely by United Democratic Front activists both to proclaim and to mask their allegiance to the banned and exiled ANC.
- 2 The Act of Union in 1910 entirely excluded Africans from three provinces from any part in common electoral politics. In the Cape Province, African men who met certain property and educational qualifications remained on the common voters’ roll.
- 3 See Colin Bundy, “Land and Liberation: Popular Rural Protest and the National Liberation Movements in South Africa, 1920-1960” in Shula Marks and Stanley Trapido, *The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism in Twentieth Century South Africa*. London: Longman, 1987, especially pp. 266-275, for an account of AAC and ANC activities in the Transkei during the 1940s.
- 4 The distinction is set out in Gerhart 1978, 11-13.
- 5 See, e.g., Kuper 1957; Lodge 1983; Karis and Gerhart 1977; Meli 1988; Fine and Davis 1990.
- 6 The existing literature was well surveyed in Chaskalson 1987. The most important study of rural resistance since then is Delius 1996.
- 7 See Baskin 1991; Friedman 1987; Maree 1987.
- 8 See Hiron 1979; Brookes & Brickhill 1980; Kane-Berman 1978; Moss 1982; Bonner and Segal 1998.
- 9 For a vivid insider account, see Mayekiso 1996.
- 10 The *toyitoyi* was a quasi-military dance-step, probably derived from MK camps. It first appeared in South Africa in the early 1980s and rapidly became a ubiquitous signature of protests and rallies.
- 11 See Sparks 1994; Ebrahim 1998; Marais 1998.

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