

# Spear of the Nation

(Umkhonto weSizwe)

SOUTH AFRICA'S LIBERATION ARMY,  
1960s–1990s

Janet Cherry

OHIO UNIVERSITY PRESS  
ATHENS

# Contents

Preface . . . . .	7
1. Introduction . . . . .	9
2. The turn to armed struggle, 1960–3 . . . . .	13
3. The Wankie and Sipolilo campaigns, 1967–8 . . . . .	35
4. Struggling to get home, 1969–84 . . . . .	47
5. Reaping the whirlwind, 1984–9 . . . . .	85
6. The end of armed struggle . . . . .	113
7. A sober assessment of MK . . . . .	133
Sources and further reading . . . . .	145
Index . . . . .	153

## Introduction

Hailed as heroes by many South Africans, demonised as evil terrorists by others, Umkhonto weSizwe, the Spear of the Nation, is now part of history. Though the organisation no longer exists, its former members are represented by the MK Military Veterans' Association, which still carries some political clout within the ruling African National Congress (ANC).

The story of MK, as Umkhonto is widely and colloquially known in South Africa, is one of paradox and contradiction, successes and failures. A people's army fighting a people's war of national liberation, they never got to march triumphant into Pretoria. A small group of dedicated revolutionaries trained by the Soviet Union and its allies, they were committed to the seizure of state power, but instead found their principals engaged in negotiated settlement with the enemy as the winds of global politics shifted in

the late 1980s. A guerrilla army of a few thousand soldiers in exile, disciplined and well trained, many of them were never deployed in battle, and most could not 'get home' to engage the enemy. Though MK soldiers set off limpet mines in public places in South Africa, killing a number of innocent civilians, they refrained from laying the anti-personnel mines that killed and maimed hundreds of thousands in other late-twentieth-century wars. They acted with remarkable restraint, and in doing so prevented a bloody race war from engulfing South Africa in the 1980s; yet they were accused of fostering a climate of insurrectionary violence in which nearly a thousand people were 'necklaced', and thousands more were shot, stabbed or hacked to death in violence involving civilians.

MK was arguably the last of the great liberation armies of the twentieth century – the freedom fighters who fought for independence from colonial, authoritarian or imperialist rule, in Vietnam and Bolivia, Guinea-Bissau and Nicaragua. In terms of international humanitarian law, the armed struggle that MK fought was a just war. At the same time, it was also one of the final conflicts of the Cold War era. MK's ideology, strategy and tactics acquired

shape and took purchase within the great contest of the second half of the twentieth century between capitalism and socialism, between the West and the Communist bloc. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War coincided with, and was a causal factor in, the end of MK's armed struggle and the negotiated transition to democracy in South Africa.

This book provides a brief history of MK, of which there are conflicting views and analyses. It does not present a detailed chronological account of every MK action but outlines the different strategic phases in its 30-odd-year history. It also illustrates these phases with stories drawn from the experiences of MK members. Some are taken from interviews conducted for the South African Democracy Education Trust project. I am indebted to SADET, who is the copyright-holder, for the opportunity to conduct some of these interviews and for access to others. Other stories are drawn from testimony to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, whose records are in the public domain. There is some bias in the selection of illustrative material, mainly geographic in nature: I have been living in the Eastern Cape for over 25 years, and many of the stories and

accounts come from this area. There is also a bias in the framing of the book, stemming from my own involvement as an ANC and an anti-war activist during the 1980s; but I hope that this experience has enhanced my understanding of MK. I want to write a popular account which is both a critical, anti-war history and a history that is profoundly empathetic to the experiences of ordinary soldiers fighting for a just cause.

## The turn to armed struggle, 1960–3

It is hard to find anyone in South Africa today who will argue with conviction that the armed struggle for liberation from apartheid was not justified. This was not always the case, especially among whites. Even so, most South Africans today are grateful that the country did not descend into a full-scale civil war during the apartheid era. Just as there are few who would deny the justice of the liberation struggle, so there are few who would argue that the struggle against apartheid should have ‘gone further’ and that there would have been a beneficial outcome to a bloody civil war, however revolutionary.

So what started the three-decades-long armed struggle – termed a ‘low-intensity war’ in the academic literature – between the liberation movement and

the apartheid regime? At first glance, it seems quite straightforward. After the introduction of apartheid in 1948, there was a decade of militant yet nonviolent protest and defiance by the ANC and its allies. But when this strategy failed to produce any change of heart on the part of the white government, the ANC began to reconsider its position. The tipping point was provided by the Sharpeville massacre of 1960, when protests against the pass laws were met with brute force by the police: 69 unarmed protesters were shot, many of them in the back as they were fleeing, on 21 March 1960 in an African township near Vereeniging. The government declared a State of Emergency, detained thousands without trial, and banned both the ANC and the PAC (Pan Africanist Congress), a newly formed breakaway from the ANC. Both bodies declared there was no longer any legal space for them to organise nonviolent resistance to apartheid, and set up their armed wings, MK and Poqo respectively.

MK launched its armed struggle on 16 December 1961 with a series of acts of 'symbolic sabotage'; at the same time it distributed a pamphlet announcing MK's formation. As the Manifesto memorably declared: 'The time comes in the life of any nation



when there remain only two choices: submit or fight. That time has now come to South Africa.' Despite the accepted wisdom that the turn to armed struggle was obvious, necessary and inevitable, the process was in fact complex and difficult and not uncontested even within the ANC.

There were those within the ANC and its allies, such as Raymond Mhlaba of Port Elizabeth, who had been arguing for some years that the time for armed struggle had come. This conventional wisdom about the inescapability of military resistance was widely held among colonised and oppressed people in the 1960s and 1970s throughout the world. Within South Africa, there were also those who did not think the mass nonviolent protests of the 1950s had been ineffective or exhausted; and there were trade unionists and church leaders who were committed to continuing to build and strengthen their organisations and institutions as sites of opposition to apartheid.

Because of the largely Christian adherence of most ANC members, including its president Albert Luthuli, the formation of MK was not in the beginning carried out under the auspices of the ANC but as a 'people's army at the disposal of the South

African masses', not directly linked to the ANC. Luthuli's stance in fact continues to evoke heated debate. In a radio discussion of a new biography of the Chief in late 2010, listeners who phoned in were incensed that the author, the American Scott Couper, could claim that Luthuli was unable to support the decision to turn to armed struggle. Couper agreed that the argument around the justice of the ANC's turn to armed struggle was convincing: if ever there was a just war, this was it. And yet he argued equally convincingly that while Luthuli understood why other leading figures in the ANC wanted to adopt a strategy of violence, and would not openly criticise it, he could not personally support the decision.

Some ANC activists were also swayed by the Gandhian tradition in South African politics, particularly those of Indian descent who were followers of the Mahatma and his philosophy of nonviolent resistance to oppression. In an ongoing history project on South African war veterans' experiences, one student is examining the way in which Indian MK members from Durban came to terms with the implications of abandoning their Gandhian beliefs and accepting the necessity of violence.

Although the decision in 1960 to engage in armed struggle is, in hindsight at least, not surprising, this did not make it any easier to prosecute successfully. And what followed in the next three decades was no easier for the guerrilla army.

MK was established by a small group of saboteurs of all races recruited from the ANC and its ally the South African Communist Party (SACP). Having been banned by the government since 1950, as a result of which it acquired some experience of underground organisation, the SACP was influential in MK from the beginning owing to its members' technical skills and their revolutionary theory. The initial number of MK recruits was around 250, organised into units of three to four members, groups of which would fall under a Regional Command structure in the main urban centres. Unity in action and nonracialism were emphasised in MK from the beginning. White, coloured and Indian activists from the SACP and other allies of the ANC like the Congress of Democrats, the Coloured People's Organisation and the Indian Congress joined African activists from the ANC and the Congress of Trade Unions.

The first acts of sabotage were planned for 16

December, a day of great symbolic importance in South Africa, celebrated by Afrikaner nationalists as the Day of the Vow or Dingaan's Day to commemorate a Boer victory over Zulu forces at the Battle of Blood River in 1838. MK leadership symbolically turned the defeat of Dingane by the Boers on its head, by launching their campaign against white rule on the same day.

Meanwhile, before the day arrived, a group of MK members was sent to China for training, among them Raymond Mhlaba. Returning in October 1962, he was asked to take over Nelson Mandela's position as Commander-in-Chief of MK, after Mandela had been arrested. It was at the end of 1962 that MK was first referred to as the military wing of the ANC and publicly acknowledged as such.

There are some wonderful accounts of the first MK campaign, the sabotage campaign of 1961–3. Most appear in the biographies or autobiographies of high-profile leaders of the ANC and SACP. In addition to the well-known writings of Nelson Mandela, and those of Govan Mbeki, who wrote extensively about the turn to armed struggle before his death in 2001, one can read (to highlight a few) *Slovo: The Unfinished Autobiography* (1995),

*Hani: A Life Too Short* (2009), Ronnie Kasrils's two entertaining accounts of early MK days in Durban, *Armed and Dangerous* (1993), largely about himself, and *The Unlikely Secret Agent* (2010), about his wife Eleanor's role in MK, and *Raymond Mhlaba's Personal Memoirs* as narrated to Thembeke Mufamadi (2001). Indres Naidoo, Ahmed Kathrada and Mac Maharaj have all documented their experiences as Indian MK members in the 1960s. These writings have been supplemented recently by oral history projects which allow the 'ordinary soldiers' of MK to speak for the first time. The first volume of the SADET history project, *The Road to Democracy in South Africa* (2004), drew extensively on interviews with the 1960s generation in describing the first phase of armed struggle, while *Men of Dynamite* (2009) documented the experiences of the Indian activists from MK units in Johannesburg in the early 1960s.

Some of these first members of MK have described how they were convinced of the need for armed struggle or how they were recruited. Ronnie Kasrils, for example, tells how he joined MK in Durban: 'During July 1961, MP Naicker took me for a walk along the beachfront. He confided that

the Movement was about to change its strategy. The government's repressive policies had convinced the leadership that non-violent struggle alone could not bring about change. We were forced to answer the regime's violence with revolutionary violence.' Kasrils then became a member of the Natal Regional Command of MK, working with the trade unionists Curnick Ndlovu, Billy Nair, Eric Mtshali and Bruno Mtolo.

These first MK units engaged in reconnaissance to identify appropriate targets for sabotage and then were confronted with the need to find or make the right kind of explosives. As MK had very limited weaponry or materiel for the sabotage campaign, members experimented with explosives obtained by various ingenious means, such as experimenting with shop-bought chemicals and stealing dynamite from a road construction camp and a quarry. Former soldiers who had fought in the Second World War, including Jack Hodgson in Durban and Harold Strachan in Port Elizabeth, assisted with making explosives. Strachan talks about buying chemicals from a pharmacy and making bombs from scratch.

The accounts of these first amateur attempts at sabotage, told with self-deprecating humour and

indicative of fierce commitment, are both amusing and deeply admirable. My personal favourite is Harold Strachan's story in *Make a Skyf, Man!* (2004) of the MK technical committee testing explosives on a remote stretch of coast near Port Elizabeth and blowing up an abandoned seaside toilet to impress Joe Slovo ('Yoshke'). 'We say to all When we raise a fist in the torchlight down there you must start timing seven and a half minutes, and they find this terribly thrilling in a revolutionary sort of way, and we go down and slosh in the glycerine and wave our revolutionary fists with our left fingers over the glass of the torch so as not to make a beam, and walk ewe gerus oh so confidently up the hill to the Olds. At seven minutes Yoshke starts some interminable ideological comment on what's going on, but its probable thirty minutes' duration are interrupted at seven and a half minutes exactly by a low-resonance stunning thud and a sphere of white fire the size of a smallish city hall, and in the middle of it a toilet seat spinning like crazy over the Indian Ocean.'

While the MK sabotage campaign was aimed strictly at installations, and was intended, as Mandela said, to 'bring the regime to its senses before it was too late', it was only the first stage in what was

understood by the leadership to be revolutionary warfare. The next phase, Operation Mayibuye, envisaged armed support for a national insurrection, with plans to bring 28,000 anti-personnel mines into the country. Such a strategy, if implemented, would have been a far cry from the selective and symbolic sabotage operations of the first phase. An extract from Operation Mayibuye reads: 'It can now truly be said that very little, if any, scope exists for the smashing of white supremacy other than by means of mass revolutionary action, the main content of which is armed resistance, leading to victory by military means ... We are confident that the masses will respond in overwhelming numbers to a lead which holds out a real possibility of successful armed struggle.'

It was to be another two decades before the 'masses' responded in overwhelming numbers to MK's call to 'make the country ungovernable, make apartheid unworkable'. Yet the threat of revolutionary violence was enough to obtain the conviction of the MK leaders, arrested at Lilliesleaf farm in Rivonia, on charges of high treason in 1963–4. It was the Rivonia Trial and the subsequent imprisonment of most of the MK High Command



on Robben Island that brought the early phase of MK activities to an end.

What were the gains and losses arising from this stage of MK's operations? First of all, the strategy of symbolic sabotage was highly effective in conveying a message to the black majority that the time had come to fight the apartheid regime. But, as could perhaps have been anticipated, it did not succeed in 'bringing the government to its senses before it was too late'. Instead, it resulted in a massive repressive backlash of harsh legislation, arrests, torture and political trials, and even executions. In terms of costs in human life and suffering, not one life was lost in the nearly 200 acts of sabotage committed between 1961 and 1964. This was because the targets and the timing of these acts were planned and carried out with considerable care by the amateur cadres. As Mandela stated during the Rivonia Trial, this was definitely not a campaign of terrorism. However, there was an element of luck involved as well: sabotage of a railway line, designed to derail a passenger train, failed; and attacks on beerhalls where there could have been civilian casualties, fortunately resulted in no loss of life.

Despite the policy of not taking lives, two people

were killed by MK members, although not as the result of the acts of sabotage. These actions involved the death of a 14-year-old girl in East London on 11 December 1962, and the killing of Siphon Mange in Port Elizabeth on 12 January 1964. They were met by a predictably harsh response from the South African Police and led in turn to the first executions of MK members.

The stories of the 14-year-old and of Siphon Mange provide some of the first examples of a continuing dilemma that MK would have to confront over the decades. It is a dilemma faced by all underground organisations and guerrilla armies, and is one that often leads to cruelty and tragedy. From the very first acts of sabotage in 1961 it became clear that MK would have problems with infiltration by police spies and betrayal by informers and by those pressed to become state witnesses in trials against former comrades. While MK sabotage actions were clearly targeted at strategic installations, and considerable care was taken not to cause loss of life, it was actions against collaborators that resulted in the first MK deaths.

In the first case, Washington Bongco, the Regional Commander of MK in East London, was involved in

an attack on the home of Inkie Domboti Hovi on 11 December 1962. The attack involved the use of petrol bombs and at least one gun. Although Hovi was shot at, he survived, but his niece was burnt to death and his daughter seriously injured. Hovi was considered a collaborator because of his support for the proposed nominal autonomy of the Transkei homeland and for its first head of government, Chief Kaiser Matanzima. While it is unclear whether the MK command at national level sanctioned the attack, the ANC at the time published pamphlets condemning collaboration and the 'traitors' and 'sell-outs' who joined the Transkeian authorities.

In this context, the Eastern Cape diverged from national MK strategy by attacking individuals, often in their homes. Such personal targets made up 21 of the Eastern Cape attacks, the second most frequent category in that region. In the main, the targets were local representatives of Kaiser Matanzima or persons regarded as supporting the Transkei 'homeland', and a few were attacks on the homes of black policemen. According to some reports, MK's national headquarters sent Govan Mbeki to look into the activities of the Eastern Cape region and concluded that Bongco had 'exceeded his authority'.

After his arrest by the police, Bongco was sentenced to death and hanged on 10 December 1964.

The second case involved Sipho Mange, who was shot in the head at his home in Port Elizabeth in January 1963. His assassination had been ordered by the Regional Command of MK, whose four members were Commander Diliza Khayingo, Commissar Vuyisile Mini, Zinakele Mkaba and Kholisile Mdwayi. Of this MK network, the first three, Mini, Khayingo and Mkaba, were executed on 6 November 1964 following their conviction on charges of sabotage and conspiracy to murder. The 'foot soldiers' who carried out the orders, Nolali Petse, Daniel Ndongeni and Samuel Jonas, were sentenced to death on 23 February 1965 and hanged on 9 July 1965. Other MK members were charged with sabotage or with belonging to a banned organisation.

It is common knowledge in the ANC that Mini and his comrades were hanged for the killing of an *impimpi* (spy or police informer) or a 'sell-out'. However, it seems that the distinction was not made at the time – nor was it made subsequently – between different categories of betrayal: informers (those paid by the police for information); agents

(spies infiltrated by the police into resistance organisations); collaborators (those who aligned themselves politically with institutions associated with the apartheid regime, such as homeland administrations or Black Local Authorities); and state witnesses (MK or ANC members who agreed to give state evidence – often after torture – in the trial of their comrades). The death of Mange was probably the first case in the operations of MK of the ‘ultimate penalty’ being imposed for betrayal of the movement. According to the court evidence, Mange was to appear as a state witness at the trial of three other MK members charged for sabotage. It thus appears that he was executed for his intention to betray the organisation by testifying against his comrades. At a later stage, MK adopted a clear policy of assassinating those who turned state witness in political trials, as with Leonard Nkosi in 1977 and Steve Mtshali in 1978.

At the time of the Mange killing, Walter Sisulu, one of the ANC’s leaders who was subsequently convicted at the Rivonia Trial, made a statement that local units of MK had to ‘take the initiative’ in dealing with informers. If this was indeed the policy, it would seem that MK orders at national level were

## Songs of this era

In the 1950s, when the ANC was committed to nonviolent direct action and formed the 'Doctors' Pact' with the leaders of the Natal and Transvaal Indian Congresses, Dr Dadoo and Dr Naicker, there was a song which celebrated this unity and called for volunteers to participate in the campaigns of the movement.

*Yebo, yebo Chief Luthuli, nawe Doctor Naicker, sikhokhele* (Yes, Chief Luthuli, and you Doctor Naicker, we follow you)

*Gcina, gcina amavolontiya, gcina, gcina ama-Afrika* (Keep safe the volunteers, keep safe the people of Africa)

*Amavolontiya*, as they were called, were required to be disciplined and dedicated cadres. There are some who regard the *amavolontiya* as the forerunners of MK cadres, because of their discipline. This is debatable: there is no reason why nonviolent activists cannot be equally disciplined and prepared to sacrifice, as in the Gandhian tradition of nonviolent resistance. With the first trained MK soldiers in exile named the Luthuli

Detachment, the songs sung in the 1950s by the volunteers were equally appropriate for the new ‘soldiers of Luthuli’.

*Amajoni, amajoni, amajoni, amajoni* (Soldiers)  
*uMandela ufuna amajoni, amajoni ase-Afrika*  
(Mandela wants soldiers, soldiers of Africa)

*Singamasoja, soja kaMandela/Luthuli* (We are  
the soldiers of Mandela/Luthuli)

*Singamasoja kaMandela*

*Lapho, lapho, lapho siyakhona* (Where we are  
going)

*Thina silindel’ inkululeko* (We are anticipating  
freedom)

*Thula mama, thula mama* (Quiet Mama)

*Ngoba thina, singamasoja kaLuthuli noMandela*  
(We are the soldiers of Luthuli and Mandela)

*Singabafana baloMkhonto weSizwe* (We are the  
men of MK)

*Singamasoja kaJoe Slovo nakaTambo* (We are  
the soldiers of Joe Slovo and of Tambo)

But this time they were real soldiers, carrying guns; and nobody will ever know how Chief Luthuli would have felt about these songs.

‘deliberately vague’ at this early stage, allowing for people within Regional Command structures to give orders for assassination.

This was an issue which plagued MK in later years, when its High Command was located far away in other countries, and struggled to maintain lines of communication with units or cells operating in townships around South Africa. In many cases, the unit commanders were given a high degree of initiative and discretion in making decisions about targets. Peter Harris’s account in his book *In a Different Time* (2008) of the decisions regarding targets made by the MK unit called the ‘Delmas Four’ provides a good example of this. Such problematic ‘on-the-ground’ decisions about what constituted a legitimate or ‘hard’ target, and what did not, were often left to junior MK cadres. It goes without saying that the issue of traitors and spies was even more tricky.

The story of Vuyisile Mini and his comrades is a good example of just how difficult and problematic such issues were in the early days of MK. Indeed, the story is more complicated than the public version of events would allow. Kholisile Mdwayi, the fourth member of the Regional Command, was arrested in



June 1963 and became the key state witness in the trial of Mini, Khayingo and Mkaba, where he gave devastating evidence. Though there is no evidence to suggest Mdwayi was an agent provocateur, what is apparent is that one of those who gave the order to kill a state witness then underwent a change of heart and became a state witness himself.

While it is not disputed that Siphon Mange was killed on instructions of MK, it seems that he was to some extent an innocent victim. There is no evidence that he was a police informer. He was not even an MK member, but an ANC volunteer who was picked up by the police in Kwazakhele in Port Elizabeth, and tortured – as were many others – into agreeing to give evidence against his comrades. Some have also asserted that the ‘foot soldiers’ who were ordered to carry out the killing were framed and were not actually involved in Mange’s murder. While the decision to kill Mange was made by the Regional Command, including Mdwayi, the consequence was that the whole Regional Command became implicated in an action that ultimately led to their destruction.

Whatever the truth of the matter, it is clear that this tragedy illustrates one of the terrible challenges

faced by MK from the very beginning of its operations: the problem of infiltration, of informers or people who had been 'turned' by the authorities. Many more were to die, whether innocent or guilty, because of such infiltration.

Vuyisile Mini, the best-known of the six MK members from Port Elizabeth who were executed in 1964, became the first MK martyr. Mini was a brave and colourful man, a trade union organiser and a marvellous singer, who composed freedom songs and sang them in a deep bass voice. His most famous song was 'Bhasopha, nants' indod' emnyama, Verwoerd' (Watch out, here is the black man, Verwoerd!). He is said to have gone to the gallows singing. His comrades Khayingo and Mkaba were also immortalised in poetry and song. The ANC Freedom Choir performed and recorded these songs and distributed them around the world and they were often played in MK camps.

After 1994, the remains of the six executed MK members from Port Elizabeth were disinterred and reburied at Emlotheni Square in New Brighton township, where there is now a memorial park and where their contribution to history is remembered. From the engraving on the 'wall of remembrance',

it could be imagined that the six MK members had died as soldiers in battle. The truth was that the members of the Regional Command were executed because they had ordered the death of an alleged collaborator.