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The (Re-)Constitution of the South African Communist Party as an Underground Organisation

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It is some 50 years since the formal reconstitution of the South African Communist Party (SACP) as an underground organisation. It is a subject about which little is known. Yet it will be argued that the communist underground, throughout its history, made a substantial contribution towards underground organisation in general, sometimes disproportionate to the number of people who were members of the Party. The manner in which that contribution was made may also have left its mark on the relationship between the SACP and the African National Congress (ANC) of South Africa. That may have been quite different from the fairly common view of communist domination (Mangcu 2003) and the relationship may in fact have limited the extent to which the SACP was able to act as an independent force.

Until recently, those wanting to read about the dissolution of the Communist Party in 1950 (then known as the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA)) and its subsequent reconstitution have had to be content with a few terse phrases in official publications. It is only the interview material in PhD theses and one or two other not easily accessible publications that have provided wider coverage of the issues (Everatt 1991a, 1991b, 1990 unpub.). In recent years, memoirs (Slovo 1995; Bernstein 1999) have reopened the question to a new generation interested in communist history, many of whom did not have access to the limited banned literature touching on such questions (Bunting 1998). All of this literature tends, however, to be urban-based and neglects processes that were in motion outside the main centres (personal communication from Phil Bonner, August 23, 2003 indicating the existence of interview material showing independent reconstitution of the Party by groups in the former Northern Transvaal as well as in the Eastern Cape). That neglect is not remedied by the present contribution but will be pursued in continuing research.

This paper is an attempt to present a broad account of the transition from dissolution of the CPSA to its reconstitution under the new name of South African Communist Party (SACP).[1] Unfortunately most leadership figures involved in both dissolution and reconstitution are no longer alive. There are, however, limited

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interviews and other records that they left, as well as people who survive and who often built the organisation at the grassroots level.

The reconstitution of the CPSA as the SACP has importance in its own right. But it also contributed to the later development of the ANC as an underground organisation. It appears that the ANC drew on the experience and some of the facilities of the SACP in developing its own capacity as an underground organisation (Sampson 1999:138; interviews with Makgothi, Matthews, Mtshali and Nkadimeng 2003). Rivonia itself, where the top ANC leadership were arrested and subsequently jailed for life, was purchased by the SACP and was initially used only by the Party.

By the time the ANC was banned the SACP already had over eight years' underground experience. It operated for 10 years before taking its first loss (Bernstein 1999:132). Many of the leading figures in the ANC underground were also members of the Communist underground. All but one of the Rivonia accused are now known to have been members of the SACP, most in the leadership of the organisation.

Dissolution of the CPSA

Within two years of the Nationalist Party coming to power it had prepared legislation to outlaw the CPSA. Prior to its enactment, the CPSA's central committee (CC) met in an emergency session. The results were not immediately announced. Bernstein describes the anxieties felt by ordinary members:

> We had expected a definitive plan for the Party after the Act, but all they brought back was the simple message: continue the campaign against the Act to the bitter end! But what we wanted to know was: what next? What will happen when the Party has been outlawed? They provided no answers. We were a disciplined body. We toed the line, even though we knew there had to be something to tell which was being withheld from us for security reasons. The CC must have decided on its future course. Steps *must* be under way and would be disclosed to us in good time. (1999:118)

But the CC had decided to dissolve the Party. Many members of the organisation greeted the dissolution with disbelief and dismay (Bernstein 1999:121ff.) Some believed it was merely a ruse and that the real intention was to regroup immediately as an underground organisation. Bernstein said, "People thought, this is a con-job. We're going to con the government into thinking we're doing something which we're not doing" (Everatt 1990:89–90 unpub.). But this was definitely not the intention (Slovo 1995:83; interview with Kathrada 2003).

Bernstein describes the Johannesburg report-back:

> Now unquestionably, the CC's plan for our own and the Party's future would be revealed. There had to be life after death. Dadoo took the chair; Kotane, the only speaker, was as always blunt and direct, without visible emotion or resort to oratory. His address is best described as a communiqué from headquarters. There were options. Option one: to do nothing and wait for the curtain to fall. In that event, the legal advice was that the Party would be deemed to have continued after it had been outlawed; and every member who could not prove to have resigned would become liable to criminal prosecution for remaining in it. The CC had not been prepared to take on the responsibility for that. Option two: to claim to have dissolved and to reconstitute the Party secretly for underground operations. The majority had decided against that, partly because almost all our members were known to the police, had no experience of underground ways of work, and would therefore have little chance of underground survival. It would be a defiant gesture but no more, with extremely serious consequences. The CC was not prepared to take responsibility for that either.

In the end, almost unanimously, the decision had been to dissolve:

> Kotane added a few low-key words of regret, and sat down. The meeting sat silent, stunned. We had been speculating about what we might hear, but no-one had anticipated it would be no more than hail and farewell. We had come expecting a message of courage, hope, perhaps defiance or confrontation; but not cold surrender without a whimper. Had we, even now, been told the truth? Was Kotane not covering the existence of an illegal successor to the Party which was already being developed? We all had questions, but not ones that could be answered in public. What we wanted to hear, what we hoped to hear could not be spoken. We knew that. There was nothing left to say. We sang the Internationale without enthusiasm for the last time, and went out into the night as though from a funeral. (Bernstein 1999:121–2)

Extent of Training and Experience in Underground Struggle

Although some tentative steps had been taken to prepare for possible banning, these were essentially insubstantial. There are some activists who envisaged the possibility of illegal action long before it became necessary. Ray Alexander Simons in preparing to immigrate to South Africa in 1929 was trained by Latvian communists for underground work in South Africa. They believed that while the CPSA was then a legal organisation, there had to be preparation for the possibility of illegality. In addition, about 14 South African communists were educated in Comintern schools or universities, where there was a distinct and compulsory course on the underground[2] (Filatova 1999:54–5; Davidson *et al* 2003). Amongst those trained were leading ANC/SACP figures such as Moses Kotane and JB Marks and the communist trade unionist, Betty du Toit (Davidson *et al* 2003:6). At various times there were travels to and from the Comintern, Comintern rep-

resentatives visiting South Africa and interacting with South African communists, as well as South African communists visiting the Comintern to consult, attend meetings or study. The logistics entailed in these activities were to a large extent secret, underground operations (Davidson *et al* 2003, Introduction; Ray Alexander Simons 2003).

The Comintern made repeated calls on the Party to prepare for the possibility of illegality. A 1934 resolution instructed:

> The congress places before the Party, as an absolutely urgent and important task, to make preparations for going underground and to have a more flexible combination of legal and illegal methods of work.
>
> While insisting upon and protecting the legal possibilities in every way, the Party organisations should immediately develop intensive mass work in preparation for illegality, explaining to the members of the Party the necessity of illegal work, point out the forms of the Party structure in underground work, the forms and methods of Party work under such conditions, the duties of the members of an illegal party, etc., strengthening the communist fractions in the mass organisations, collecting cadres for leading illegal work, creating an illegal apparatus, etc. The CC should instruct all the leading Party comrades on the methods of illegal Party work and point out that going over into an illegal condition should not be regarded as a technical, organisational task of reconstructing the apparatus and introducing conspiratorial methods, but as a change in the system of Party work.
>
> If the Party will be compelled to go underground, it must safeguard the cadres and the contacts between the Party organisations, must *preserve the mass character of the Party* and the main thing is broad contact with the masses. At the same time the Party should to a greater extent utilise all the legal possibilities of contacts with the masses along the line of utilising the mass national reformist and reformist organisations. (Davidson *et al* 2003:107ff, Vol 2, emphasis inserted)

The stress on underground simultaneously with 'mass character' of the Party is interesting. When the Party did go underground, it did not conceive of itself as a mass organisation, unlike the ANC, which tried initially to retain its mass character even while operating underground. The SACP's self-definition was always as a small 'vanguard' party and according to Shubin (1999:12) (who cites notes from discussions of his predecessors [in the Soviet Communist Party] with SACP leaders) (personal communication by e-mail September 29, 2003), its membership was never more than 500. Possibly because of the disarray within the CPSA, consequent on various fissions at the time (Simons and Simons 1983) *nothing was done to prepare the organisation as opposed to individuals for potential underground work.*

Many did not consider it necessary to take the precautions where an immediate clampdown was not being confronted. Bunting recalls Moses Kotane's explanation of why the CPSA had not prepared for underground before its banning.

> Kotane did not favour dissolution; but neither did he think it possible to have organised an illegal party before the Suppression [of Communism] Act became law.
>
> It is very easy to say we should, he said later. But no person can react to non-existent conditions. Many romantic people say we could have made preparations, but I dispute this. You don't walk looking over your shoulder when there is nothing to look back at. Theoretically you can train people to be pilots when there are no aeroplanes. But the realities have to be there. (Bunting 1998:179)

Appealing as these metaphors may be, the reality as we have seen, was that the Party and some trained individuals (including Kotane) did have some experience of underground, even where there were no 'aeroplanes' to fly.

But the steps taken beyond that were insignificant:

> Some amateurish attempts had been made in the Johannesburg district, following the 1946 miners' strike, to set up a second-string district party committee to function in case the elected DPC was incarcerated. But the second string was, after all, like the spare wheel on a car – an insurance against disaster seldom put to use. When they met they had nothing to discuss except the unknown future. Nor was it possible on the spur of the moment to build up a secret party membership, because cadres are only steeled in political action and the Party did not know how to operate a legal Party side by side with an illegal Party. Nobody had any experience of underground work, or how to combine legal and illegal activities. (Bunting 1998:178 and interview 2003. See also Meredith 2002:34; Everatt 1990:91 unpub.).

In this context, legal opinion carried great weight in the decision to dissolve. Vigorous opposition to dissolution on political grounds from Michael Harmel may not have been backed with a concrete political and organisational plan (Bernstein 1999:124). According to Bernstein and Everatt, the domination of the central committee by Capetonians, and the suggestion of steps for underground preparation coming from the Transvaal, fed into "existing regional disharmony" (Everatt 1990:91 unpub.).

Bernstein (1999:123) also suggests that the Party's history, until then, was concerned to a substantial extent with safeguarding its own legality and constitutional rights, and that:

> Safeguards against possible future illegality could have and should have been in place, but were not. Attention had been focused solely on open and legal activity. Forty years of legality had coated its revolutionary

> edge with fat, and principle had been overtaken by pragmatism. By the time the CC met to see to its defences they had already fallen into disuse. It had clutched at the 'legal opinion' like a drowning man at a straw.

Kathrada (interview 2003) recalls the atmosphere of fear engendered:

> Now my recollection is that people feared that the moment the Communist Party is banned there will be a general round-up of members. So much so that some people left the country, some waited in Botswana [then Bechuanaland] and some went on from there and some never came back.

Rowley Arenstein also says that "none of us knew what it meant – whether we were going to be picked up and put into concentration camps, we had visions of Nazi Germany" (interview with Everatt 1990:88 unpub.).

Jack and Ray (Alexander) Simons try to contextualise the decision, of which Jack as a member of the central committee was a part, within the revolutionary traditions of the CPSA, and with some sympathy:

> They had to decide on how best to continue the struggle. Deep-seated loyalties, communist tradition and fierce contempt for the oppressor urged them to defy. On the other hand, could the party make the transition to illegality without being annihilated? The police were in possession of its membership lists, seized during the raids of 1946; attempts to create the skeleton of an underground organisation had failed. After years of activity in the full glare of publicity members could not be expected to adopt illegal methods overnight. Having joined a legal party, was it proper to expect them to incur the severe penalties prescribed by the bill without long discussion and preparation which were not possible in the circumstances.

They conclude with what may be the most important reason to justify the decision: "Moreover, and this weighed heavily, the experience of the German communist Party under Nazi rule had shown the difficulty involved in passing from legal to illegal work without a pause" (Simons and Simons 1983:607).

Bunting (1998:178 and interview 2003) provides similar arguments:

> The membership had been recruited during a period when the Party was completely legal and able to function openly. Quite apart from the legal considerations mentioned in the statement of dissolution, the central committee felt that it could not go underground with the sort of membership it had, many of whom were totally unequipped both ideologically and practically for illegal struggle and all of whom were known to the police. A totally different kind of Party was required to face the sort of challenge which would be presented after the Suppression of Communism Act became law.

The decision to dissolve was taken with only two members of the central committee dissenting. In later years the decision would be severely criticised in official documents such as the 1962 Party Programme:

> Nevertheless, despite its great achievements and struggles, the Communist Party of South Africa proved incapable of surviving under illegal conditions. Legalistic illusions had penetrated into the ranks of the Party, including its leading personnel. The Party was unprepared and unable to work underground. These errors culminated in the dissolution of the Party. (SACP 1981:310)

Some Top Party Figures Do Not Join the Underground

Bunting (1998:179) says that Kotane, "together with the majority of the central committee members, automatically assumed that after the formal act of dissolution, the committee would begin to reconstitute the Party on new lines suited to the illegal conditions". But some of the leadership and membership were not prepared to join an illegal organisation.

After the dissolution, central committee members had different understandings of their future role. "Where some members had seen dissolution as a tactical manoeuvre, for others it was final" (Everatt 1990:91 unpub.). Some significant figures such as the chairperson of the CPSA at the time of its dissolution, Ike Horvitch, and leading theoretician Jack Simons refused to join the underground SACP, although his wife Ray Alexander did. Ray Alexander describes how Brian Bunting came to ask them to join the underground Party and she immediately accepted, but Jack walked out of the room and later berated her for not first discussing it amongst themselves. Jack Simons only rejoined the Party over 20 years later (Ray Alexander Simons, forthcoming).

According to Bunting, Simons' decision was not ideological but based on family considerations. He assumed that Ray Alexander would face arrest and one parent was needed in the house. He was a "loyal Party member in his mind" (interview 2003). But his non-involvement shocked many, for Simons was regarded as a hero (interview with Kathrada 2003).

According to Bernstein (1999:128), Simons believed there was no longer a need for an independent Communist Party, given the rise of the nationalist movement (see also Everatt 1990 unpub.). Unfortunately Simons appears to have left no testimony on his reasons.

Everatt argues that the differences between those who joined and those who did not, related to different perspectives on the relationship between class and national struggle, and in particular the emergence and advocacy of the theory of 'Colonialism of a Special Type' especially by Michael Harmel in the Transvaal (Everatt 1991, 1990:95ff unpub.). This divergence had a regional dimension,

with those in the Cape allegedly being less sympathetic to national struggle. Everatt (1990:96 unpub.) quotes Fred Carneson, Cape CPSA secretary:

> Until the African National Congress, or the congress movement, emerged as a real political force in South Africa, I think there was a tendency among the activists inside and outside the Party, to see things in class terms more than in national liberatory terms. Particularly so, I think, amongst some of the white communists, though it was not confined to the white communists by any manner of means.

But Bunting denies this claim of ideological differences (interview 2003). The reference to the ANC as a 'real political force' is important to bear in mind. For most of the period of the SACP's existence the ANC had been very weak organisationally and its activities were mainly related to its annual conference. It was only under the secretary-generalship of Rev James Calata and presidency of Dr AB Xuma that attempts were made to turn the ANC into an organised force. This created a foundation for the later emergence of the Youth League (YL) and implementation of its plans in the ANC's programme of action, thus turning the organisation into a mass force in the 1950s. Despite the initial anti-communist flavour of YL pronouncements, the turn to mass politics was one of the factors creating a foundation for an ANC alliance with the SACP.

Insofar as there may be some truth in the argument that advancing of 'Colonialism of a Special Type' was crucial to the SACP's reconstitution, it would certainly have been a factor that facilitated the development of an alliance between the SACP and the national liberation movement, led by the ANC (Everatt 1991).[3]

Ismail Meer (2002:124) recounts with some bitterness that other members of the CPSA were not asked to join:

> We [ordinary members] were merely informed of the dissolution. The Party had for years given me a non-racial home. I had enjoyed the camaraderie of whites, Africans and Coloureds. We could continue the personal relationships formed, but those too were not maintained because there was an underground, secret formation that selected 'reliable' or credible comrades, and by that act dissipated the former unity. Whoever did the selection, they created suspicion and tension between the chosen and the discarded. I fell in the discarded category.

Billy Nair (interview 2003) confirms that Meer was not asked to join, on the basis of the different type of cadreship required to conduct underground work. It was one thing being a member while a student at the University of the Witwatersrand, another in an illegal organisation.

Factors Favouring Successful Establishment of the SACP Underground

While establishing an underground organisation is always difficult, there were factors that were relatively favourable in this case. That some time had elapsed between dissolution of the CPSA and the moment of establishment of the SACP saw communists actively involved in other political activities on which the security police focused. Monitoring those non-Party activities absorbed the police and may have left them focusing on communist influence in the various congresses, but without thought for a hypothetical reconstitution of the Party itself. The existence of these other legal organisations within which communists participated also provided opportunities for Party members to identify potential recruits, conduct political education and access facilities (interviews with Cleopas Ndlovu, Eric Mtshali and Billy Nair 2003). It also enabled Party members to interact with a wide range of people that it would not have been able to reach had it remained in secluded units.

The level of sophistication and cruelty of the security police was not yet what it later became. Police testimony was repeatedly rejected in court cases, and the use of torture was then a fairly rare phenomenon. Legislation, which would create a greater barrier to public exposure, was not yet in place (Slovo 1995:86; interview with Kathrada 2003).

The dissolution of the CPSA and the fact that it was apparently without an organisational presence created, as far as the authorities were concerned, an element of quiescence, a sense that all was well on that front.

Great care had been taken to observe security precautions in the process of reconstitution under a new name. No precautions can ensure indefinite underground existence. But given the favourable conditions they worked under and that they did observe high security, the Party was able to operate effectively. Slovo (1995:85–6) writes that

> the overwhelming majority of those who made up the underground membership had previously been publicly connected with the legal Party. Almost all of us, members of the central committee and district committees, were subject to bans imposed upon us under the Suppression of Communism Act which deprived us not only of the right to be active participants in a list of specified legal organisations, but also restricted our movement from one city to another and prohibited us from attending any 'gathering'. But in spite of the fact that we were accessible to 24-hours-a-day police surveillance, we managed to organise regular meetings (sometimes more than one a day) and occasionally to travel illegally beyond the confines of the restricted regions.

That the Party was relatively invisible in the sense of having no public profile, even from underground, until 1960, will also have made detection more difficult.

How Was the SACP Underground Constituted?

In 1953, in conditions of utmost secrecy, a small working group of senior figures began to reconstitute the Party, building up a new network of units or cells. "Their numbers were small – fewer than 100 members were at the core of Communist Party activity, most of them living in the Transvaal. They operated mainly in small units of four or five people, meeting clandestinely, often in 'unmarked' cars owned by friends and colleagues or in 'safe' houses" (Meredith 2002:42; Slovo 1995:83–4; see also Kathrada interview 2003).

Bunting (1998:197–8) writes:

> Kotane and most of his comrades took immediate action to get the wheels turning again. Under surveillance all the time, Kotane had to act with extreme care, but step by step, he was able to establish contact with like-minded individuals and groups in Johannesburg and discuss plans for the launching of the new Communist Party. At the beginning, having no headquarters to operate from, he and his initial contacts used to meet at dawn, in the open veld, away from the urban centres, so that, hidden in the bushes, they would themselves be screened from observation while at the same time able instantly to detect the presence of any unwanted stranger. At each meeting they would make detailed arrangements for the next meeting, fixing the exact time and spot at which each comrade was to be picked up, and the time and spot at which he or she was to be set down. If cars were used for transport, they had to be changed from time to time. It was important that no regular pattern should be established; times, places and personnel were constantly varied. All written communication was banned.
>
> It was only after many abortive approaches and tentative discussions that the first group was established in Johannesburg. Meanwhile, in other centres, similar groups were being formed. In Cape Town they met sometimes in houses, sometimes on the slopes of Table Mountain or in the thickets of the Cape Flats. In Durban, Port Elizabeth and other areas other groups started to function. Taking the initiative, Kotane's group sent couriers to the other centres to find out what was being done, made arrangements for future contact and communication. It was all slow work, but Kotane insisted from the start that security was to be of the tightest, and personally checked on every detail.

The first task was obviously to ensure that its reconstitution was sustainable, that structures created would endure, whatever pressures might arise. Recruitment was on a very careful and conservative basis. Someone might recommend a person and if found to be suitable the actual recruitment and placing of that individual in a unit would be carried out by someone else (interviews with Nair and Mtshali 2003). The process of vetting was "very strict":

> The unit would say well this is 'a potential'. It would not recruit him, but what the unit could do is if it is running some broader classes it could invite that person there in a broader class, not letting him or her know it is a

> Communist Party thing. The communists would be watching who the 'potentials' were and the unit would then say that we think we should recommend A, B, and C. The district committee would then go through very carefully and decide and the recruitment would take place but depending on where the person is going to be placed eventually then someone from that unit would then approach that person. (Interview with Kathrada 2003).

Eric Mtshali relates: "I was a trade unionist from the very beginning, so my task was to build the trade unions and identify good comrades who could be recruited into the Party. But my duty was not to recruit them, just identify them and tell somebody who would do the rest" (interview 2003; see also interview with Cleopas Ndlovu 2003).

Jean Middleton (1998:12) writes of a slightly later period: "Recruits to illegal organisations were discussed within the organisation and carefully watched, before they were invited to join. Finally, someone was assigned to speak to the recruit, someone the recruit already knew, and who belonged to the unit he or she had been assigned to".

People would observe simple, elementary rules of underground, which despite their involving simple techniques found in detective novels, were what was required for effectivity. These included participants in meetings never travelling together, documentation seldom if ever being carried to meetings and if needed for discussion, being destroyed there. As far as possible, venues were in innocuous places and constantly changed, and members often did not know or never knew the venue beforehand but had arrangements for meeting that made this unnecessary, for example, being collected at some point (interviews with Nair, Kathrada and Mtshali 2003).

The Party was organised at various levels – central committee, district committees and units. The latter seldom comprised more than four people. In some cases it was considered more secure to segregate people and not mix white and black, since this could attract attention (Middleton 1998 for the Transvaal, though it was not universal there. See interview with Kathrada 2003). In the Cape and Natal, however, mixed units appear to have been fairly common (interviews with Bunting and Nair 2003).

Members usually knew only those in the unit within which they worked, again by code names unless they already knew the person's real name, which was fairly common in so small a party, especially at leadership levels (Middleton 1998; interview with Nair 2003). At a district committee level individuals would also interact with units which they coordinated, though the district committee as a whole, and while knowing the numbers involved, would not know the actual names of members in various units (interview with Nair 2003).

Not everyone was organised into a unit. A category of members known as 'D' or recalled by others as 'C' category was safeguarded against exposure to the mem-

bership. Kathrada describes them as 'underground, underground Communists'. This was sometimes because they had no record of previous involvement in the Party and were very unlikely to arouse suspicion, amongst them being Vernon Berrange QC (interview 2003).

There were also people who were not members but contributed funds. According to Billy Nair (interview 2003), this was the case with Dr Monty Naicker, non-communist and leader of the Natal Indian Congress, who interacted with Nair and one or two others whom he knew to be communists, through whom he made his financial contribution. Others made facilities available to the Party for various types of meetings. There are numerous cases of meetings in doctors' surgeries or conferences at the back of shops of Indian traders, who were not present at the time (interview with Kathrada 2003).

While Chief Albert Luthuli is known as a non-communist Christian, during the treason trial he became very close to Moses Kotane, so much so that he never subsequently took any important decision without consulting Kotane, often bypassing other officials in order to seek his counsel. Bunting (1998:236–7) quotes an interview with the late ANC president Oliver Tambo:

> It is significant that Chief Luthuli, who was not a member of the Party, and not near to being a member, on difficult questions on which he wanted advice by-passed his officials and secretaries and sent for Moses because he had discerned his loyalty to him. He knew Moses was 100 per cent a member of the communist party, in fact its general secretary; but he also knew him to be 100 per cent ANC, and this gave Luthuli great confidence in him. Even when Luthuli was confined to the Groutville area in Natal, he would send for Moses to explain or discuss some issue he was uncertain about.

Walter Sisulu confirms this:

> The friendship between Moses Kotane with Luthuli was even better than friendships I had with Luthuli as secretary general. Chief Luthuli said, "Does Moses Kotane know about this?" He was never happy till he knows that he knows. Chief Luthuli gained confidence in the communist leadership in that [trial] because he came into contact with Bram, Rusty, Joe and thought, well these people mean well. (Interview quoted in Bonner *et al* 2003 unpub.)

He also relied on people whom he knew to be communists for logistical support when he broke his banning orders. From the period of the treason trial he also became an avid reader of Marxist and SACP literature. Special arrangements were made to deliver copies of the *African Communist*, (at first published as an independent journal, but later to become the official organ of the SACP) to Luthuli in Groutville. This was in no way an indication that the chief was becoming a Marx-

ist, but he had an enquiring mind and wanted to understand communism, which had been such a factor in the treason trial (interview with Nair 2003).

Tasks in the Congress Movement and the Party's 'Leading Role'

Interviews with Party members suggest that the main tasks of the organisation were in relation to other congresses, as members, in building these into stronger organisations. Mtshali (interview 2003) remembers:

> Well I don't know what other units were doing but ours I know was to work in the unions. We were given different tasks, build the unions, different unions, others to work in the ANC, build ANC branches, others in the Youth League.
>
> Q: But to build them in their own right, not to…?
>
> A: Not to make them Party satellites, but to strengthen them.

Kathrada recalls that the Party dealt "more with our work in the congress movement. As to Party work, it was political education amongst ourselves and also to look for potential recruits" (interview 2003). This would seem to have remained the prime emphasis of the Party throughout its illegality, working to strengthen the ANC.

At the same time members took pride in the Party having initiated the 'main decisions' in the organisations or having been crucial to the resolution of problems in all the congresses (interviews with Nair and Joe Matthews 2003). Matthews says:

> Remember up to 1960 the Party did not announce its existence. Although any intelligent person could have seen the coordination, not only in the Party but in the broad democratic movement. People spoke with one voice too often and it was obvious that there was a coordinating force. I must say that contrary to popular belief, every important decision was taken by the Party, not by the ANC. [Shubin, personal communication, September 29, 2003, believes this is exaggeration].
>
> Q: But won democratically in the ANC?
>
> A: Yes. But decisions were taken in the Party central committee. I became a member of the central committee and we took decisions there that affected everybody.

But Kathrada (interview 2003) notes that concern began to be felt about communists operating as a unified bloc within the congresses. Dr Yusuf Dadoo indicated at a meeting that the Party had changed its strategy:

> Previously you would take decisions in the Party and go and implement them. That they said is no longer allowed. You can discuss but you don't take decisions and say this is a Party decision and we'll go to the congress and try and push through a decision. In other words for the communists in

> the past, it was a rigid thing. You take a line, which you take to the congresses and implement.
>
> Q: But that previous approach would still have been democratic in the sense that even if you had decided that, you would have had to win it democratically?
>
> A: You had to win it democratically, but it would have become very obvious that the communists were coming with this line. After all there were many who were not communists and some were anti-communist so that even for the smooth running of the organisation you had to take care.

Given the Marxist content of congress alliance courses (Suttner 2003), clearly political education was a major arena of communist input. The Party also distributed literature reflecting its position, but not then under its own name, for example the publication, *Inkululeko* (meaning freedom, and later to be the name of an underground Party journal in the 1970s) (interview with Kathrada 2003).

The interaction with the congress organisations, as indicated, was also to identify potential SACP recruits. The South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) used to hold large meetings and debates in Durban, and Nair describes how they would identify from these discussions who could potentially be drawn into the Party (interview 2003).

Despite the extent of involvement in congress organisations, there was sometimes reluctance to join the ANC (Delius 1986:100, for the Northern Transvaal). After joining the SACP, Eric Mtshali was not a member of the ANC:

> I would attend ANC mass rallies. But I didn't find anything interesting. All I would hear, fighting for independence, which was to me far away. It did not answer my immediate problems, which were bread and butter issues, higher wages and better working conditions. So to me those ANC mass rallies did not make much sense. But later, again this comrade [in the SACP] said I must join the ANC. I said why must I join the ANC? I am OK. Then what I would call a second phase of my political education came in, so they were now introducing me to the real politics, the national question and so on. (Interview 2003)

Underground Conferences

The SACP held a number of conferences during this period. Slovo (1995:84), making a veiled and – given its sensitivity – rather convoluted allusion to the recruitment of top ANC figures writes:

> Between 1952 and 1962 the Party had six underground conferences, and the last one, when the Party Programme was adopted after a thorough discussion in the underground units, recorded impressive achievements throughout the country after a decade of underground work. This conference was attended by delegates from every major urban centre and by historic figures whose relatively recent conversion to the cause of socialism

> and the Party was a positive sign that our roots were indeed spreading deeper in the indigenous soil.

Kathrada (interview 2003) recalls:

> The first conference took place at an Indian shop in the East Rand. There was a shop and a storeroom at the back. Now that Indian guy would have left for the weekend. Then there was a house too, I think, because we stayed there. All of us were taken there by car. All staying there for the weekend. On mattresses on the ground. It was not a very posh house. Some must have slept in the storeroom. The shop was closed. That was the first conference.

Internal Party Democracy

The 1962 programme made no bones about the curtailment of internal democracy entailed in working underground:

> The structure of the Party is based on the principles of democratic centralism. While demanding strict discipline, the subordination of a minority to the majority and of lower Party organs to higher organs, and the prohibition of all factions within the Party, it upholds the principle of democratic election of all leading organs of the Party, collective leadership and full debate of policy. The curtailment of some aspects of democratic procedure is inevitable under illegal conditions; this temporary situation must be compensated for by all members, regarding it as their duty to participate in the formulation of policy and by the leadership, encouraging and making it possible for them. (SACP 1981:311)

According to Slovo (1995:108), the necessities of underground did not lead to the wiping out of internal democracy within the SACP:

> [W]e continued to practise a good measure of internal Party democracy. The rank and file had the opportunity of debating major policy statements before they were finally adopted by the central committee. An election system was devised which was designed to achieve a balance between the often contradictory requirements of security and democracy.

This is confirmed by Joe Matthews who, while arguing that ANC preparations for underground under the M-Plan were essentially undemocratic, maintains that the Party underground operated on a democratic basis, always giving members the chance to discuss questions before decisions were taken (interview 2003). If this is true, it may also have something to do with the conditions under which each organisation prepared for underground, and the relative stability and slower pace of the process in the Party underground.

The extent to which membership participation was a factor must have varied in different periods of illegality and the conditions of repression being experienced.

Certainly when the 1989 Party conference was held in Cuba, there was a great deal of input from within the country towards finalisation of the preparatory documents. This was also aided by the presence of then senior Party officials involved in 'Operation Vula', the attempt to return outside figures to join the internal underground.

SACP Involvement in Development of the ANC Underground

The reconstitution of the CPSA has importance for the later development of the ANC as an underground organisation (Suttner 2003). It appears that the ANC drew on the experience and some of the facilities of the Party in developing its own organisational capacity as an underground organisation (Sampson 1999:138; interviews with Nkadimeng, Mtshali, Matthews and Makgothi 2003).

Many of the leading figures in the ANC underground were also members of the communist underground. Although there was a great deal of overlap in membership, and facilities were sometimes shared, there does not appear to have been any general merger (interview with Cleopas Ndlovu 2003). But Henry Makgothi (interview 2003) seems to think that the two structures were more or less indistinguishable in the early period after banning. It should be noted, however, that Kotane, who remained free, headed both the communist underground and the emergency committee of the ANC (Shubin 1999:12 and personal communication September 29, 2003).

Unlike the SACP with its period of experience up till 1960, the ANC had not made serious preparations for underground. Illegality found it ill-equipped (Shubin 1999:11). The basis on which the ANC organised itself underground was the M-Plan, developed as preparation for underground in the 1950s, but not thoroughly implemented then (Suttner 2003). But successful transition of a mass organisation to an underground one was very complicated. Communists were very active in building the ANC as members of ANC and as an allied underground force (interview with Eric Mtshali 2003).

The SACP involvement was first to ensure survival of the organisation under completely new conditions of illegality. Eric Mtshali relates this in Durban:

> The Party, but doing ANC work, built the ANC branches using our experiences to build the ANC underground, also using SACTU because SACTU was not banned and the leadership of SACTU were mainly communists in almost all provinces. So we effectively used our experience, but we were not masquerading as members, because we were trade union organisers (and ANC members).
>
> Q: Using the cover?
>
> A: SACTU was not banned, ANC was banned, so we could call SACTU meetings and invite the ANC leadership to come and speak as guest speakers and address the meeting.
>
> Q: You established quite a few ANC underground units?

> A: We applied the M-Plan, from street to street from area to area.

But Mtshali (interview 2003) claims:

> It was difficult to change ANC comrades to maybe adapt to underground conditions. Many of them left the ANC at that time because they felt the whole thing was run by communists (see also interview with Cleopas Ndlovu 2003). This was not correct because we were organising underground ANC as members of the ANC, who had an added advantage of being communists, with this experience of underground work. As a result ANC did not die because it was banned. And communists who were members of the trade unions were able to use the trade unions to further the work of the ANC and communist party without anybody suspecting.

The Turn to Armed Struggle

Almost simultaneously with the process of establishing an ANC underground, MK, the armed wing of the ANC, was formed.[4] The decision to take up arms arose first in the SACP, though there had been talk of 'fighting back' in various parts of the country, throughout the 1950s (Bonner *et al* 2003 unpub.). Risings in Pondoland, Sekhukhuneland, Natal/Zululand and other areas indicated that, as Nelson Mandela was to say at the Rivonia trial, unless the ANC took steps to control and regulate the drive towards violence it would become uncontrolled (Mandela 1990:162–3). Some future MK members 'jumped the gun' and had started to burn cane fields, among other unauthorised actions in the late 1950s (Bonner *et al* 2003 unpub.).

Although the SACP had initiated the idea it knew that it could not be the driving force or organisation, especially given the need for support in Africa (interviews with Mtshali, Nair and Kathrada 2003). An indication of the difficulties likely to be faced by communists, especially non-African ones, is that of Joe Slovo being declared a prohibited immigrant by the Tanzanian government, forcing him to relocate to London (Karis and Gerhart 1997:27).

The SACP Underground After the Reverses of the Mid-1960s

After the Rivonia trial, various ANC and SACP units remained at large for a few more years, but after the sentencing of Bram Fischer the communist underground was effectively smashed. Yet the 'political dormancy' or silence that is referred to in much of the literature does not reflect the almost immediate, albeit small-scale, attempts to reconstruct (Suttner 2003 unpub.).

In the revival of the ANC underground, many ex-Robben Islanders, very often communists, were heavily involved. These included Joe Gqabi and John Nkadimeng, who played a crucial role in patiently rebuilding the ANC under-

ground. It is not clear to what extent the Party existed as an independent underground force within the country.

In the late 1960s and the 1970s, however, a number of communist-initiated propaganda units were established within the country, often through the recruitment of people who had been studying overseas. Amongst the latter was Ahmed Timol, who paid with his life. These units were responsible for distributing official publications of the SACP and also ANC, as well as sometimes producing other publications such as *Vukani!/Awake*, written inside the country. Their lifespan tended to depend on the extent of their activity: the more they produced, the more likely that police could detect the pattern of their work and close in on the unit. But in general, none of these groups appear to have avoided capture for longer than four years, though there may be some that were never arrested.

These were strictly propaganda units, with instructions not to do anything attracting attention to themselves, as would have happened in interracial units or open, progressive activity. The units tended to be racially exclusive and that was in line with the character of the times, that in so precarious an operation nothing could be done that would attract attention (Jeremy Cronin interview in Frederikse 1990:127; Suttner 2001). They did not play an organisational role beyond the issuing of propaganda that may have guided organisational activity or interpreted events. Alexander Sibeko (Ronnie Kasrils) indicates that the importance of the propaganda units, formal and informal, lay in the context of the post-Rivonia reversals, where the liberation movement battled against invisibility:

> At a time when our movement has been battling to reconstruct an underground apparatus, so seriously damaged by the mass arrests and 'dispersal' of the sixties, our propaganda has often been the only visible expression that we survived the terror and continued to grow. (1983:204; see also Suttner 2003 unpub.)

In the 1980s units were established with a more far-ranging character, producing both ANC and SACP literature, acting as both ANC and SACP units and conducting a range of underground activities. This was the case in a number of provinces. Paul Mashatile in Alexandra, together with other members of the Alexandra Youth Congress executive, was drawn into underground work. Significantly, Mashatile's unit stored their matériel in one of the premises of a 'puppet' councillor, who was so despised by the community that his house was burnt down (interview with Paul Mashatile 2003).

A similar far-ranging contribution derived in the 1980s from a grouping drawn initially from the Catholic youth, who had been subjected to left-wing as well as ANC influences within the Church. The way in which members of units were inducted was a mixture of Marxist-Leninism and ANC political education (interview with Robbie Potenza 2003). Although it is not clear whether many or most were formal members of the Party, their main links within the liberation movement were through Party members in Zimbabwe.

The unit initiated by Potenza later grew to comprise a range of units embracing some 30 people. One person, a former pacifist, Henry Winkler, was sent to the Soviet Union for military training, safe houses were created, arms were smuggled and a lot of propaganda issued (interview with Potenza 2003).

What emerges from this Catholic-initiated unit is the importance of sections of the Church in spreading the 'left' message during the period prior to banning and the large areas of convergence between these people and the Party. This is something that needs further attention.

During this period there was considerable activity initiated outside the country, most notably being Chris Hani's pioneering and difficult entry into South Africa just after being elected assistant secretary-general of the SACP in 1974. After his return from South Africa he established a base in Lesotho and repeatedly crossed into the country and helped build units. Structures were established in the Free State, Transkei, Western Cape, Eastern Cape and Border (Shubin 1999:125). Hani's activities are one of many cases where the line between ANC and SACP underground organisation were blurred.

The Contribution and Character of SACP Underground

It is not known how many people engaged at various times in underground struggle for the SACP. It was clearly only a few hundred in the 1950s and early 60s, but may have increased significantly in the preparation of MK people for underground work outside and inside in the 1980s.

The joint ANC/SACP 'Operation Vula', coordinated by then ANC president Oliver Tambo and then SACP general secretary Joe Slovo envisaged a qualitative shift in the character of underground work, returning significant leadership figures into the country so that interventions would not be from a distance but on the spot. It was intended to merge internal and external underground to a greater extent than previously (interview with Pravin Gordhan 2003). Most of those who entered the country or participated in Vula activities appear to have then been communists. With the unbanning of organisations and negotiations, this initiative was, however, overtaken by events.

ANC/SACP Relations and the Question of Party Independence in the Period of Illegality

The period of establishment of the SACP underground was also the time when the ANC/SACP alliance was consolidated and a common analysis of national democratic struggle and the thesis of 'Colonialism of a Special Type' was emerging. But what did the character of this alliance mean for the relative status of the two components and their independent character?

The conditions under which the Party emerged underground had some specific characteristics that may have left their mark on relations with the ANC through-

out the period of illegality. Despite its reconstitution in 1953, it took seven years before the Party announced its independent existence, and some figures including Moses Kotane and Yusuf Dadoo resisted this, fearing it would compromise relations between the ANC and the Party (Shubin 1999:14; interview with Joe Matthews 2003). Bonner *et al* (2003 unpub. quoting interviews with Rusty Bernstein, Walter Sisulu and Ben Turok) confirm the hesitancy of Kotane and resistance to destabilise the relationship of communists within the ANC. The decision to emerge appears to have been taken by the group of CC members who were out of prison, and was met with mixed feelings (Shubin 1999:14, 41).

While the relationship between national and class struggle was subsequently formulated as coterminous, it seems that, for many, the 'two stage theory' then prevalent was initially interpreted as meaning to build the national struggle and in particular its main vehicle, the ANC. To some extent there appears to have been reluctance over the Party speaking in its own name. It also appears that this was the pattern in exile. Oliver Tambo initially expressed reservations about Party people meeting as separate units. He phrased his notions of the relationship between the two organisations in inclusive terms, not wanting to think of Party people as different within the ANC. But obviously this would also tend to obliterate the independent character of the Party.

This perspective of Tambo is well captured in quotations by Bunting in regard to the role of Kotane. This is crucial because Kotane was the key individual in forging the ANC/SACP relationship:

> I think Moses Kotane contributed more than anyone to this kind of collaboration between the ANC and the Party, to the unification of the liberation movement in South Africa. He could have used his position to underline attitudes, which were specific to the Communist Party, to speak from a particular position and remind everybody about the ultimate objectives of the Communist Party. But he never did that. *He debated from what seemed to be an exclusive ANC standpoint*, and from the point of view of building unity this was extremely important. I am absolutely certain that many people who might have been hostile to the Party were won over because they found a man like Kotane to be an ANC man second to none. (emphasis inserted)

Tambo refers to no-one being fooled by the dissolution of the Party, knowing that Party members never ceased to be members and that the Party contributed to the development of progressive policies in the ANC.[5] Then, "before 1950 there was the feeling that there were two camps; some belonged to one, some to the other. But after 1950 we were all together and *when we discussed policies we never thought of the differences in our philosophies*. We were all equals deciding what must be done" (Bunting 1998:236–7 citing a 1973 interview which he conducted with Tambo, emphasis inserted).

All together yes, but clearly it was under overall command of the ANC. When people were to be sent to the International Lenin School for studies, Tambo had to approve them. When Joe Slovo was chosen as general secretary of the Party, Tambo's permission was required to release him from duties in the ANC.

Even in 1990, after unbanning, the legacy of these ANC claims over Party officials was seen when the Party wanted Chris Hani to be deputy general secretary and released from his tasks in MK (personal participation of author in meetings where the issue arose in 1990–91). The ANC was refusing to allow this and it was only when the Party conference of 1991 elected Hani general secretary, without seeking permission, that this changed.

There needs to be a more careful examination of SACP/ANC relations in the period of exile. Many top leaders were in fact also SACP leaders at the time (though many allowed their membership to lapse in 1990). But having the presence of large numbers of SACP members in leadership structures of the ANC does not mean the SACP was necessarily giving strategic direction.

Certainly key party strategic interventions were there, in particular the adoption of the 'Colonialism of a Special Type' perspective by the ANC. But we need to ask whether, beyond that, the selection of top ANC cadres for SACP membership was turned to the benefit of specifically Party purposes, or whether it became primarily *an SACP presence within the ANC*, carrying out almost purely ANC tasks.[6] Shubin refers to a central committee decision in the 1960s to set up Party organisations outside South Africa. The process was "very slow", the main reason apart from practical difficulties being hesitation on the part of the leadership "primarily by Moses Kotane". Chris Hani, in an interview with Sonia Bunting in May 1974, expressed his concerns:

> After coming out of prison [in Botswana, after retreating after the Wankie campaign in then Rhodesia] I made a serious attempt to organise party life. I saw Moses was keen on preserving the cohesion of the national liberation movement. He realised there were enemies and he felt the Party should never give them the excuse to destroy the good working relations between the two organisations [ANC and SACP]. Because of his credentials he felt that he himself was representing the Party in the ANC and that therefore there was no need for the Party itself. In a way he succeeded, he achieved the respect of OR [Oliver Tambo] and indirectly OR's recognition of the Party is mirrored in Moses. But Moses went too far. (Shubin 1999:112 and reservations of Joe Slovo at 112–3)

This is not to question the large measure of convergence between ANC and SACP goals, not only in a specific phase of the struggle but even potentially in a conceivable transition to socialism. This is clearly manifested in the 'Green Book', the report of a commission established after an ANC visit to Vietnam (ANC 1979). What is being asked is the implications of two independent organisations relating to one another in alliance, where the one is the more powerful and

leader of a liberation movement. Was there only one way this could have unfolded, with SACP leaders being praised for being indistinguishable from the ANC, or could an SACP presence have been more independently manifested?

A rather uncomfortable question that needs to be asked is whether the Party did not allow itself to become a 'route to greatness'. In the exile period, the Party commanded various resources and networks through which people could have access to superior training and various beneficial opportunities. Being regarded as an 'elite' organisation signified an association between Party membership and the possibility of rising in various other structures, in MK and the ANC broadly.

In short, this had some of the characteristics of a patronage network. In such situations, the temptation is there for people who were able, to take advantage of these resources and to seek party membership to do so, as much for the benefits that accrued as for whatever ideological convictions were supposed to accompany them. We need to ask whether the post-1990 defections have not partially confirmed this.

Finally, all of this has contemporary significance. When Jabu Moleketi and Josiah Jele issued a long pamphlet filled with voluminous quotations from classic Marxist and Leninist texts, one of the objectives they declared was to advise that the Party remain the Party of Kotane (Moleketi and Jele 2002). This pamphlet was issued at a time when the SACP with the Congress of South African Trade Unions had taken independent stances on macro-economic and other policies, breaching the 'unity' of the alliance on these issues. In invoking Moses Kotane, who is undoubtedly one of the greatest figures in South African revolutionary history, whose contribution spanned decades, it is to treat him as representing a particular view of the relationship between the ANC and the SACP.[7] As we have seen, his approach is open to the interpretation of tending to dissolve the Party as an independent force or at least maintaining it mainly as a symbolic force without establishing proper structures.

Conclusions

There is no doubt that communists either in the SACP or in the ANC played an important role throughout the history of the underground, establishing the initial underground units of the Party and playing a substantial role in enabling the ANC to survive banning and establish itself underground. Individual communists were also in the forefront in re-establishing ANC units after Rivonia, sometimes on a very small scale, sometimes on a larger scale. They were also represented in large numbers amongst those who entered as MK operatives carrying out daring missions.

Looking at the communist underground within the overall history of liberation, it needs to be seen as opening a new phase, showing that something that had not previously been done could be successfully embarked on. Continuities and ruptures mark the history of the national liberation movement. When the Indian

Passive Resistance campaign was embarked on, it impressed Sisulu and Mandela. People were prepared to go to jail, something that still carried a stigma for many Africans. Mandela and Sisulu saw the Defiance Campaign as representing a break with that past, a willingness to be 'defiers of death', as they were called in the Eastern Cape. Sisulu saw the Defiance Campaign as having revolutionary implications in the development of the liberation movement (Sisulu 2000).

Likewise the SACP establishing itself underground represented a new phase. It showed that illegality did not preclude organisation and establishment of structures. It did not last forever but even when these structures were crushed, steps were later taken to re-establish structures under new conditions, carrying out a variety of functions in the entire period of apartheid. For a people suffering under apartheid, to read or hear of what underground operatives were doing was a source of inspiration and courage. If some could do it, others did follow, and certainly the experience of the communists in blazing this trail made it easier for the ANC to follow.

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Notes

1. In Everatt's view it was not a case of reconstitution but establishment of a new organisation, due to the different ideological basis on which the SACP was constituted, compared with the CPSA. This relates in particular to the adoption of the 'Colonialism of a Special Type' framework. (See Everatt 1991a, 1990 unpub.).
2. The Communist International (Comintern) was a worldwide organisation of communist parties, located in Moscow from 1919 until its dissolution in 1943. During its existence every communist party was described as a 'section' of the Comintern. On various occasions the Comintern intervened in the affairs of communist parties of various countries, including that of South Africa. See further, "Introduction", Davidson *et al* Vol 1 2003.
3. This thesis described South Africa as a special type of colonial state where a white colonial bloc, comprising all classes of the white population, stood in a colonial relationship towards the nationally oppressed black population as a whole.
4. MK is the abbreviation for *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (the Spear of the Nation), the armed wing of the ANC.
5. If he thought this, Shubin points out, he was wrong, because after 1950 many communists did not join the underground SACP (personal communication September 29, 2003).
6. Shubin believes that the answer to this question is 'both', that it differed from person to person and from time to time (personal communication September 29, 2003).
7. I sincerely hope that none of the remarks I have made in relation to Kotane's perspective on the SACP/ANC relationship are understood as disrespectful of the giant that he was. He just happens to have been the prime and leading exponent of a perspective that set the alliance on a particular trajectory which needs to be openly and critically examined.

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