

The African National Congress (ANC) Underground: From the M-Plan to Rivonia*

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Introduction

Existing scholarship on African National Congress (ANC) underground organisation suffers from an over-reliance on documentary resources, which has tended to conceal its texture, complexity and detail. This article covers an early part of that experience, reinterpreting some literature on the ANC's M-Plan as well as using oral evidence to throw light on its meaning and impact. The historiography is given a different interpretation mainly because this contribution places more weight on the Plan than is usually given. Its impact was far wider than most scholars suggest. In particular, it formed the basis for establishing the ANC underground immediately after its banning.

Another feature that emerges is that many of the traits conventionally attributed to the exile experience can also be found in the period when the M-Plan was adopted. It is fairly common to refer to the exile experience in contrast to that of the 1950s and 1980s as manifesting top-down, hierarchical forms of politics.¹ Yet, this article shows that from the early days of preparation for underground

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'Rivonia' in the title refers to the Rivonia trial, named after the underground hideout of the top leadership of the ANC and South African Communist Party (SACP). The trial led to the life imprisonment of Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and others.

1. See R. Suttner, 'Culture(s) of the African National Congress of South Africa: Imprint of Exile Experiences', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 21, 2 (May 2003), 303-20.

organisation, there was a similar emphasis. Marxist influence, often attributed to training in the Soviet Union or political education in MK (Umkhonto we Sizwe, the ANC's armed wing), can also be found on a large scale in the political education associated with the M-Plan in the 1950s.

Methodological Questions

Studying underground political activity presents special problems to the researcher. The underground political operative has to be invisible in order to achieve success. This is one of the reasons why it was so easy for writers to conclude that the ANC was absent during the period of crackdown on opposition after Rivonia. Unlike organisations with a public presence, an underground one would obviously not have made itself known or its operatives 'available for interviews' by historians.

Even today this presents problems. Many of those who worked underground are no longer alive and even if they are, they cannot easily be located because there may be few people who know that they were working secretly during the 'difficult times'. Also, there may well be an opposite tendency – an element of fiction against which one has to guard, a tendency for people to claim they worked underground or exaggerate exploits, given that it is hard to check. The difficulty is greatest in covering the earlier periods, when memories may have faded or events are recalled in a selective or distorted manner. Where there are few if any survivors of a particular period, it is hard to test one's sources.

The literature on underground activity in South Africa is very limited: mainly pages or chapters of biographies or autobiographies, usually of leaders.² There is a limited range of writings of underground workers below the level of national leadership.³ There is also very little record of underground activity in the rural areas.⁴

2. See, for example, N. Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela* (Randburg, 1994); J. Slovo (with an introduction by H. Dolny), *Slovo: The Unfinished Autobiography* (Randburg and London, 1995); E. Sisulu, *Walter and Albertina Sisulu: In Our Lifetime* (Claremont, 2002); A. Sampson, *Mandela: The Authorised Biography* (London, 1999); R. Bernstein, *Memory Against Forgetting: Memoirs from a Life in South African Politics* (London, 1999).
3. See, for example, J. Middleton, *Convictions: A Woman Political Prisoner Remembers* (Randburg, 1998); R. Suttner, *Inside Apartheid's Prison* (Melbourne, New York and Pietermaritzburg, 2001); Sisulu, *Walter and Albertina Sisulu*, when writing of the Sisulu children; A. Sibeko [Zola Zembe], with J. Leeson, *Freedom in our Lifetime* (Durban and Bellville, 1996), though he became a leadership figure later.
4. But see P. Delius, *A Lion Amongst the Cattle: Reconstruction and Resistance in the Northern Transvaal* (Portsmouth, NH, Johannesburg and Oxford, 1996); Suttner 'Culture(s)', 308-10; Interviews with Victor Moche, Johannesburg, 23 July 2002; Noloyiso Gasa, Johannesburg, 23 Dec. 2002; John Nkadimeng, Johannesburg, 2 Jan. 2003; Radilori Moumakwa, Mafikeng, 15 May 2003.

Certainly underground work presented special and distinct problems for high profile and easily recognisable figures such as Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu. It was obviously more difficult for them to make the transition from legal activity on one day to illegality the next. But while some of this has been documented, there is little that has been written about the experiences of rank-and-file ANC underground workers. The documented sources generally relate to what is visible through media or court records. And those which have received attention have tended to be high-profile cases. What still needs to be properly studied is the large number convicted of ‘furthering the aims’ of the ANC in the early 1960s and other less-publicised cases.⁵ There is also a body of archival data, only recently made available, that needs to be consulted in order to throw further light on some activities.⁶

Before one can draw conclusions about the impact of underground activity within the ANC experience, more primary research needs to be undertaken. At this point we need to uncover precisely what that underground organisation was – including its extent and character and the many variations within it. The scale of such activity may have been large or small. Sometimes conditions did not allow for more than a presence. That may have been without any public impact for some time, as in the case of the more repressive bantustans such as the Transkei.⁷ Such an embryonic presence was nevertheless important in situations of illegality and especially in moments of extreme repression. These pockets of resistance or potential resistance were also significant because they may have been important bases for the later emergence of more substantial manifestations of ANC support.

Other periods and experiences have been more thoroughly documented on the basis of written and oral sources.⁸ Only three years ago Jeremy Seekings

5. E. Feit, *Urban Revolt in South Africa, 1960-1964: A Case Study* (Amherst, Mass., 1971) did some limited work of this kind. See also interview, Joe Matthews, Johannesburg, 20 Feb. 2003.
6. See V. Shubin, ‘Digging in the Gold Mine: The Mayibuye Centre Archive as a Source on the History of the South African Liberation Movement’, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 19, 1 (1999), 46-52.
7. See interview, Noloysio Gasa, 23 Dec. 2002.
8. In the case of exile there are books of interviews: for example, H. Bernstein, *The Rift. The Exile Experience of South Africans* (London, 1994), as well as archived transcripts of unpublished interviews, housed mainly at Mayibuye Centre in the University of the Western Cape. There is also a great deal of official documentation at Mayibuye Centre and other sites: see also Shubin, ‘Digging in the Gold Mine’. MK has received attention in, for example, H. Barrell, *MK: The ANC’s Armed Struggle* (Johannesburg, 1990) and H. Barrell, ‘Conscripts to their Age: African National Congress Operational Strategy, 1976-1986’ (DPhil thesis, Oxford University, 1993). The period of the 1980s has received much attention: for example, J. Seekings, *The UDF: A History of the United Democratic Front in South Africa, 1983-1991* (Cape Town, Oxford and Athens, 2000); I. van Kessel, ‘Beyond Our Wildest Dreams’: *The United Democratic Front and the Transformation of South Africa*. (Charlottesville and London, 2000); T. Lodge and B. Nasson, *All, Here, And Now: Black Politics in South Africa in the 1980s* (Cape Town, 1991). Prison experiences have been dealt with extensively in Fran Buntman’s book, *Robben Island and Prisoner Resistance to Apartheid* (Cambridge, 2003), as well as many archived transcripts of

referred to the absence of any literature on the ANC or SACP (South African Communist Party) underground.⁹ To understand underground activity, recourse to oral evidence is most important, though it is extremely limited, with the possible exception of the testimony collected by the South African Democracy Education Trust project on the history of the liberation struggle, whose sources are not yet publicly available, and in the work of Howard Barrell on MK and David Everatt on the SACP.¹⁰

In this type of enquiry it is impossible to operate with notions like a 'representative sample', in the sense that one cannot start with a clear idea of what the extent of the phenomenon being studied may be. One has to work with a 'snowball sample', while being aware that certain categories of participants may be neglected unless one consciously seeks them out, in particular, women participants and those who have for one or other reason fallen into disfavour.

What Do We Mean by Underground Political Activity?

Underground work is political activity that is not open or openly declared for what it is. Under the cover of doing one thing, one may in fact also be performing an activity below the surface and not visibly. Essential to underground action is that while something happens at the surface or nothing surfaces, the politically significant activity happens below the surface.

Where one is in complete hiding, one does not surface at all. Everything that happens is invisible. Alternatively one may have a public face, but that is quite distinct from the underground one that will not be revealed publicly and will only be revealed in disguised form or to a restricted range of people.

Underground activity is not necessarily illegal because in some situations where one has rights or apparent freedom of political activity, one may nevertheless be under surveillance. For one or other reason it may be important that what one is doing is not observed by the police. In some situations the activity may be illegal but the organisation may not have been banned, as was the case in the 1980s when the United Democratic Front (UDF) and its affiliated organisations were generally still legal, but the state of emergency prohibited certain activities.¹¹

interviews, and collections.

9. Seekings, *UDF*.

10. Barrell, 'Conscripts to their Age'; D. Everatt, 'The Politics of Nonracialism: White Opposition to Apartheid, 1945-1960' (DPhil thesis, Oxford University, 1990); D. Everatt, 'Alliance Politics of a Special Type: The Roots of the ANC/SACP Alliance, 1950-1954', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 18, 1 (1991), 19-39; D. Everatt, 'The Banning and Reconstitution of the Communist Party: 1945-1955', in C. Bundy, ed., *The History of the South African Communist Party* (Rondebosch, 1991), 33-51.

11. The United Democratic Front was launched in Cape Town in 1983 and embraced some 600 affiliates of various types, representing millions of members. It offered a powerful, open and mass challenge to the apartheid regime, contributing significantly to the unbanning of ANC and

Continuing these activities underground was not generally seen as a prelude to permanent underground and illegal existence.

Furthermore, illegal underground activity often coexists with quite legal activities at the same time, though the manner of coexistence was substantially different in various periods. This was the case when the Communist Party was reconstituted as an illegal organisation, but its members simultaneously participated quite legally in the Congress Alliance.¹² Likewise, in the 1970s and 1980s, some activists participated in legal organisations, including UDF affiliates, while simultaneously performing illegal underground activity for the ANC and SACP.¹³

A final question that arises, though it becomes more of a factor with the establishment of the ANC in exile, is what are the boundaries of underground activities? This relates to both place and time. Does one classify an activity as underground by the time and place in which it is finally executed, or are the preparatory phases part of the underground work, even if these were much earlier and in another country? In my view, one cannot treat preparatory work in a much earlier period and undertaken in London, Angola, Swaziland or anywhere else, as unconnected to the final execution of underground activity. The concept of underground work should include training and other preparations that might have taken place in such areas.¹⁴ In fact, preparatory phases for entering the country often involved great danger and the establishment of a wide range of logistical arrangements.¹⁵

Origins of Underground Activity in South Africa

There are some activists who envisaged the possibility of illegal action long before it became necessary. Ray Alexander Simons,¹⁶ in preparing to emigrate to South Africa in 1929, was trained by Latvian Communists for underground work. They believed that while the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA, as it was then called) was a legal organisation, there had to be preparation for the possibility of illegality. In addition, about 14 South African Communists were educated in

resolution of the apartheid conflict.

12. The Congress Alliance refers to the alliance formed in the 1950s between the ANC, South African Indian Congress, Congress of Democrats, Coloured People's Congress and the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU). On the establishment of the SACP underground, see Everatt, 'The Politics of Nonracialism', and R. Suttner, 'The Reconstitution of the South African Communist Party as an Underground Organisation', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 22, 1 (forthcoming Jan. 2004).
13. Interviews with Steward Ngwenya, Johannesburg, 4 Dec. 2002; Paul Mashatile, Johannesburg, 22 Apr. 2003; Pravin Gordhan, Pretoria, 13 Apr. 2003; Robbie Potenza, Johannesburg, 13 May 2003. Others planned their legal activity in a manner that coincided with the overall strategic goals of the ANC: interview with Amos Masondo, Johannesburg, 10 March 2003.
14. I am indebted to Professor Irina Filatova for raising this question with me.
15. Interview with Totsie Memela, Pretoria, 20 Aug. 2003.
16. Ray Alexander Simons's *Autobiography*, forthcoming.

Comintern schools or universities, where there was a distinct and compulsory course on the underground.¹⁷ Among those trained were leading ANC/SACP figures such as Moses Kotane, J.B. Marks and Communist trade unionist, Betty du Toit.¹⁸ At various times there were travels to and from the Comintern, Comintern representatives visiting South Africa and interacting with South African Communists, as well as South African Communists visiting the Comintern to consult, attend meetings or study. All of these activities were to a large extent secret, underground operations.¹⁹

On various occasions, the Comintern urged the CPSA to prepare for underground.²⁰ Possibly because of the disarray within the organisation, resulting from various fissions at the time,²¹ no serious consideration seems to have been given to this advice. Consequently, there was no experience of underground activity or any preparations of a substantial kind before the 1950s, by organisations as opposed to individually trained cadres.

While the ANC was declared illegal in 1960, there was extensive experience in underground activity inside and outside that organisation (in the reconstitution of the SACP) during the 1950s. It is necessary to revisit plans for underground like the M-Plan, which have generally been characterised as having an essentially limited impact.²² This evaluation derives from the narrow character of the focus, which looks mainly at only one phase of ANC and the M-Plan's history – the moment of its first attempted implementation. By expanding the focus, it will be found that the M-Plan was one of the more substantial sources on which the ANC underground drew in establishing itself after banning in 1960. At the same time, having a plan was insufficient for successful implementation. Without the organisational muscle of the SACP, then already enjoying some experience in

17. See I. Filatova, 'Indoctrination or Scholarship? Education of Africans at the Communist University of the Toilers of the East in the Soviet Union, 1923-1937', *Paedagogica Historica: International Journal of the History of Education*, 35, 1 (1999), 54-5, and information found in A. Davidson, I. Filatova, V. Gorodnov and S. Johns, eds, *The Communist International and South Africa: Documentary History*, vol. 1 (London, 2003), 6. 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 Communist International. On various occasions the Comintern intervened in the affairs of Communist parties of various countries, including that of South Africa.
18. *Ibid.*, 6.
19. For various examples of such activity, see *ibid.*, 8ff, and Ray Alexander Simons, *Autobiography* (unpublished).
20. Davidson *et al.*, *The Communist International*, vol. 2, document 34, 107ff.
21. J. and R. Simons, *Class and Colour in South Africa*, (London, [1969] 1983), ch. 19.
22. For example, T. Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945* (Johannesburg, 1983); Mandela, *Long Walk*; Sampson, *Mandela*.

underground organisation, the ANC underground may have taken off with much greater difficulty.²³

M-Plan

There are claims that the ideas embraced in the M-Plan were first advanced by A.P. Mda.²⁴ Some people in the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) claimed that the M in the M-Plan referred to Mda and not Mandela.²⁵ It may well be true that Mda thought of these ideas first, but it was the later conceptualisation, associated with Mandela, that achieved the organisational significance that is considered here.

The M-Plan was conceived as a moment of transition or rupture within the decade of mass struggle of the 1950s.²⁶ The Defiance campaign was also conceived that way by people like Walter Sisulu, referring particularly to volunteers in the Eastern Cape as *Amadela Kufa*, 'defiers of death'. He argues that 'a revolutionary situation was emerging'.²⁷ If these tendencies are correct, then the rupture between mass democratic politics of the 1950s and underground and ANC revolutionary politics started earlier than 1960, however uneven the character of this break may have been.

As with the question of armed struggle – under discussion long before formation of MK – underground organisation was not only a 'last resort', forced on the ANC, but was under consideration and to some extent in preparation, long before illegality and the formation of MK.²⁸ The first plans for underground, in the M-Plan, were elaborated some seven years before the banning, almost at the same time as the reconstitution of the SACP and around the time when Mandela urged Sisulu to seek arms from the Chinese when visiting the People's Republic.²⁹

23. Eric Mtshali argues that it would not have succeeded without Communist Party involvement: interview, Johannesburg, 8 Feb. 2003. This is contested by Ahmed Kathrada: interview, Cape Town, 18 Feb. 2003, and Vladimir Shubin, personal communication by e-mail, 3 June 2003.
24. G.M. Gerhart, *Black Power in South Africa: The Evolution of an Ideology* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1978), 131-2, note 9. See also T. Karis and G.M. Carter, eds, *From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa 1882-1964*, vol. 3; T. Karis and G.M. Gerhart, *Challenge and Violence 1953-1964* (Stanford, 1977), 36.
25. Personal communication, Gail Gerhart, e-mail, 17 Dec. 2002, a claim, which Joe Matthews, in interview, met with great scepticism.
26. N. Mandela, *The Struggle is My Life* (London, 1990), 40, 134ff; Karis and Gerhart, *Challenge and Violence*, 35ff; Sampson, *Mandela*, 81-2; Lodge, *Black Politics*, 75-6; E. Feit, *African Opposition in South Africa: The Failure of Passive Resistance* (Stanford, 1967), 72-5; W. Sisulu, in conversation with G.M. Houser and H. Shore, *I Will Go Singing: Walter Sisulu Speaks of His Life and the Struggle for Freedom in South Africa* (Cape Town and New York, c. 2001), 80-1; G. Mbeki, *The Struggle for Liberation in South Africa: A Short History* (Cape Town, 1992), 74.
27. Sisulu, *I Will Go Singing*, 79.
28. Mandela, *Long Walk*, 146. See Delius, *Lion amongst Cattle*, 131ff; R. Mhlaba, *Raymond Mhlaba's Personal Memoirs: Reminiscing from Rwanda and Uganda* (Pretoria and Robben Island, 2001), 116.
29. Mandela, *Long Walk*, 134-5.

Our interest here is not simply how successfully the M-Plan was implemented between 1953 and 1955. The ANC National Executive Committee in 1955 pointed to its general lack of implementation.³⁰ The question being asked is how lasting was the impact of the M-Plan, and whether it simply petered out in the 1950s after some success mainly in the Eastern Cape, as its conventional treatment appears to suggest? And in what ways did it help constitute the ANC underground in later periods in a number of parts of the country,³¹ and indeed impacted on the UDF people's power period?³² To what extent were the ideas of the M-Plan embedded in organisational consciousness after the period of its initial attempted implementation, and with what consequences?

What was the Essential Quality of the M-Plan?

The M-Plan was prompted by a belief that political conditions were becoming more repressive. This was evident in the banning of the Communist Party and restrictions on many leading figures in the Congress movement. The ANC had to organise itself in a way that adapted to these new conditions. The assumption that everything it did could be achieved through public activity, especially huge rallies and very large branches, had to be changed. Greater sensitivity to questions of security was needed, on the assumption that there could be a clampdown and that the ANC might be banned. It also had to prepare and immediately institute measures to communicate in smaller units and with a greater degree of secrecy.³³ In January 1953, Joe Matthews, then a young ANC leader, wrote to his father, Professor Z.K. Matthews, then Cape leader of the ANC, about 'a secret meeting ... of the top leaders of both the SAIC [South African Indian Congress] & ANC, half of whom were banned'. They had planned the future with 'cold-blooded realism', preparing for the organisation to continue 'under conditions of illegality by organising on the basis of the cell system'.³⁴ Matthews recalls that meeting, over 50 years later, saying, 'there were very strong feelings that sooner or later the organisation would be banned and that certain preparations should be made'. But the expected scale of repression that was anticipated, did not immediately follow:

Gradually after the Defiance campaign, things returned to what one might call 'South African normality'. Meetings began again, conferences were held. ... The campaign for the

30. Lodge, *Black Politics*, 75. See also Feit, *African Opposition*, 75.

31. Sampson, *Mandela*, 81; Eric Mtshali interview; Noloyiso Gasa interview.

32. J. Cherry, 'Traditions and Transitions: African Political Participation in Port Elizabeth', in J. Hyslop, ed., *African Democracy in the Era of Globalisation* (Johannesburg, 1999), 404.

33. Karis and Carter, *Challenge and Violence*, 38-9; Mandela, *The Struggle is My Life*, 40; Mandela, *Long Walk*, 134ff; Lodge, *Black Politics*, 75-6; Feit, *African Opposition*, 72-5.

34. Karis and Carter, *Challenge and Violence*, 35-6.

Congress of the People proceeded. So the declaration of banning of ANC occurred much later but they had sort of prepared for it.³⁵

Mandela confirms that the NEC had instructed him to draw up a plan that would enable the organisation to operate from underground'.³⁶ The M-Plan embraced a number of elements. On the one hand, it may have been conceived simply as a preparation for a future underground existence of the organisation as a whole. It may have also had a more limited purpose – greater security to prevent falling victim to the increasing repression, manifested in careless use of sensitive documents.³⁷ But it was also the extension of modes of operation that were already in existence. Many in the leadership, despite being subjected to heavy banning orders, were already carrying out Congress activities in secret, meeting among themselves and with those who were still allowed to operate legally.³⁸ Walter Sisulu said that the M-Plan was 'actually intended to go into effect when banning orders began to take place'.³⁹ After his restriction, the Security Police noted:

his public activities decreased to such an extent that he no longer came into the limelight ... However he has dug himself in (established his position) and there is plenty of evidence from utterly reliable and delicate sources that he is, in secret and behind the scenes, as busy as before with advice and guidance and instigation among the non-whites.⁴⁰

Oliver Tambo was made Secretary-General in 1955, but because of his work as a lawyer, he could not manage the full-time organisational work. Consequently, Sisulu continued to work in a full-time capacity underground, with Tambo having the power to veto anything he did. In effect, Sisulu remained *de facto* Secretary-General.⁴¹

The M-Plan was not a classic conception for a tightly knit vanguard-type underground. Despite the greater security involved, the plan also envisaged expansion of the membership and organisation.⁴² One of the key distinctions between the Communist and ANC underground, despite the deep involvement of Communists in the ANC, was that the Communist underground was modelled on Leninist vanguard strategies, albeit operating in a situation where much Commu-

35. Interview, Joe Matthews.

36. Mandela, *Long Walk*, 134.

37. Karis and Carter, *Challenge and Violence*, 39.

38. Mandela, *Long Walk*, 136.

39. Sisulu, *I Will Go Singing*, 80.

40. Walter Sisulu, Ministry of Justice files, quoted by Elinor Sisulu, *Walter and Albertina Sisulu*, 121.

41. *Ibid.*

42. Mandela, *Long Walk*, 134-5; Sampson, *Mandela*, 81; Feit, *African Opposition*, 72-5.

nist effort went into building the ANC.⁴³ The ANC underground, by contrast, was envisaged as a way of enabling a mass organisation to operate in underground conditions.⁴⁴ While that may have been the original intention, in the long run it proved unsustainable.

Top-Down ‘Transmission’ and Elements of Local Initiative

As with all plans for underground, the M-Plan embraced a hierarchical structure, with very clear ‘top down’ manifestations. Thus Mandela writes that ‘[t]he ... organisational machinery ... would allow the ANC to take decisions at the highest level, which could then be swiftly transmitted to the organisation as a whole without calling a meeting ...’.⁴⁵ ‘Press statements’ and ‘printed circulars’ would be unnecessary.⁴⁶ The same emphasis can be found in the description of the operation of the M-Plan in East London, given by Johnson Malcomess Mgabela:

Going from house to house we spoke with the people *and gave them some orders*, trying to bring political understanding of what the ANC were doing. We had to organise small meetings because the government declared any meeting of more than ten people an illegal gathering. So we used the Mandela Plan: going to a house; staying there with ten people; giving them an understanding of what the ANC was doing; *giving them orders*; going to the next house. We tried to give people a message of what the ANC stood for and what its plans of actions were. You would tell people here, tell people there. You would even go to a public place like a shebeen or stand with a few people on a street corner ... All of this was to be done underground. No name must be written down. Everything must be kept in secret. From the national level the *instructions came to us* through the leadership of the region. We had to *take these instructions to the branches; the branches had to take it to the area committees and the area committees had to take it to the street committees*.⁴⁷

At the same time, the plan had important elements promoting local initiative and participation, that was an inspiration during the 1980s People’s Power period, especially in Kwazakele in Port Elizabeth.⁴⁸ This can be seen in Mandela’s elaboration of the aims, again showing its conception to be quite different from a

43. SACP (South African Communist Party), *The Road to South African Freedom. Programme Adopted at the Fifth National Conference of the Party Held Inside the Country*. In *South African Communists Speak. Documents from the History of the South African Communist Party. 1915-1980* (London, [1962] 1981); Kathrada interview; interview with Brian Bunting, Cape Town, 18 Feb. 2003. It is interesting to note, however, that the Comintern ‘instruction’ to the Communist Party, to prepare for underground, mentioned above, includes advising that the ‘mass character’ of the Party should be safeguarded.

44. See V. Shubin, *The ANC: A View from Moscow* (Bellville, 1999)11.

45. Mandela, *Long Walk*, 134.

46. Mandela, *The Struggle is My Life*, 40; see also Sampson, *Mandela*, 81.

47. J.K. Coetzee, L. Gilfillan, and O. Hulec, *Fallen Walls: Voices from the Cells that Held Mandela and Havel* (Robben Island, 2002), 60, my emphasis.

48. Cherry, ‘Traditions and Transitions’, 404.

vanguardist approach. He speaks of building local branches as ‘local Congresses’ and extending and strengthening ‘the ties between Congress and the people and to consolidate Congress leadership’.⁴⁹

These steps were seen as part of the consolidation of ‘the Congress machinery’,⁵⁰ and are elaborated in Mandela’s autobiography:

The smallest unit was the cell, which in urban townships consisted of roughly ten houses on a street. A cell steward would be in charge of each of these units. If a street had more than ten houses, a street steward would take charge and the cell stewards would report to him. A group of streets formed a zone directed by a chief steward, who was in turn responsible to the secretariat of the local branch of the ANC. The secretariat was a subcommittee of the branch executive, which reported to the provincial secretary. My notion was that every cell and street steward should know every person and family in his area, so that he would be trusted by the people and would know whom to trust. The cell steward arranged meetings, organised political classes and collected dues. He was the linchpin of the plan.⁵¹

Thembeke Orié describes the role of the steward in the Port Elizabeth area:

Each street had its own steward whose task was to recruit within the street. The steward had to inform on the types of people in each street, whether there were for example policemen. The most important task for the steward was to know everything happening within the street, be it a social event like a funeral, an initiation ceremony or a fight.

These duties were crucial because when it came to organising meetings, the ANC could not risk holding a meeting of more than ten people in one street knowing that there were police in the neighbourhood. Social functions like African traditional ceremonies (initiation) or funerals for instance, were used by the ANC to advance its political goals. The street stewards therefore had to be always on the alert in order to organise properly and thereby utilise such occasions effectively.⁵²

The use of the concept ‘steward’ appears to have its etymological origins in the church, especially the Methodist church.⁵³ Joe Matthews confirms this likelihood:

49. Mandela, *The Struggle is My Life*, 40.

50. *Ibid.*

51. Mandela, *Long Walk*, 135; see also Feit, *African Opposition*, 72-3.

52. T. Orié, ‘Raymond Mhlaba and the Genesis of the Congress Alliance: A Political Biography’ (MA thesis, University of Cape Town, 1993), 102-3.

53. *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. 2 (3rd ed., Oxford, 1986); and personal communication from Greg Cuthbertson, e-mail, 31 Jan. 2003, who writes that the word ‘steward’ is ‘still used in Methodism to designate the function of material custodian in church affairs. Of course, Primitive Methodism and to a lesser extent Wesleyan Methodism were significant feeders of the trade union movement in Britain, and Methodism in its many forms in SA, including the AME [African Methodist Episcopal] tradition, has also played a part in liberation movements.’

There was a very strong church influence in New Brighton. There was a very strong religious bent in that branch and it was Methodist and it was drawn from people like Gladstone Tshume, [who] was a Communist but he never missed a church service. ... It came from that idea of a steward who not only is responsible for organisation but also for collecting the subscriptions and that of course is one of the jobs of the steward in the church. It's making sure that people are paying their quarterly subscriptions.⁵⁴

At this point, the term was not widespread within the union movement in South Africa. Eddie Webster writes:

Shop-stewards were introduced into trade unions in South Africa in the late 19th century by British craft workers. However, they operated rather weakly until the 1970s when, influenced by the growth of a shop-steward movement in Britain, the emerging industrial unions placed central emphasis on building a working class leadership based on the shop-floor ...⁵⁵

If this is correct, it is another illustration of the continuity of experiences, and influences, in this case Christian and trade-union ones, from one phase of African nationalism to a quite different one.⁵⁶

Political Education

Considerable weight was placed on political education, in motivating the plan⁵⁷ and indeed throughout the 1950s.⁵⁸ Many people appear to have gone through some form of internal education where a common understanding of Congress politics was developed, through lectures and discussion. Those who participated at one level were expected to give the lectures at another.⁵⁹ Mandela explains:

As part of the M-plan, the ANC introduced an elementary course of political lectures for its members throughout the country. These lectures were meant not only to educate but to hold the organisation together. They were given in secret by branch leaders. Those members in attendance would in turn give the same lectures to others in their homes and communi-

54. Interview, Joe Matthews.

55. E. Webster, 'Introduction', in S.M. Pityana and M. Orkin, eds, *Beyond the Factory Floor: A Survey of COSATU Shop-Stewards* (Johannesburg, 1992), 7. A similar view is expressed by Sakhela Buhlungu, personal communication by e-mail, 15 July 2003.

56. See P. Walshe, *The Rise of African Nationalism in South Africa: The African National Congress, 1912-1952* (London, 1970).

57. Mandela, *Long Walk*, 135.

58. Anon., 'Internal Education in the Congress Alliance', *Africa Perspective*, 24 (1984), 99-111; Mtshali interview; interview with Billy Nair, Cape Town, 21 Feb. 2003; R.V. Lambert, 'Political Unionism in South Africa: The South African Congress of Trade Unions, 1955-1965' (PhD thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 1988); Everatt, 'Politics of Nonracialism'.

59. Mandela, *Long Walk*, 135.

ties. In the beginning, the lectures were not systematised, but within a number of months there was a set curriculum.

The lecturers were mostly banned members, and I myself frequently gave lectures in the evening. This arrangement had the virtue of keeping banned individuals active as well as keeping the membership in touch with these leaders.⁶⁰

Inside and outside these structures and within this overall perspective, many cadres saw political education as their key task during this period. Elias Motsoaledi recalls:

We took those who understood into a house and continued with political classes in order to give the movement its impetus; you must have real members not only paper members. People did not know the history of the ANC so we had to impart this knowledge to them. Secondly, they needed to know the day-to-day issues which affected them; to make him understand exactly why he was treated the way he was treated. I had so many people from all over Soweto who came to me for political classes ...⁶¹

An important element of these processes that appears to have been neglected thus far, is that they not only inducted members into the Congress movement, but also created a body of organic intellectuals, a category of individuals who would be equipped to make sense of the world people lived in, and advance and explain changing strategies and tactics of the organisation. Obviously this would be an important asset in difficult times, when results seemed few and somewhere in an unknown future. This was something that would happen in a number of other structures – in the Communist Party, in the MK camps, in the trade unions, on Robben Island and in the UDF.

Using Gramsci's approach, an intellectual is not defined purely by the qualifications that he or she has obtained, but by the functions that the person performs – the role played in relation to others.⁶² In the case of the South African struggle, these internal courses saw people learning one day and becoming teachers the next.⁶³ Many had little, if any, formal education, yet they carried out an intellectual function.

One significant aspect of the political education is that much of its content was informed by Marxism.⁶⁴ Generally, the widespread diffusion of Marxist

60. *Ibid.*

61. Quoted by Philip Bonner and Lauren Segal, *Soweto: A History* (Cape Town, 1998), 50.

62. Q. Hoare and G. Nowell-Smith, eds, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (London, 1971), 3-23.

63. Eric Mtshali describes receiving such lectures and Cleopas Ndlovu later reports on receiving lectures from Mtshali: Mtshali interview; interview with Cleopas Ndlovu, Durban, 30 June 2003.

64. Anon, 'Internal Education'; interviews with Mtshali, Nair and Ndlovu. Some of the actual lectures, including those referred to by Mandela, can be found in archival collections, including the University of the Witwatersrand Cullen Library, A 84/2, DA14: 45/2 ANC G'52, 'Notes for Lecturers. Elementary Course on Politics & Economics' and A 84/2, DA14: 45/3, 'The World

thinking within the ANC today tends to be attributed to the exile experience, when some cadres were sent to Party schools and much of the political education was Marxist.⁶⁵ But these Congress Alliance courses indicate that the modes of analysis were already within that paradigm long before the period of exile. Even before the establishment of the Congress Alliance and SACTU in particular, this was happening within the trade unions in Natal where many Communists were placed.⁶⁶

This also raises an interesting contemporary question. Given this Marxist orientation during the 1950s and the apparent popularity of socialism during the exile period and within the country in the 1980s, what has happened to that tradition within the ANC in the present period? Has it simply been obliterated from peoples' minds and if so, how was that achieved, or does it mean that the conviction and training was in fact very superficial?⁶⁷ Alternatively, is this orientation in abeyance, yet a potential basis of socialist support? If so, under what conditions can it be mobilised? Or, is Marxism now primarily a rhetorical device within the ANC, used to defend sometimes conservative macroeconomic policies and deployed against the left?⁶⁸

Extent of Initial Success and Failure of the M-Plan

Accounts of the implementation of the M-Plan generally refer to its success being mainly in the Eastern Cape, particularly in Port Elizabeth, though Lodge refers to some degree of implementation in Cato Manor, but no source is given.⁶⁹ Feit refers to limited attempts in a number of areas in Eastern Cape, Natal and Transvaal.⁷⁰ Mtshali refers to implementation in the whole of Durban.⁷¹ There was also considerable success in parts of East London.⁷²

Archie Sibeko indicates implementation in the Western Cape:

The regime had unintentionally made this easier by concentrating Africans in townships ... [B]ranches were quickly divided into wards, zones and cells, each with its own leadership.

We Live In'.

65. For that influence, see interview with Serache, Johannesburg, 31 Aug. 2002; M. Sparg, J. Schreiner and G. Ansell, eds, *Comrade Jack: The Political Lectures and Diary of Jack Simons, Novo Catengue* (Johannesburg, 2001). See also Suttner 'Culture(s) of the ANC'.

66. Nair interview.

67. Interview with Petros 'Shoes' Mashigo, Pretoria, 12 Apr. 2003, who indicates some of the limitations.

68. J. Moleketi and J. Jele, *Two Strategies of the National Liberation Movement in the Struggle for the Victory of the National Democratic Revolution* (Johannesburg, 2002).

69. Lodge, *Black Politics*, 75-6; Mandela, *Long Walk*, 136; Sisulu, *I Will Go Singing*, 81.

70. Feit, *African Opposition*, 75.

71. Mtshali interview.

72. Interviews with Mgabela and Monde Colin Mkunqwana in Coetzee *et al.*, *Fallen Walls*, 60, 77-8.

This structure enabled regional and branch leaders to communicate very quickly to all members. We could call a branch meeting on a Sunday morning within 30 minutes, or mobilise people to deliver leaflets to every household in the township in a short space of time.⁷³

Mtshali describes implementation of the M-Plan in Durban:

We were told about the M-Plan, in the Party and the ANC. In fact, the people who implemented the M-Plan in Durban, were mainly members of the Communist Party

Q: In what parts of Durban was it implemented to your knowledge?

A: In fact the whole of Durban, and that including the townships.

Q: By saying it was implemented you mean people established cell structures?

A: Yes cell structures, but at the time M-Plan did not work effectively because ANC was legal.

Q: It was premature?

A: It only worked effectively when ANC was banned ...⁷⁴

John Nkadimeng also claims that the implementation of the M-Plan at an early stage after its inception (as well as later, as a plan for underground when the ANC was illegal), was much wider than the areas conventionally named.⁷⁵ He claims that it was implemented in a number of areas of the then Transvaal and had a role in the Pondoland and Sekhukhuneland risings, though this needs further investigation and clarification.⁷⁶

But the success of the M-Plan should not be measured purely or mainly by the extent to which it was implemented at its inception, which seems to be the main emphasis in Karis and Gerhart⁷⁷ and other works. For various reasons related to a lack of resources as well as resistance to changes that did not seem immediately necessary, and fears of centralisation, many members were reluctant to make the organisational shift at the time.⁷⁸ Others did not consider it necessary to take the precautions when an immediate clampdown was imminent. This recalls Moses Kotane's statement when asked why the Communist Party had not prepared for underground before its banning:

'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.

73. Sibeko, *Freedom*, 49-50.

74. Mtshali interview.

75. Nkadimeng interview.

76. This assertion is confirmed by interview with Henry Makgothi, Johannesburg, 3 Mar. 2003.

77. Karis and Gerhart, *Challenge and Violence*.

78. Mandela, *Long Walk*, 135-6; Lodge, *Black Politics*, 76; Sampson, *Mandela*, 81-2.

Theoretically you can train people to be pilots when there are no aeroplanes. But the realities have to be there.⁷⁹

In the same way, many ANC people found it abstract to organise for illegality while the organisation was unbanned.⁸⁰ But once it was declared illegal it became a necessity.

Revival/Implementation of M-Plan after Banning

There is some evidence that conceptions of the M-Plan, even if unevenly implemented in an earlier moment, were embedded in people's consciousness and formed the basis of organising underground units after banning.⁸¹

Noloyiso Gasas's parents were leading Western Cape ANC figures, Vulindlela [Welcome] Zihlangu and Dorothy Zihlangu. Gasas reports on the implementation of the M-Plan after banning:

I only heard about that [M-Plan] after the organisation was banned. And then people were told not to meet in large numbers ... When we used to ask why are the general meetings not there any more, because we used to enjoy them, they would say the securities have forced people not to meet in large numbers again. But we could see that people were meeting and you would gather from them that there was a plan that was proposed that people should meet in tens in separate venues. That is how I got to know about it.

Q: So you are saying the way they organised when the ANC was banned was based on that earlier M-Plan?

A: Yes...

People were in prisons, they were detained and after their detention they came back and they said they could not meet in large numbers any more so they met separately in tens. When you asked how did they work, they only met in separate venues but they discussed the same agendas. That is how we came to know about it, but I was never in those meetings.

Q: So this was really the organisation operating underground?

A: I should think so.⁸²

79. B. Bunting, *Moses Kotane, South African Revolutionary: A Political Biography*, 3rd ed. (Bellville, 1998), 179.

80. Mtshali interview.

81. Noloyiso Gasas interview; Sampson, *Mandela*, 80; F. Meli, *South Africa Belongs to Us: A History of the ANC* (Harare, 1988), 153; Benson, *Nelson Mandela*, 76, 91-2; Nkadameng interview; Mtshali interview; Makgothi interview.

82. Noloyiso Gasas interview.

Frances Baard confirms this interpretation of the M-Plan forming the basis of underground, in Port Elizabeth.⁸³ This became an explicit decision at the Lobatse conference held in Bechuanaland in 1962. The final resolutions instructed all organs and units 'as a matter of urgency ... to ensure the full implementation of the 'M' plan ... and its rapid extension to every area in South Africa ...'.⁸⁴

At the same time, habits of organisation from the phase of legality were carried over into the period of underground. Given that the model of a good branch chair from the Xuma/Calata period⁸⁵ may have been one who kept records and other documents in good order, Welcome Zihlangu continued this practice after banning, though taking care to hide the records. Gasa reports:

In fact when people were detained and they started meeting in tens I was not involved at all except when I wrote notes for my father after he came back from meetings. He could write but he had a bad handwriting.

Q: So he wanted it neat. But why did he want it in writing if it was illegal?

A: I don't know. Maybe to remind themselves

Q: Did he hide it then?

A: Yes at home we had a trapdoor where he used to hide these things

Q: What did you hide there?

A: Books, their membership cards, their minutes

Q: So they had records. . . But they did it secretly?

A: I should think so, my father was a chairman of a branch and he used to bring these things home ...⁸⁶

Similar practices can be found elsewhere. Photographs taken by Nat Serache in Dinokana, a village outside Zeerust, show a woman indicating where she used to hide ANC membership cards during the period of banning. There are other instances involving both ANC and CPSA membership cards. Many members wanted to retain the cards in a safe place.⁸⁷ It was possibly a symbol of their continued commitment to the organisation.

83. F. Baard, *My Spirit is Not Banned* (Harare 1986), 71. See also confirmation by Eric Mtshali that the substantial implementation of the M-Plan was after the banning of the ANC: Mtshali interview.

84. Meli, *South Africa*, 153.

85. Walshe, *Rise of African Nationalism*, 389ff. Dr A.B Xuma and Rev (later Canon) James Calata, as President and Secretary-General, tried to build structures of the organisation on a sound financial and administrative footing.

86. Noloyiso Gasa interview.

87. Everatt, 'The Politics of Nonracialism', 93.

ANC is Banned: Development of ANC Underground

The reconstitution of the Communist Party of South Africa as the South African Communist Party has importance for the later development of the ANC as an underground organisation.⁸⁸ It appears that the ANC drew on the experience and some of the facilities of the SACP in developing its own organisational capacity as an underground organisation.⁸⁹ By the time the ANC was banned, the SACP had already had seven years of experience underground. It operated for 10 years before taking its first loss.⁹⁰ Many of the leading figures in the ANC underground were also members of the Communist underground. All but one of the Rivonia accused (Mandela being the exception), are now known to have been members of the SACP, most in the leadership of the organisation.

When the ANC was banned many of its leaders were in prison together, held under the State of Emergency. But a meeting of the National Executive of the ANC was held – by those outside of prison – at which the decision to declare a day of mourning was taken. It was also resolved that in the event of the government banning the ANC, it would not dissolve.⁹¹ On 1 April 1960, a statement was issued by the ‘Emergency Committee of the African National Congress’ (chaired by Kotane⁹²) declaring, *inter alia*,

We do not recognise the validity of this law, and we shall not submit to it. The African National Congress will carry on in its own name to give leadership and organisation to our people until freedom has been won and every trace of the scourge of racial discrimination has been banished from our country.⁹³

A defiant statement in *African National Congress Voice: An Occasional Bulletin*, No 1, April 1960, also carried advice to those holding illegal literature. Such suggestions for security would become characteristic of underground publications in later years. It declared:

We shall continue to work Underground until the unjust and immoral ban suppressing the ANC has been repealed.

This bulletin, ‘Congress Voice,’ will be issued from time to time. Read it. Study it. Pass it on. But do not be caught with it, or tell anyone where you got it.⁹⁴

88. See Suttner, ‘Reconstitution of the South African Communist Party’.

89. Sampson, *Mandela*, 138; Nkadimeng, Mtshali, Matthews, Makgothi interviews.

90. Bernstein, *Memory against Forgetting*, 132, 185; Kathrada interview.

91. Mbeki, *The Struggle for Liberation*, 86.

92. Shubin, *ANC*, 12.

93. Karis and Gerhart, *Challenge and Violence*, 572.

94. *Ibid.*, 574, capitalisation in original.

The new situation of illegality presented a challenge to the activists who had escaped arrest. The organisation's structure had to be changed to meet the new situation. Michael Dingake describes the atmosphere:

The abnormal times called for the suspension of normal procedures and practices. The democratic elections gave way to executive appointments in a hierarchical order. The task of operating the ANC underground was formidable after years of above ground existence ...⁹⁵

Annual conferences or any other conference as provided for in the constitution of the organisation were suspended ... It was part of the new spirit of discipline to accept the suspension of this crucial concept of the freedom struggle without reservations ... It was not easy and the morale of the masses was ailing ...⁹⁶

The state of mind of many of the members was, however, not conducive to this transition. Dingake indicates the difficulty in communicating with and coordinating the membership:

Within the liberation movement there was much confusion ... Loyal members of the organisation, lacking close contact and guidance, swayed with the wind ...

The general euphoria of the pre-State of Emergency had been interrupted ... The experience was sobering to some of us who, for the first time, lived and worked practically under conditions of illegality. The task of organising and maintaining underground machinery was an uphill battle. Activists had to learn new methods and acquire different techniques of operation. Not only that, we had to change ourselves to adapt to new conditions.

There was an element of demoralisation induced by the state of emergency. While the 'liberation struggle had not been crushed ... [t]he ban and the State of Emergency undermined the mood of enthusiasm, disrupted the trend of mass political involvement in the fight against oppression and triggered minds in search of novel solutions to the political problem of the country.'⁹⁷

Pointing to what would re-emerge as a greater challenge to the ANC during the Black Consciousness period and the later rise of Inkatha, Dingake remarked that 'Black organisations which had not been banned and others who claimed to represent the interests of the oppressed tried to cash in and fill the vacuum left by the ban on the PAC and the ANC'.⁹⁸ Ian Mkhize, a former member of the Pietermaritzburg ANC branch recalls:

I must say, it seemed for a while that the ANC had a demise – it seemed like it was virtually dead ... It was in 1963 that I joined the Liberal Party. It certainly, was, in my own view,

95. M. Dingake, *My Fight Against Apartheid* (London, 1987), 58-9.

96. *Ibid.*, 64.

97. *Ibid.*, 62.

98. *Ibid.*, 59.

going the same way as ANC at that moment ... They were the only alternative that was available. I would have taken a stand against them being anti-communist, but we had no option. Somehow we had to get a political platform.⁹⁹

Dingake puts a rather optimistic interpretation on this trend:

What was interesting was that the majority of ANC members who joined other organisations did not do so out of disillusionment or rejection of the ANC. They regarded working through other avenues without prejudice. On investigating further, one invariably came up against the disinclination of people to operate underground. It is natural. Underground work is hard, demanding and pregnant with hazards. Only the truly dedicated, selfless and disciplined cadres are suitable for the underground.¹⁰⁰

Cleopas Ndlovu observes a similar phenomenon. Many members of branches were reluctant to stop wearing Congress uniforms and recognise that their legal rights had been curtailed. Nevertheless, in his experience, substantial numbers still worked in the underground organisation. By his estimation this amounted to about sixty per cent of the membership of the branches with which he was acquainted.¹⁰¹ While the SACP was then fairly seasoned in underground work, the ANC had not made serious preparations. Successful transition of a mass organisation to underground structures was very complicated. Obviously, not every ANC member joined an underground unit. But the scale was much greater and the security consequences more problematic than in the case of the SACP.

The expertise and facilities of the SACP appear to have been crucial. Communists were very active in building the ANC as an allied underground force. But there was some suspicion of the Communists. Mtshali says 'it was difficult to change ANC comrades, to adapt to underground conditions. Many of them left the ANC at that time because underground work was a foreign animal to them and many of them suspected that it was the Communist Party doing work.'¹⁰² While facilities were sometimes shared, as was the case with Rivonia, there was never a merger of the ANC and SACP underground. The SACP retained its vanguard and tightly knit, small-scale character.¹⁰³ Mtshali speaks of the Party 'playing its vanguard role in the mass movement'.¹⁰⁴

99. J. Frederikse, *The Unbreakable Thread: Non-Racialism in South Africa* (Johannesburg and Harare, 1990), 93.

100. See Mtshali interview for similar comments below.

101. *Ibid.*

102. *Ibid.*

103. Kathrada and Bunting interviews; A. Lerumo [Michael Harmel], *Fifty Fighting Years: The South African Communist Party 1921-1971* (London, 1971), 88.

104. Mtshali interview.

Tasks of the ANC Underground

The first task of the ANC underground in this period was to ensure survival of the organisation under conditions of illegality. Mtshali explains the situation in Durban, where SACTU continued to function legally, though with many of its members in detention or under restriction. The space it occupied was used partly by the ANC to create a platform for advancing its positions.

The Party's big task was ... [building] 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).¹⁰⁵

Q: You established quite a few ANC underground units?

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

Q: Did you encounter a lot of fear on the part of the people or were you able to get quite a lot of people to do it?

A: No we were able to get a few people to do it.

They first had to 'make sure that ANC does not die'. They also had to distribute whatever literature was produced 'on time and widely'.

While the ANC was illegal it had to try to exert influence both from the underground, but also through influencing organisations that were still legal. Mtshali recalls how the ANC in Natal tried to ensure the development of and influence residents' associations in townships.¹⁰⁶ They had to 'work with them and say the same things that we were saying when we were ANC. But this time not as ANC but as members of the Residents' Associations and Ratepayers associations or as members of the unions.'¹⁰⁷

Much of the work of the underground was of a welfare nature, finding and providing aid to relatives of detainees, organising legal defence and fines for those charged.¹⁰⁸ This would continue to be one of the roles, alongside the building of organisational structures, throughout most of the years of the ANC's underground period.¹⁰⁹ In addition, these structures facilitated recruitment to MK, exit from and entry to the country,¹¹⁰ though their capacity was initially very limited.

105. E. Feit, *Workers Without Weapons* (Hamden, Connecticut, 1975), ch. 8.

106. Mtshali interview.

107. *Ibid.*

108. Dingake, *My Fight*, 59-60.

109. Sisulu, *Walter and Albertina Sisulu*, 244. See also interview with Phumla Tshabalala, Johannesburg, 13 July 2003.

110. Interviews Phumla Tshabalala and also Ralph Mgijima, Johannesburg, 15 July 2003.

ANC Underground Organisation and Rivonia

The establishment of the ANC underground organisation was almost simultaneous with the creation of MK, though the first acts of MK were only a year later. The establishment of MK as an organisation independent of the ANC represented a compromise, which Joe Matthews claims, created its own problems. Being outside constitutional structures meant the absence of normal checks on who was recruited and that MK acted on its own, sometimes leading to serious security problems. According to Cleopas Ndlovu, however, this is 'nonsense'. Structures of the ANC were in fact involved.¹¹¹ He claims that Matthews, then based in Basutoland (now Lesotho) was not conversant with the process. This question deserves further investigation, since the potential for the problems Matthews claims occurred must have been there if MK was independent of ANC structures.¹¹² The extent to which the issue did arise may relate to the extent to which there was a *de facto* overlap between ANC and MK structures.

After a shaky start, the ANC underground organisation began to function reasonably well, consolidating its structures and work. MK performed well and, according to Michael Dingake, its call for volunteers led to an 'unprecedented' response from the youth, the organisation being 'inundated' with applications for training abroad.¹¹³ But there were serious lapses of security:

The successful sabotage operations of 1962-3 created extreme over-confidence with its dangerous corollaries of recklessness and complacency. Regions, areas, streets and cells, through their structures, exhorted the membership to observe some elementary rules of security: change venues of meetings, be punctual at meetings, don't discuss your role in the organisation with other members of the organisation who are not working directly with you, be careful whom you talk to and what you say, etc. These elementary principles were broken daily ... It was all the result of emotional fervour overwhelming common sense and mutual trust generated among the membership by the wave of spectacular achievements of MK. The optimistic side of the mood was good. The incipient complacency and recklessness produced by such a mood however was dangerous.¹¹⁴

Important logistical measures, such as transport of MK recruits out of the country, were not always undertaken with proper security, with drivers sometimes shouting on the streets that they would be making such a journey.¹¹⁵ On other occasions, unscheduled accommodation of MK recruits would be imposed on cadres,

111. Matthews and Ndlovu interviews.

112. Phil Bonner believes, from research he has been conducting, that Matthews' point may well be valid.

113. Dingake, *My Fight*, 68-9.

114. *Ibid.*, 75-6.

115. *Ibid.*, 77.

endangering security of a wide range of people.¹¹⁶ Sobizana Mngqikana, on returning to his home city, East London, from Fort Hare, was recruited into ANC underground structures. These instances flouted basic rules of conspiracy and clandestine work, leading

to calamitous disaster, as we were to witness. For example, one of our leaders would boast to some non-ANC acquaintances that he had been reinforced by intellectuals in his organisation. This meant us ex-Fort Harians. We would be confronted by individuals claiming to know our political affiliations and activities. Sometimes we felt honoured by this, not appreciating the grave consequences that could arise. Sometimes we had fundraising parties where freedom songs were sung.

At one point, as a member of the Border Regional Command Secretariat, Mngqikana experienced the reprimand of more seasoned revolutionaries. The Border committee had instructed him to write without sensitivity to the changed conditions, demanding a report back on the ANC conference in Lobatse:

In response to our demand a delegation comprising Vuyisile Mini [a trade union leader and composer of famous freedom songs, later to be hanged by the apartheid regime in 1964] and [Caleb] Mayekiso came to East London. The meeting lasted from 8 p.m. to 5 a.m. the following day. The four-room house in which we held the meeting was discreetly guarded and secured by MK cadres. Before we could delve into the main part of the meeting, Mini, in tears, expressed dismay at the uncomradely letter we had written. 'Did we know the implications of the resort to armed struggle', he asked? 'Did we appreciate that blood is going to flow and that lives are going to be lost?' At some stage he couldn't continue as tears rolled down his cheeks. Mayekiso, I remember, mildly reproached him: 'Vuyisile, Vuyisile stop this, stop this!' After a while he cooled down and proceeded to give a report of the Lobatse conference and the expectations that the leadership had of us ...

I felt sad and guilty during and after Mini's intervention for ... I was the author of the uncomradely letter Mini was referring to. I realised then and afterwards the gravity of armed struggle.¹¹⁷

This dressing down did not, however, ensure that the sense of gravity and need for security was generally appreciated:

Later a group of some of us underground activists were summoned to a meeting where we were told about MK tasks and asked to join. Here again lack of underground discipline was to surface among MK cadres. You would get cadres berating people at bus ranks for not joining the struggle ...

116. *Ibid.*, 77-8.

117. Interview, Sobizana Mngqikana, Stockholm, 2 Feb. 2001. This intervention of Mini, one of the most famous revolutionary martyrs, is also interesting in showing that what some have described as the 'masculine' character of the ANC may take a variety of forms, not necessarily that of the macho hero.

Disaster was to strike in early 1963. Some MK comrades started test-shooting revolvers at night, not far from the public location bus rank. One of them left the revolver at his uncle's place, not very far from the testing site. And the police got wind of this ...¹¹⁸

Conclusion

Writings about early ANC preparations for underground organisation may too readily have written off the significance of the M-Plan, which seems to have had a widespread influence, though not necessarily at its time of initial implementation. Also, the tendency to use epithets such as 'amateurish' to describe the first phase of illegal organisation and MK activity after banning, underestimates the difficulties under which the ANC had to operate. Without the elapse of time between illegality and underground organisation, enjoyed by the Communists, the tasks were much more difficult for the ANC. Of necessity, the underground had then to be immediately built, in the main, by those who were known as ANC supporters from their previous above-ground, legal work. Furthermore, there are probably very few examples of a mass movement, as opposed to a vanguard organisation or small numbers of units, trying to establish structures underground. The ANC's size produced special problems of coordination and security, whether established over a short or longer period.

In addition, what emerges from this study is that the 1950s were not only a period of mass democratic upsurge, but also a decade when top-down transmission, hierarchical organisation and widespread diffusion of Marxist doctrine took place within the ANC. The tendency to counterpose the exile experience with allegedly more democratic and grassroots phases of the 1950s and 1980s has tended to ignore the presence of similar elements found, in varying degrees, in all phases. It may be better to see every phase of ANC history after the 1950s as containing to a greater or lesser extent both democratic and undemocratic elements, hierarchical and 'bottom up' aspects, and that none deserves romanticism or any form of blanket characterisation.

118. Sobizana Mngqikana interview.