

Introductory essay: the problems of exile

“Exile is predicated on the existence of, love for, and bond with, one’s native place; what is true of all exile is not that home and love of home are lost, but that loss is inherent in the very existence of both.”¹

Many South Africans voluntarily chose or were forced to flee the country and go into exile during the period of apartheid rule. While some voluntarily left in order to start lives elsewhere as ex-patriots, others left with the intention of returning one day to a liberated South Africa. The reasons for leaving as well as the experiences of exile are as varied and numerous as the individuals who left. However, some trends and issues that arose from life in exile are illuminated by the documents in this section, though many more have yet to be discussed and brought to light.

Three main periods of exodus from South Africa occurred during the apartheid era. The first followed the Sharpeville Massacre on 21 March 1960, the subsequent banning of the African National Congress (ANC) and Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), and the increased efforts by the apartheid government to crack down on any opposition. The second, and by far the largest, followed the 1976 Soweto uprisings. The third came in the mid 1980s during the period of township revolts. A steady stream of people continued to leave South Africa and go into exile between the major exoduses as well and some people left even before the 1960s, and some still trickled out of South Africa in the early 1990s.

In the wake of the banning of the major liberation organisations, both the ANC and the PAC sent some of the leadership to other countries to set up headquarters outside of South Africa. As the number of people in exile grew, so did the organisations. Military camps, offices all over the world, camps for transit, and some huge self-sufficient communities were envisioned, built, staffed, and filled with exiles. All of their members had to be supported and provided with shelter, food, finances, and political instruction. From fundraising to awareness raising, diplomacy and the

¹ Edward Said, quoted in Hilda Bernstein’s *The Rift: the Exile Experiences of South Africans*

gathering of international support, to cultural troupes and activities, administration, deployment, scholarships and training, the duties of the organisations expanded far beyond their original mandate. From liberation movements tasked to fight apartheid inside South Africa, they grew into worldwide organisations supporting and organising thousands of people. With each new influx of people leaving South Africa, the organisations had to modify their existing structures, introduce new ones, and intensify fund raising in order to provide for new cadres. The problems inherent to all of these diverse needs make up a part of the documents of this section. Details of the set up and supplying of the camps, fund raising efforts, invitations to lecture or submit papers to conferences, or perform at cultural events and the like can be found among the documents in this section. Competition for support between the ANC and PAC also arose, and some documents either maligning each other or explaining the levels of support in various countries are also included here. Many other organisations, such as the Black Consciousness Movement, AZAPO, and the SSRC, set up operations outside of South Africa, but unfortunately documentation surrounding their activities are few and far between. Hopefully in future, more of these documents can be collected and made available to researchers.

The exiles left South Africa for many different reasons. Some faced detention, prosecution, or even assassination if they remained in the country, and their choice was quite clear, though still very painful. Others chose to leave in order to get military training and to join the fight against apartheid. Many foresaw better futures abroad, either through education or career opportunities that were unavailable to them under the apartheid regime. Some white male South Africans fled to avoid conscription into the armed forces, some of whom were later attracted to the liberation movements abroad. Other people, often artists and intellectuals, felt stifled under South Africa's repressive and censored society, and left to find more freedom to express themselves, whether in a political sense or in a more personal and non-aligned manner. More still just felt they could no longer continue to live under apartheid, and chose to leave. Families faced difficult decisions, when one parent or spouse decided to go into exile. Children often had no choice in going with their parents, and spouses faced the difficult choice of leaving with their loved ones or remaining behind and losing them. All of these people are included in the life stories section of this topic,

and their varied reasons for leaving and their experiences outside offer a good overview of life in exile and the problems that came with it.

In the years in exile, for some people a matter of decades, life continued. People had children, married comrades or natives of the countries in which they found themselves, divorced, and died. Documents requesting permission to marry or divorce, pleas to be reunited with a loved one assigned to a distant place, reminders of responsibilities in regard to children and similar subjects are also included in this section. Deaths in exile came from accidents, natural causes, and in some instances executions, assassinations, raids on neighbouring countries or foreign wars sponsored by the apartheid government, who often reached beyond their borders to attack their enemies. People in exile lost loved ones at home in South Africa, many never hearing of it until their return. Many families simply had their loved ones disappear, finding out whether they were alive or dead years later, if they found out at all. Telegrams announcing a loved one's death, biographies of people who passed away, funeral arrangements, reports on raids by the apartheid government, and expressions of sympathy can also be found among the documents. Some people became disillusioned with the organisations they had joined and withdrew. Many exiles, whether aligned or not, despaired of ever returning home, and some had breakdowns. Others fell into self-destructive behaviour and some even killed themselves. Some became so used to life in exile that they settled and never returned. Many children of exiled parents found themselves fully integrated into their new homes and no longer saw themselves as South Africans like their parents. The life stories included in this section cover much of these issues well, and letters resigning from organisations, or letters expressing the sense of hopelessness experienced in exile are also to be found in this collection.

Life in exile brought its own unique problems. Homesickness is an obvious and common problem, which required a variety of solutions, and people combated it in many ways. Cultural events in their camps, reunions with other South Africans in exile, whether already long standing friends, family members, or even complete strangers helped some feel closer to home. Visa and immigration problems abounded, and clashes with the host countries were common. Refugee status brought its own problems, and many travelled under UN passports, or gained passports from other

countries with or without the approval of the governments involved. Visas, applications for visas and passports, letters of expulsion, travel documents, lists of South Africans in jail in other countries, and the like can also be found among the documents in this section. The problem of citizenship plagued many people when it was finally possible to return to South Africa, whether because they had given up their citizenship to leave, or because their spouses or children from foreign countries or born there faced difficulties getting into South Africa. Families and friends found themselves separated even when in exile together, assigned to different parts of the world. Some people found their living situation worse than that they had left in home. Living in another countries brought its own problems with cultural and language differences, racism and hostility.

Due to the nature of this topic, the historical documents included in this section are largely related to the ANC and PAC, and can be found at the University of Cape Town's Simons Collection, various collections at the Mayibuye Centre at the University of the Western Cape, and from the liberation archives of both the ANC and PAC at the University of Fort Hare. A few personal letters, poems, and the like are included. When it comes to the experiences of individuals who were not aligned to one of the major liberation movements, documentation is much scarcer. In this case, many of the interviews in the life stories section, drawn from the Oral History Collection at the Mayibuye Centre at the University of the Western Cape offer much insight into their experiences, as well as a deeper and more personal look at the lives of those aligned with the liberation organisations.

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