

RECOGNISING THE AMABUTHO



Acknowledging the Agents of Change

In October, the fourth volume of *The Road to Democracy*¹ was launched. This volume deals with the South African liberation struggle in the 1980s. Writing and conducting research for the South African Democracy Education Trust (SADET) project over the past 10 years has been an extraordinary privilege and an exciting task. It has also challenged me to reflect on the research process and to highlight the role of certain actors who have been neglected.

By Janet Cherry

Professor Bernard Magubane, a leader of the SADET project, consistently reflected in his writings, especially during the 1980s, the role of “the masses” of ordinary working-class people in bringing about their own liberation:

The masses in South Africa have demonstrated their revolutionary energy, their revolutionary creative power and initiative, over and over again.²

After 1994, when the SADET project was set up, this became one of the methodological approaches of SADET: “history from below,” the recording of the voices of those who were the unacknowledged and unrecorded actors in our history of struggle. For me, unlike the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) research process in which I was also a researcher, the SADET research process focussed refreshingly on these voices of actors as conscious agents of their own destiny. While the TRC by its nature had to identify and classify people as victims

I set out to evaluate the claim of the strategic nonviolence theorists, that nonviolent tactics were more effective than violent tactics. But in the research, I could not disentangle the two and I ended up coming dangerously close to Anthea Jeffrey’s *Peoples War* analysis, despite my criticism of her approach.³ My critique of Jeffrey is clear: she adheres to a form of social science that gives precedence to an educated elite, who manipulate “the masses” from above. She cannot give agency to ordinary, decent, working-class people: they are simply tools of evil manipulators. This is, of course, very close to the argument of the Apartheid regime, which portrayed the struggle as being conducted by the Soviet elite, and the millions who participated in consumer boycotts, strikes, and education boycotts as doing so out of fear for their lives. Previous research in the working class township of Kwazakele had told me otherwise: that ordinary people had (and still have) a high level of political consciousness;

The strategic nonviolence theorists would argue that violent tactics (or strategies, as in the case of the ANC which held to its “four pillars” strategy, with armed struggle being one of four strategies) always detract from, or even contaminate, the struggle. As such, the costs are higher; the levels of violence escalate; the mass nonviolent strategies or organisations are compromised; the leadership is distracted through involvement in secretive and dangerous work; and the outcomes are always worse, as internal democracy is compromised, intolerance reigns and polarisation increases. As a result, the strategic nonviolence theorists tend to present the violent and nonviolent strategies as two distinct and separate movements, with the nonviolent strategy having “won out” and the violent strategy having been ineffective.

Empirical research has led me to the conclusion that while at a national level it is true that the armed struggle was ineffective in terms of posing a threat to State power, it is very hard at

“I set out to evaluate the claim of the strategic nonviolence theorists, that nonviolent tactics were more effective than violent tactics.”

or perpetrators, this resulted in them speaking as victims or perpetrators, not as actors in a grand conflict.

For example, I heard about the death of Thozama Fibi Mani at one of the first TRC hearings in Port Elizabeth in 1996. She was presented as a victim of a brutal police assault on the shack in which she was staying. In December 1987, the shack was surrounded in the early hours of the morning, and crushed by an armoured vehicle as the police fired into it. But the real story of her death was not told to, or recorded by, the TRC. This was one of the “untold stories” I returned to during the SADET research process.

The research process was deeply disturbing to me, as someone who had been an activist in the 1980s. In addition to revisiting the life-changing experience of being part of a mass uprising, a revolutionary “moment,” it also meant revisiting or uncovering some extremely painful and violent events, some of which involved good friends and comrades of mine.

are not easily manipulated; are very aware of the transgressions committed by people within their community; and weigh up carefully their options in terms of political action and how it will affect the wellbeing of their household.⁴

So, how to tell the story of the 1980s without presenting it as a seamless and unproblematic combination of mass mobilisation, guerrilla warfare and international sanctions? How do we measure the effectiveness of violence? There is a clear argument – and this ties in with Martin Legassick’s critique of the ANC⁵ – that the focus on guerrilla warfare and the increasing militarisation of the struggle inside South Africa was not only undermining the internal democracy of mass-based, working-class organisations (militaries are inevitably hierarchical and intolerant of dissent, not to mention patriarchal and elitist), but was actually counterproductive in terms of the waging of the liberation struggle. How could this be?

the local level to separate the armed struggle from the mass mobilisation. The effects of this integration on the mass movement were drastic and negative: there was the assassination of key leaders, the torture of many more, and the detention without trial of thousands. Despite the involvement of hundreds of thousands of ordinary people in the uprising of 1985-6, the State was able to crush this uprising and prevent a direct challenge to the central state. In military terms, the ANC “missed the insurrectionary moment” – the State was simply too strong. What the Apartheid State could not do, however, was to regain its legitimacy: it simply was unable to reconfigure a legitimate State either among the majority of South Africans, or in the international community.

In the context of this stalemate, the ANC persisted with the escalation of the armed struggle and the rhetoric of the seizure of State power. Those who died in this period are often forgotten. The years between the glory days of



peoples' power in early 1986, and the Defiance Campaign and rolling mass action of 1989, are pushed aside. Alternatively, there is an assumption that there was a simple continuity between mass action and the escalation of the armed struggle. The reality is somewhat different: mass action had largely been contained by the State by 1987, allowing for a second round of elections to the hated Black Local Authorities to take place. The ANC had not yet got Operation Vula into

Mbeki was released in 1987.

In the 1980s volume of SADET, I attempt to capture the dynamics of this stalemate, and the terrible sacrifices made by those involved in the development of the underground throughout the decade. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that Umkhonto We Sizwe (MK) was not only militarily ineffective, but deeply compromised as well. As soon as those few cadres who were privileged enough to re-enter South Africa made their way to the

between July and December 1987. Because the comrades in MK units who died in New Brighton, Veeplaas, Zwide and Motherwell were killed outright by the police, they never stood trial, and so their stories have not been told. Moreover, they were not killed by a covert unit, or tortured to death, and so there could be no application to the TRC under the terms of its legislation.

Even so, today these comrades still have a chance of being recognised, as they are listed on the ANC's list of

“The years between the glory days of peoples' power in early 1986, and the Defiance Campaign and rolling mass action of 1989, are pushed aside.”

place, and lines of communication between the underground and the mass movement were shaky at best. In Port Elizabeth, where I was based, almost the entire leadership of the mass movement was being held under State of Emergency detention from mid 1986 until late 1989 – for more than three years. At this point, a “vacuum of strategy” permeated the liberation struggle and it was into this environment that ANC leader Govan

urban centres like Port Elizabeth, they were infiltrated and brutally “taken out” by the Apartheid security forces. This is one of the untold stories of the struggle, including the death of Thozama Fibi Mani, which is documented in my chapter in volume four of *The Road to Democracy*. She was one of the people who died giving assistance to an MK unit who came into the PE townships and were killed by the security forces in a series of shocking incidents

dead MK cadres, and their stories are gradually being brought into the public domain through projects like SADET's. It can be argued convincingly that their sacrifice was not in vain; and stories of previously untold sacrifice and heroism are usually well-received.

But in addition to this particular story, what the chapter explores is the telling of other stories that people do not want to hear. These are the stories of those comrades who formed part of

this delicately integrated violent and nonviolent struggle, who were on the frontline of the “people’s war” strategy, and who carried out that strategy on behalf of “the people.” Because they were not trained MK members, those who survived have been afforded no recognition, no special pension, no government jobs: they are unemployed, middle-aged, uneducated, and with no record of exile education. For those who died, there are no memorials, no names on the “Wall of Names” at Freedom Park. In Port Elizabeth, some of these unrecognised comrades have organised themselves and are demanding recognition from the ANC. They are called the *Amabutho of PE*. In the Port Elizabeth context of the 1980s, *amabutho* – which means a regiment of an organised military formation – was the term used for the informal paramilitary formations of the mass movement, as described in detail in the SADET chapter.

Only last week, the *Amabutho of PE* were demanding recognition, eligibility for special pensions, and more, through a protest at the ANC office. An article in *The Herald*, (6 October 2010) describes the event:

Amabutho Bay secretary Thobibe Peter said about 50 members took part in the action. He said they wanted the ANC regional structure to recognise them. “It’s been 16 years since we got democracy, but we are not recognised by the ANC like other structures such as the MKVA [MK Veterans Association]. And we are never represented in ANC events such as the recent NGC in Durban.” Peter said their slogan during the Apartheid era was: “Education later, freedom now.” However, he said, now the ANC overlooked them and employed “educated individuals” at their expense.

At a recent conference in celebration of Professor Magubane’s life, I explained how these *amabutho* had engaged in the history project with me, showed me their “bases” in each area of the Port Elizabeth townships and the waterpipes they had used as underground escape routes, and described their weapons and tactics. What I was offering them



was a voice and a place in the history books, and thereby some form of recognition of their role. The legitimate question was asked by one member of the audience: Are these *amabutho* members of their ANC branches? Why are they not playing a role through their branch structures? And it is true that for addressing their contemporary problems of unemployment, skills training, housing or welfare, they are no worse off than the other 50% of township residents who are unemployed working-class people.

Yet it does seem to me that history should not leave out the role of these *amabutho*, and that we should tackle the complexities surrounding their role. If we are remembering the MK soldiers who died, we should also remember the township youth who died. If we acknowledge our political leaders who went to Robben Island, we should also acknowledge those who died of malaria after spending 10 years in the Angolan camps. If we acknowledge the role of leaders in exile, we should also acknowledge the role of those who, like the *amabutho*, were at the cutting-edge of the struggle.

This research also raised other uncomfortable challenges: Was I, as a privileged university academic, benefitting from recording the stories of the *amabutho*, while they were still

without even acknowledgement from their own movement? I would like to think that such research provides a small element of recognition, perhaps an encouragement to their self-organisation, and a pressure on other institutions and academics to give them a voice and a place in history.

Lastly, acknowledgement does not mean that they should be praised unequivocally as heroes. Their role, in all its nastiness and complexity and brutality and creativity, needs to be explored and presented in a nuanced way – as does that of the MK soldiers, the community leaders, and all the extraordinary ways that people mobilised to liberate themselves from oppression. The truth, as the TRC taught us, is that war is a messy, brutal and confusing business. ■

Notes:

- ¹ Volume 4: *The Road to Democracy in South Africa 1980-1990*. UNISA Press, 2009.
- ² Bernard Magubane. 1989. *South Africa: From Soweto to Uitenhage – The Political Economy of the South African Revolution*. Africa World Press, New Jersey.
- ³ Anthea Jeffery. 2009. *Peoples War: New Light on the Struggle for South Africa*. Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg.
- ⁴ Janet Cherry. 2000. “Kwazakele: The Politics of Transition in South Africa – An Eastern Cape case study.” PhD thesis, Rhodes University.
- ⁵ Martin Legassick. 2008. “Debating the Revival of the Workers’ Movement in the 1970s: The South African Democracy Education Trust and Post-Apartheid Patriotic History,” in *Kronos: Southern African Histories*, 34, November.