

THE ROLE OF “FREELANCE” UNDERGROUND OPERATIVES IN THE STRUGGLE FOR LIBERATION IN SOUTH AFRICA: THE CASE OF EASTERN TRANSVAAL, 1980–1990

Tshepo Moloji

University of the Witwatersrand
tshepo.moloji@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

On 8 April 1960, the National Party (NP) government proscribed the African National Congress (ANC) and Pan Africanist Congress. This broke the back of black political opposition in South Africa, if only temporarily. In exile, the ANC introduced four pillars of its liberation struggle against the NP government. These were the armed struggle, international solidarity, mass mobilisation and underground work. A substantial body of work has been produced on the role of the first three but very little is known about underground work. This is largely due to its covert nature. Yet underground operatives played a significant role in reviving political mobilisation in South Africa that finally led to the defeat of the oppressive regime. In this article I will use the then Eastern Transvaal (today's Mpumalanga Province), particularly parts of the Lowveld region, as a case study to demonstrate the impact underground work had on mass political mobilisation inside the country. Drawing on oral testimonies from a number of underground operatives, I will argue that this kind of “work” was not only carried out by individuals who were connected to the ANC, but also by those who were not; i.e. by “freelance” operatives, particularly women.

Keywords: African National Congress; Liberation Struggle; Underground; Eastern Transvaal; National Party; LOYOMO

INTRODUCTION

In 1960, the National Party (NP) government, which had assumed power in 1948 on the ticket of apartheid, proscribed the African National Congress (ANC) and Pan Africanist Congress and imprisoned the leaders of these organisations, and forced many others to flee the country into exile. This halted overt black political opposition in South Africa, if only temporarily. In exile, the ANC introduced four pillars of its liberation struggle. These were the armed struggle, international solidarity, mass mobilisation and underground work. A significant body of work has been produced on the role of the first three but very little is known about underground work. This is largely due to its covert nature. Yet underground units and operatives played a significant role in reviving overt political activism in South Africa that finally caused the demise of the NP's oppressive regime.

In recent years, scholars in South Africa have begun to shift their focus to underground work. These scholars include Raymond Suttner, who was himself an underground operative in the early 1970s; Jabulani Sithole, another underground operative in the 1980s; Gregory Houston, and Janet Cherry. Suttner's work covers the period from 1950 to 1976. In his work, he demonstrates that following the promulgation of the Suppression of Communism Act in 1950, which was effectively aimed at banning the South African Community Party (SACP), the latter quickly dissolved and its members regrouped and operated underground. Suttner also shows that after the ANC had been banned, some of its members regrouped and operated underground, mainly facilitating the formation of cells in a number of places across the country which would be "involved in a range of activities such as distributing ANC and SACP leaflets, recruiting people to carry out this task and maintain underground structures" (Suttner 2009, 5).¹

Houston, formerly with the South African Democracy Education Trust Oral History project, a presidential project aimed at rewriting the history of the liberation struggle in South Africa, has written extensively on this subject in volumes 2 and 3 of *The Road to Democracy in South Africa*. In volume 4 (1980–1990), for instance, he grounds the connection between underground work and aboveground activism inside the country (Houston 2010). Cherry's work, on the other hand, focuses on underground work in the Eastern Cape. In her work she provides a number of examples of young people, particularly members of the Congress of South African Students (COSAS), who were recruited to undergo crash course training with the ANC in Lesotho. On their return to the Eastern Cape, they operated underground recruiting other young people to join Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK, the ANC's military wing) or to distribute propaganda material of the ANC (Cherry 2010). And Sithole's work on Southern and Northern

1 In *The Unlikely Secret Agent* (2010), Kasrils, a member of the SACP in the 1950s, writes about the role Eleanor Griggs (later Kasrils) played doing underground work for the SACP and ANC in the aftermath of the Sharpeville massacre.

Natal sheds light on how the ANC helped members of MK to infiltrate the country to recruit new members and to carry out military operations (Sithole 2010a; 2010b).

Without doubt, these scholars’ publications on underground work in South Africa, dating back to the 1950s, have greatly helped to shed light on this subject. However, these publications on underground work in South Africa have neglected Eastern Transvaal. This caused the historian Peter Delius to conclude that “[h]istory of Mpumalanga is not understood or appreciated. Very little has been written about this province” (Delius 2007, 1). A study undertaken by Paul Holden and Sello Mathabatha (2007) is an exception.

In this article, I will use Mpumalanga Province (formerly known as the Eastern Transvaal), particularly parts of the Lowveld region, as a case study to demonstrate the role played by underground operatives, particularly the “freelance” underground operatives in the struggle for liberation in South Africa. I argue that prior to the formation of underground cells or units, the Eastern Transvaal’s Lowveld region was politically quiescent and tranquil. For example, it lacked civic associations – unlike other localities such as Soweto and the West Rand where these were established from 1979 onwards to mobilise their communities against the community councils, and later the town councils (see Bonner and Segal 1998; Van Kessel 2000).

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE EASTERN TRANSVAAL IN THE LIBERATION STRUGGLE

The Eastern Transvaal was strategically positioned during the struggle for liberation. Many places in the Lowveld shared borders with Swaziland and Mozambique. More importantly, the inhabitants of those places had close connections with Swaziland and Mozambique because they either had relatives (or intimate relationships) or religious connections with people in these countries. Another distinct characteristic of the Lowveld region was that its inhabitants were also fluent in the languages spoken in Swaziland and Mozambique, siSwati and Xitsonga (or Shangaan), respectively. These characteristics distinguished the residents of the Eastern Transvaal and enabled them to operate underground without being easily detected by the country’s security personnel, particularly the Special Branch, or its informers.

WHAT IS “UNDERGROUND” WORK?

Underground work involved clandestine work. The individuals and organisations participating in such work were not meant to be known (and they themselves ensured this); their identity and actions were kept a secret, especially from the police, the public and even political activists, both those operating underground and aboveground, who were not privy to some of the operations. Suttner writes “[underground] refers to actions

by individuals or organisations that are meant to be outside the public eye, though they may be designed for a public impact" (Suttner 2009, 5).

UNDERGROUND WORK IN THE EASTERN TRANSVAAL IN THE EARLY EIGHTIES

In 1980 Thembuyise Simon Mndawe was recruited to operate underground. Before then he was a devout Christian, actively involved in the Student Christian Movement at his school, Sidlamafa Secondary. Although he did not abandon his Christian beliefs, after meeting with and being conscientised by JS,² a trained member of MK, he dedicated his life to fighting the unjust system perpetrated by the NP regime. In an interview with JS, JS recalled that he informed Mndawe about the unjust laws used by the NP regime to discriminate against Black people and oppress them. And more importantly, he introduced him to Radio Freedom, and informed him about the illegal routes to use to go to Swaziland, where the ANC had a base (Interview with JS). In August 1980, JS was arrested after being betrayed by a "friend" who was supposed to offer him and his comrade a getaway car to get out of the country. Fearing that the police might connect him to JS and his military missions, Mndawe fled the country to Swaziland where he joined the ANC. There he was trained in how to operate underground.

It was not long before he was smuggled back inside the country to recruit. While doing this he found employment with the KaNgwane homeland government as an office administrator in the Department of Health. This gave him a good cover for his underground work. He could leave his workstation under the pretext that he was visiting clinics in the surrounding villages whereas he was carrying out his underground work.

The impact of the role played by Mndawe and his underground cell was felt during the resistance against the Land Deal between the South African and Swaziland governments. At the beginning of the 1980s, the NP regime, together with the leadership of Swaziland, mooted the idea that KaNgwane homeland should be incorporated into Swaziland. This land was owned and settled by people who had the same culture as the people of Swaziland. The people of KaNgwane, led by the homeland's Chief Minister, Enos Mabuza, resisted the incorporation. Thembuyise Mabuza used lawyers to fight the incorporation, but he also contacted the leadership of the ANC in Lusaka. This was facilitated by underground operatives (Interview with Michael Mndawe). Mndawe played a crucial role in this campaign. He informed the leadership of the ANC about the government's plan and he was instructed to return to the country with pamphlets denouncing this plan and calling on the masses to resist the move. LM, who was recruited and trained by Mndawe in Mozambique in 1982, recalls that Mndawe was instrumental

2 I use the interviewees' initials because when I submitted this article for publication I had not received permission from the interviewees to use their real names.

in disseminating ANC pamphlets opposing the government's attempt to incorporate KaNgwane into Swaziland (Interview with LM). The masses were galvanised to oppose the incorporation. In 1984 the NP government relented and abandoned the plan.

Observing the rapid spread of political activism in the once tranquil Lowveld, the NP government believed that this was influenced by the ANC members based in Swaziland. It therefore intimidated Swaziland and its leadership. Under duress, the Swaziland government became hostile towards the ANC and forced its members out of the country (*Swaziland Weekend Observer* 1984; Masilela 2007). In February 1983 the police arrested Thembuyise Mndawe, tortured him and kept him in a police cell without proper medical care. Two weeks later, on 8 March, he was found dead in his cell.

Painful as this was, his death did not discourage his recruits and other underground operatives. Like Mndawe, they also used the safety provided by their employer, the KaNgwane government. LM remembers that he and others established a public servant union called the KaNgwane Public Servants Association (KAPSA) to represent the workers. KAPSA was actually used as a cover by the underground operatives to mobilise the masses in the Lowveld region. Recalling this incident, LM had this to say:

In 1983 the regime decided to remove the leadership of KaNgwane. We said to the people you are not going to work. The ANC was supplying us with documents ... I was recruiting young people to join the ANC. There was a group working at a Printing Section in the Department of Interior. We asked those young boys to copy the documents so that at night we would distribute, place bulks at bus terminuses, taxi ranks (Interview with LM).

"From there", adds LM, "were electricity protests, education protests" (Interview with LM). The Eastern Transvaal, particularly parts of the Lowveld region, was no longer quiescent and tranquil. It was at this stage that young people in the region formed the Lowveld Youth Movement (LOYOMO), which became the United Democratic Front's affiliate. According to the sociologist, Shireen Ally, by mid-1985 boycotts had become ubiquitous in the Eastern Transvaal:

It started in mid-1985 when rent boycotts that had set the Vaal on fire swept through five major townships in the eastern Transvaal – including Emjindini (Barberton), Thandukukhanya (Piet Retief), and Kwazanele (Breyten). The boycotts and the landmark legal battles waged from Thandukukhanya in particular fermented a politics of protest (Ally 2011, 355).

Although some members of the ANC remained in Swaziland, operations were now planned and orchestrated from Maputo, in Mozambique. The ANC's operations in Mozambique were also interrupted from 1984 after the signing of the Nkomati Accord between the Mozambican and South African governments. The Accord, inter alia, compelled the Mozambican government to force the ANC out of the country thus preventing it from sending MK cadres into South Africa and receiving new recruits in exile; and from sending propaganda material and weapons. Although the ANC was

allowed to retain its office with a limited number of people working there, it operated under strenuous conditions. This undoubtedly had an impact on the strength of the ANC to mobilise inside the country.

Matters worsened when the South African government pressurised the Mozambican government to force the remaining leaders of the ANC out of Mozambique (this period has been termed Nkomati Accord Number 2). This resulted in Jacob Zuma, Sue Rabkin and a few others leaving the country. These were people who had over a period of time created reliable underground networks inside the country, especially in Mpumalanga. Their departure meant that those who remained in Mozambique had to create their own network of underground operatives. It was against this background that “freelance” underground operatives were identified and recruited.

Suttner posits that “freelance” underground operatives were not necessarily individuals who had no formal links with the ANC structures – for some deliberately so, for security reasons. But they supported the struggle for liberation by carrying out instructions from members of the ANC or MK. “Freelance” underground operatives were involved in a variety of clandestine activities, ranging from harbouring MK cadres infiltrating back inside the country to smuggling weapons meant to be distributed to the members and supporters of the ANC inside the country, to feeding MK cadres. The following case studies demonstrate the role played by the “freelance” underground operatives in the Lowveld region.

CASE STUDY 1: GLORY AND VIRGINIA MGWENYA³

Glory was born on a farm in Tenbosch, in Mpumalanga. She does not know when (by the time of the interview she looked well over 70 years). What she remembers is that she was born when the *boers*⁴ came to her home and shot and killed cattle and goats owned by blacks living on their farm. After moving from one farm to another a couple of times, she (her parents had passed away by then) relocated to Goba village, next to Mbuzini village. This was in 1976. The majority of the residents of this village were Xitsonga-speaking (a language similar to the Shangaan language spoken in Mozambique). Glory had 10 children, including Virginia. Her husband was employed in the mines in Johannesburg. Initially her husband returned home but gradually stopped and did not send money home anymore. She was forced to raise her children single-handedly. She survived by carrying wood (close to the border between South Africa and Mozambique) and selling it. In 1983 her husband died in Johannesburg.

While she was eking out a living by looking for wood to sell she met and fell in love with a Mozambican chief in the village that shared the border fence with Goba. Glory began to spend more time in Mozambique with the chief. She also introduced her children

3 Not their real names.

4 *Boer* is an Afrikaans word for farmer. During apartheid, it was also used to refer to white police officers or soldiers.

to him. In 1986 a few of the politically conscientised young people living in the village mobilised young people from other villages in the surrounding environs. This attracted the police's attention. When the police searched for them with the intention of arresting them they fled the country and went to Glory and the chief in Mozambique. There the chief introduced them to the ANC. It was at this stage that the new underground unit that had been formed in Maputo, following the departure of Zuma and others, called the Service Unit, identified Glory and her daughter Virginia, who was born in 1970, as potential underground operatives. The two were not members of any organisation, let alone of the ANC. They were not political activists either.

Recalling how they were recruited, Virginia had this to say:

Then MP continued coming and giving us food and to see us. He would come with pamphlets which had to cross the border to South Africa. He would ask us how we were going to get the pamphlets to South Africa because we were already wanted in the country. (Interview with Virginia)

Glory came up with a strategy to smuggle the ANC's material into the country. She solicited the help of some of her friends who lived in Goba village. She explains:

MP gave me a bulk of them [documents]. Maria and some women agreed that they would take the documents out. They used to smuggle them using pots. They would put the documents inside the pots and take them out to Mbuzini. FS would go and tell a certain teacher, who was the one that used to take them in his car. He was the one who used to transport the documents. The women used to smuggle them. They were helping me because I asked them to assist. (Interview with Glory)

She used a simple plan to store the ANC's propaganda material. She adds:

I had a plan. I had a drum in the bush. I would take the boxes there and then opened them and put the documents in the drum and close. I'll place stones on top of it. And when the women came we would go and take them and bring them to the house. They would then put them in their pots. (Interview with Glory)

This was not the only task that they carried out as underground operatives. Virginia was used to do reconnaissance work. In her words:

Because comrades used to come to carry out underground work this side, they needed to find a way of entering the country. They couldn't just use any place or spot to enter. What I used to do when I knew that they were coming was that I would go and search for the place where there were no *boers* so that they could get a space to enter. When they came back I would tell them which areas they should use. There was this big tree there. It was not busy there. They (*boers*) never used to stay there, so they usually used that place to enter the country. We would tell them that they must use that place. (Interview with Virginia)

The material that was smuggled into the country was then distributed in the townships in and around the Lowveld region but some was sent to other places across the country. This was JK's speciality.

CASE STUDY 2:

JKJK was born in 1961 in Nelspruit. Members of his family were staunch congregants of the New Apostolic Church. When he was 10 years old his family was forcibly removed from Nelspruit and settled in KaNyamazane, a township about 26 kilometres from Nelspruit. After failing his matric, in 1981 he found employment and in 1984 relocated to work in Johannesburg and lived in Soweto. Because of his status as a “non-South African” citizen (he was a citizen of the KaNgwane homeland) he was detained for not having a *dom-pass* (pass book) permitting him to be in Johannesburg. In 1985 he upgraded his matric symbols and the following year registered at the Mgwenya Teachers’ Training College. After completing his two-year course he was employed at Lahawu Secondary School in Pienaar, close to KaNyamazane.

It was during this period that he began doing church work, travelling to Swaziland to open branches in black areas there. It was against this background that he met the ANC. He first made contact with exiled members of the ANC. He recalls:

A lady called Cindy Kubeka⁵ and her sister lived in Swaziland. They had been chased away where they used to stay. I convinced the church that there were people who were stranded and they were members of the church. The church built them a house in the church’s yard. So we had a chance to politicise each other with *Mayibuye* and *African Communist*. I would get them from them and hide them in the car, a Land Rover. I hid them and came with them this side. I would give them to comrades I knew. (Interview with JK)

It was not long before a leading figure in the South African Youth Congress who also operated underground introduced JK to TC, who was part of the Service Unit in Maputo. TC recruited JK. He remembers:

Now because of Mpumalanga’s proximity to Mozambique and our knowledge of Mpumalanga, we then recruited quite a number of people in Mpumalanga. First, we had to make sure that these were reliable people that we could use and take them out for training. I remember quite a few comrades that we recruited from Mpumalanga but I want to mention a specific one by the name of JK. He was a teacher. We gave him a name of JM (Interview with TC).

In addition to smuggling weapons and banned literature into the country, using his disguise as a member of the church, he was also responsible for taking the ANC’s recruits into exile. He recalls:

We would take them as groups. Sometimes in two kombis ... We would give them soccer balls and we would go through a roadblock under a guise that we were taking them to a *sangoma* (traditional healer). There was a *sangoma* in Mbuzini called Mahhoyane. (Interview with JK)

Underground work was fraught with danger. The danger was not only posed by the state but by political activists who were operating aboveground. Some of the members of LOYOMO suspected that JK was working for the “system” because he was driving

5 Not her real name

a Land Rover and always travelling to Swaziland. They planned to "necklace" him (Interview with JK).⁶ But he was rescued by an older activist, who was himself operating underground. He was forced to inform the members of LOYOMO that JK was working for the ANC.

Between the time he was recruited to work underground and 1990, JK was instrumental in smuggling many weapons and banned literature into the country, and also in helping recruits to flee the country. In addition to this, he also played an important role in establishing "safe houses" where MK cadres who infiltrated the country would stay while planning their next move.

CONCLUSION

"Freelance" underground operatives such as Glory, Virginia and JK are hardly mentioned in the struggle narrative. The reason for this is that their work was invisible and that they themselves kept their activities out of the public eye. This unfortunately distorts the history of the liberation struggle in South Africa. Through their efforts the masses inside the country were able to receive banned literature which provided them with information about the ANC in exile; its policies and tactics and strategies; and, perhaps more importantly, they were also informed about what other activists in different parts of the country were involved in. This created solidarity among political activists across the country.

This article has attempted to demonstrate that underground operatives played an equally important role in the liberation struggle as aboveground activists. Their work was fraught with secrecy and dangers, posed not only by the state but also by political activists. It is clear from the oral testimonies that the role of underground operatives had an impact on open political activism inside the country in the 1980s.

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