

O. R. Tambo in the Period of the ANC's Illegality

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Abstract

Oliver Reginald Tambo's life is best known by his association with the African National Congress (ANC) and the struggle for liberation, and as having been the foremost leader of the ANC for most of the period of its illegality. Most accounts, however, do not mention O. R. Tambo's religious beliefs, and in this they pass off an opportunity to highlight what could have been the source of his individual strength, his spirituality. It is this spirituality that this article seeks to highlight and whose depth it seeks to explore. It aims to show that Tambo's personal religious beliefs were infused with his political outlook and concludes that this composite belief system provided the strength he exuded throughout his service to the struggle for liberation in South Africa. The article looks at how he related to and influenced those he came into contact with, both inside his organisation, the ANC, its military wing Umkhonto We Sizwe (MK), the broader alliance, and those who were outside his close political realm. It looks at how he exercised his leadership qualities, born of his beliefs, under the pressures thrown up by the struggle, and finally how he grasped the moment at the point of the conclusion of that phase of the struggle. This article is informed by a number of sources, including books written on the subject by scholars, those who shared space with O. R. Tambo, some of his speeches, interviews, and occasionally the author's own experience as part of the MK contingent from the late 1970s.

Keywords: O. R. Tambo; ANC; struggle; leadership; beliefs; religion; Christianity; ministry; external mission; Mandela; apartheid; Umkhonto; communist

Though a sizable volume of local writings do make mention of Oliver Reginald Tambo's (hereafter Tambo) leadership and influence on the African National Congress (ANC) from the days of his Youth League membership in the 1940s through to the unbanning of the organisation, a number of his colleagues, friends and observers mention him more often as part of the ANC leadership collective than single him out as an individual; however, they rarely dwell on his individual beliefs. Long-time friend

and comrade, Nelson Mandela (Mandela 1994), certainly mentions Tambo's "deep religious" nature but does not go into much detail on this, but delves more into their common devotion to and experiences in the struggle for liberation in South Africa. In an interview with Callinicos in March 1993, Chris Hani, a much younger comrade and protégé, also touches, but briefly, on Tambo's Christian beliefs and likens those with his own (communist) ideology (Hani 1993).

Kasrils (2013) saw in Tambo a unifier and a democrat, among other qualities, whilst Manong (2015), an ANC and Umkhonto We Sizwe member, experienced Tambo as a compassionate leader who took a personal interest in the lives of ordinary members.

Crocker (1992), Under-Secretary for African Affairs in the Reagan administration makes it clear that their meeting with Tambo's delegation in 1987 was out of "political necessity", and that they found Tambo's responses to the issue of "communists in the ANC" to be "waffling and disappointing."

Ellis (2012), an academic who was hostile to the ANC sees Tambo's leadership style as having been weak, choosing to bury differences rather than confront them in order to prevent splits at all costs. He declares Tambo's account of Mkatashinga¹ in Durban in July 1991 as having been "blatantly dishonest."

Shubin (2008), arguably the representative of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) closest to the ANC for the period of its illegality, sees Tambo as the pre-eminent leader of the ANC during this period and attaches great importance to Tambo's friendship with the leadership of the then USSR as well as his "acceptance of socialism as the future of society."

Callinicos (2004) approaches Tambo's story from a Biographical prism, and she therefore delves into his personality and mentions his "spirituality."

Tambo's name was known to South Africa's wider public of the 1980s by his association with the ANC and the struggle for liberation.² He came to personify the ANC as its head for arguably the most difficult period of its existence, the 30 years of illegality³, from 1960 to 1990, a period made no easier by the ANC's adoption of the armed struggle as a tactic.

¹ Ki Mbundu is a name widely used to denote the 1983 mutiny in the ANC's Umkhonto We Sizwe ranks.

² This refers to the fact that most young activists of the 1980s were not yet old enough to understand what was going on around them, and were not yet participants in the struggle for liberation when the ANC was banned in 1960, and were thus, not familiar with Tambo's political leadership inside the country, let alone his other life as a lawyer and an academic.

³ Mandela (1994, 706); see also Callinicos (2004, 6).

He was cast in the role of overall leader of the ANC almost by some accident of history. At the moment of the Sharpeville massacre in March 1960, and the declaration of the State of Emergency that followed immediately afterwards, the ANC, anticipating the total prohibition of the organisation, and being aware of the need to maintain an unrestrained voice to communicate its message to the world, and sensing that this was not going to be possible from inside the country under the conditions of states of emergency and banning orders, then developed the idea to send one of its senior members outside the country to represent its ideas and to expose the evils of apartheid and its brutality to the outside world.⁴

It seems the choice was made in order of seniority, with ANC President Chief Albert Luthuli having been the first to be approached. Chief Luthuli could unfortunately not go due to a number of reasons, chief among these being his state of health. The task then fell on Tambo as his deputy and “second in command.” It is worth noting that Tambo did not hesitate but agreed immediately; though neither he nor the rest of the ANC leadership knew what awaited him and his family outside the country, there having been no assurance of even bare necessities like residence, source of income and so forth, for them outside the country’s borders. He took the news of this new task to his wife, Adelaide, whom he informed that “the ANC wants us to leave the country ... and to tell the world what is happening here.”⁵

By May 1960, barely a month after leaving South Africa, Tambo had already started with the work of representing the ANC outside,⁶ also being involved in the efforts to set up a South African United Front (SAUF) that included the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) among others. But, owing in large part to the behaviour of the PAC regarding the Pietermaritzburg All-in-African Conference and its decisions, however, the SAUF did not survive for very long, in spite of Tambo’s legendary patience. Indeed, it became kind of “still-born,” also because it was an idea that originally belonged to the OAU’s precursor, the Pan-Africa Freedom Movement of East, Central and South Africa, and not to the direct participants (Lissoni 2008).⁷

When Tambo left the country, the decision to take up arms had not yet been taken, though such discussions could have started already.⁸ It was only when the Nanking Group, which included Raymond Mhlaba, Andrew Mlangeni, Joe Gqabi, Wilton Mkwayi and others, informed him that they were from military training in China that he got to know of the armed/military addition to the struggle for liberation. The armed struggle was quickly added on the menu of items he had to sell, in spite of his not having been directly part of the decision to take up arms. Tambo understood the move to armed

⁴ Mandela (1994, 289).

⁵ Mandela (1994, 253–254).

⁶ Mandela (1994, 347).

⁷ Lissoni (2008, 100–124).

⁸ Mandela (1994, 320–326).

struggle; he also accepted the explanation that the reason he was not told about this earlier was in order to avoid complicating his life as a person who was living in the West.⁹ He took the matter no further but rallied the troops he had, occupied the trenches and continued the fight against apartheid.

The task of the “external mission” would be to support this new tactic as much as they could, and this also included arranging accommodation and other facilities for MK men in-transit.

But with the arrest of the leadership at Rivonia, things changed dramatically almost overnight; where the task of the leadership of the armed struggle was wholly thrust onto the external wing,¹⁰ that is, into Tambo’s hands. So he found himself responsible for the “diplomatic effort,” the armed struggle, and the internal political struggle, on account of the void created by the capture of the ANC/MK leadership inside and their sentencing to life imprisonment. Following on this, more members of the underground were arrested and the internal ANC machinery was effectively rendered non-functional. Referring to this difficult period, Tambo states:

We had left our country in the belief that when we came back with our martial skills we would be received by our leaders occupying the front trenches and guiding us into battle. And now we were faced with the imponderable prospect of being cut off from the lifeblood of our revolution—our people.¹¹

Certainly the catastrophe of the capture of the whole leadership was never anticipated.

This was a difficult period for the ANC—the period of illegality and the armed struggle, especially the first decade (1964–1974 and thereabout) of having no real organisational representation at home, a necessary base for continuity as the struggle’s main theatre was inside South Africa, not outside. However, it was a period of great uncertainty in the ranks. At the time of the Rivonia arrests there were MK groups who got stuck outside in the North African states, where they were not supposed to be. These were groups that had expected to go outside to undergo military training and to return immediately with the intention of resuming normal lives in South Africa on the one hand, and start with the task of training others and engage their enemy on the other hand, as envisaged by Operation Mayibuye.¹² With the arrest of the leadership at Rivonia, the severing of the

⁹ See Wilton Mkwayi’s account (2008, 269–271); see also Ellis (2012, 28–29).

¹⁰ Shubin (2008, 47).

¹¹ See in <https://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/statement-oliver-tambo-national-executive-committee-african-national-congress-25th>. Accessed February 15, 2019.

¹² Operation Mayibuye was the MK High Command’s blueprint for conducting guerrilla warfare after its initial sabotage actions. See <https://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/operation-mayibuye-1963>. Accessed February 16, 2019. Note that there was no unanimity on the feasibility of this plan even among the ANC/MK leadership, with discussions on this raging long after the events. See Mandela (1994, 425); Also see Bernstein (2017, 226–229).

underground communication links, and the shattering of the MK organisational structures, there was suddenly no-one to return to, no-one to receive and guide them; returning home for them became also a shattered dream. Under these circumstances only a few managed to return home, so few that they were insignificant because their contribution became negligible; most of them were either captured or opted to return to exile.¹³

From merely preparing transit facilities for MK members going for training and returning home, the external mission would refocus on preparing whole semi-permanent camps for troops that would be stationed in foreign lands with no real hope or plan of going back home as soon as they had anticipated. In a newly independent Africa that was itself grappling with their own internal problems, new ways had to be found not only for this “troop problem” but also for the problem of advancing the whole of the struggle, especially the internal political struggle, the ANC’s main agenda. Tambo was the leader of this process of survival and search for new solutions.

Tambo gained his first grounding in beliefs in the family and in the larger, mainly rural setting underpinned by communal cultural values,¹⁴ where the individual’s needs and identity were fused into those of the collective. This may have been the initial source of his deep sense of patriotism. It must be mentioned that though others profess to have seen in Tambo a “rural wisdom”,¹⁵ this could not be confused with feelings of “tribal ethnicism” as he came to embrace an inclusive non-racial patriotism.¹⁶ He also became *a believer*, a Christian in the formal sense. So deep were his Christian beliefs that he even had the dream of being ordained as a minister of religion.¹⁷ Noting that the basic principles of most religions are justice and fairness, with the common ethical injunctions “not to murder, not to steal, not to visit injustices on others, and, in the case of particularly Christianity, the instructive: “To do unto others as you would have them do unto you,”¹⁸ Tambo was to carry these principles as his own throughout his life.

Tambo was introduced to Christian influence in the family setting; this continued to his receiving education through the agency and financial support of missionaries and Christian benefactors.¹⁹ In that same formal setting, sanctioned by the school authorities, thus virtually part of the curriculum, he was introduced to South African politics by way of journalist and ANC activist Seloape Thema’s workshops.²⁰ This seems to have been his further training ground in patriotism and the politics of resistance, his path to the

¹³ See Mkwai (2008, 278–279).

¹⁴ Callinicos (2004, 28–34).

¹⁵ Callinicos (2004, 18).

¹⁶ Callinicos (2004, 14)—“embracing an inclusive, non-racial project.”

¹⁷ Callinicos (2004, 229, 244, 254); See also Mandela (1994, 172).

¹⁸ See in the King James Version of the Christian Bible, Matthew 7:12.

¹⁹ Callinicos (2004, 49–52).

²⁰ Callinicos (2004, 75).

acquisition of political beliefs. Joining the ANC therefore formed part of his natural progression.

This composite belief system (religion-patriotism) seems to be what formed Tambo's identity, what determined the way in which he held and carried himself about, it permeated his approach to the work the organisation gave to him later. It was these qualities that shone through and characterised his leadership style. There was also a likeness, a noticeable common thread in the make-up of the "Christian" belief systems of a number of ANC leaders almost from its inception through to that moment.²¹ Tambo had been deputy to Chief Albert Luthuli who was himself a devout Christian; they had worked closely together,²² no doubt also because they shared common beliefs beyond their political views. Chris Hani, an O. R. Tambo "disciple" and later a prominent member of the ANC and MK, also went through a similar upbringing, in his relation to and grounding in "Christian" values.²³

The Diplomat

Driven by these beliefs, whose basis is justice and fairness, he delved into the role of attracting the world's support firmly behind the cause of the oppressed in South Africa as represented by the ANC with the passion of a *missionary*. He oversaw the building of a comprehensive network of world opinion against racism in South Africa expressed in the Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM),²⁴ encouraging the establishing of branches in almost every major Western capital, with the result that apartheid as a heinous anti-human system was to be known and reviled the world over. This body's presence and power made life extremely difficult for the representatives of apartheid in all their forms, from government ministers, business firms and products, to sports teams and personalities. Tambo sought to keep the memory of the imprisoned leadership of the ANC alive, and in an act of self-effacing humility, even refused the mantle of "Leader of the ANC" in deference to the imprisoned leadership.²⁵

He was instrumental in popularising the names of Nelson Mandela and the rest of the ANC leadership that were incarcerated in apartheid jails at that time. He lost no opportunity to call for their immediate and unconditional release and to acknowledge their remarkable devotion to the struggle for freedom, their bravery in the collective act

²¹ The names of previous ANC leaders, the Reverends Dube, Rubusana, Calata, and Mahabane are in this fold.

²² Luthuli (2006, 173, 213); See also Hani (1993) and Mandela (1994, 523).

²³ Smith and Tromp (2009, 6, 15).

²⁴ Dubbed as "one of the most powerful international solidarity movements in history," the AAM was to play a significant role in the fight against apartheid, whilst Tambo was to play an overseeing role. The pioneering work of people like Vella Pillay and Tennyson Makiwane is acknowledged. See <https://www.sahistory.org.za/topic/british-anti-apartheid-movement>. Accessed February 19, 2019.

²⁵ Callinicos (2004, 6); also Shubin (2008, 139); on Tambo's self-effacing character, see Gevisser (2007, 162). Also see Mandela (1994, 687).

of refusing to separate their freedom from that of their people. On one occasion he likened Mandela's personal attributes to those of the 19th-century Latin American hero, Simon Bolivar. He mentioned that Mandela, like Bolivar, being of noble background, had renounced a life of privilege to choose to devote himself to the cause of the liberation of his people. He talked of Mandela's daring, tenacity, courage and audacity in the pursuit of this ideal, that Mandela fought for neither personal power, nor fortune, nor glory, but for the freedom of his people, and he declared, "Nelson Mandela is our Bolivar."²⁶

So much did he sing Mandela's praises everywhere he went that it must be in no small measure due to his work that the name came to be known throughout the world, that it became synonymous with the efforts of the people of South Africa to be free. In his words of acknowledgement of the attributes of his fellow comrades, Tambo, perhaps inadvertently, also described his own; he described the strength of the bond that bound him and his fellow comrades to their common "belief" in the cause of freedom.

Tambo struck up close personal friendships with the leaders of Africa and the rest of the world, not for himself but for the benefit of the ANC and the struggle for liberation; from President Kenneth Kaunda, also a devout Christian²⁷, the Mozambican leadership,²⁸ Angola's Dr Agostinho Neto,²⁹ leaders in the USSR and other socialist countries, including Sweden's Olaf Palme³⁰ to Cuba's Fidel Castro, ensuring that they all would have a firm grasp of the South African struggle for liberation through Tambo's "ministry." Among these, Fidel Castro committed fully to this struggle, which he referred to as the "most beautiful cause."³¹

He easily made friends with other believers: Archbishop Trevor Huddleston, Bishop Ambrose Reeves, and Canon John Collins whom he had met with Nelson Mandela in 1954. John Collins helped to set up the Defence and Aid Fund (later IDAF) that worked from the 1956 Treason Trial onwards.³² Canon Collins would further take up the cudgels for South Africa's oppressed to the UN, making numerous presentations on the evils of apartheid and suggesting ways in which that system could be punished by the world's people, also opening the way for that august body to listen to the voice of the ANC in the form of O. R. Tambo. The IDAF would receive funds mainly from the Scandinavian countries and channel them inside South Africa for the legal defence of political detainees and support for their dependants: seeing to the practical needs of those under

²⁶ See <https://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/statement-oliver-tambo-accepting-simon-bolivar-award-behalf-nelson-mandela-24-july-1983>. Accessed February 19, 2019.

²⁷ Callinicos (2004, 485).

²⁸ Callinicos (2004, 486).

²⁹ Shubin (2008, 120); Angola was the ANC's main centre from the late 1970s, see Ellis (2012, 118).

³⁰ Shubin (2008, 120); for Olof Palme see Tambo's speech at the Olaf Palme Memorial Lecture (Tambo 2014, 333–340).

³¹ See Gleijeses (2013, 15); for an example of Cuba's support to the ANC, see Ngculu (2009, 57–58).

³² Callinicos (2004, 244–245).

the yoke of oppression. Now led by Horst Kleinschmidt, the IDAF³³ would serve as the nucleus of the organising committee for such momentous occasions as the Release Mandela Concert held at the Wembley Stadium on June 11, 1988, televised in 67 countries to an audience of 600 million, simultaneously being an audience to the ANC's message.³⁴

There were similarities between Tambo's vision and beliefs (Christianity, justice, peace and freedom for all) and those of Canon Collins who had moved away from the conservative interpretation of the Bible and its message and even joined the Labour Party in the pursuit of the practicalisation of the message of the Scriptures.³⁵

But, different from claiming the right to oppose apartheid racism, the armed struggle was an activity that suggested the organisation and execution of vigorous, extreme violence—a tactic that Tambo had to justify to the world, his own Christian beliefs notwithstanding. He reasoned that it was the violence of the apartheid state that compelled the ANC to take up arms in defence of the people:

The Verwoerd government abandoned the political fight and took to arms. The unarmed demonstrators and would-be strikers were confronted with practically the entire South African Army, fully equipped and ready for war.³⁶

The point is thus made that whether the ANC held on to its arms in the longer term or jettisoned them depended entirely on the attitude of the white government in Pretoria. He was able to define the origins of the armed struggle, striving to correctly allocate it to its proper historical context; this premise was never lost to him. Tambo was even able to bring other Christians at home and abroad to support the armed struggle *because* they were Christians. Addressing a gathering of the World Council of Churches (WCC), he said, in part:

When those who worship Christ shall have, in pursuit of a just peace, taken up arms against those who hold the majority in subjection by force of arms, then shall it be said of such worshippers also: blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the sons of God.³⁷

Karis and Gerhart note that in the late 1960s, “the WCC applied the principle of a ‘just war’ by supporting organizations which used violent means to combat racism, when other means had been exhausted,”³⁸ an indication of its move from mere

³³ Jordan (2007, 342–343).

³⁴ <https://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/statement-launch-nelson-mandela-freedom-70-campaign-o-r-tambo-wembley-stadium-london-11-june>. Accessed February 19, 2019.

³⁵ <https://spartacus-educational.com/REcollins.htm>. Accessed February 19, 2019.

³⁶ Tambo (2014, 61).

³⁷ Tambo (2014, 280).

³⁸ Karis and Gerhart (1997, 81); see also Mafumadi (2011, 84–89).

pronouncements to material support of the armed struggle. The WCC, at this time, also published an ANC profile which painted a sympathetic picture in order to justify the aid it provided to the ANC, and representatives of the ANC continued to be present at major ecumenical gatherings.³⁹ It is important to note that Tambo had attended a crucial sitting of the WCC that heralded the above policy developments.⁴⁰

But whether it be the church, non-governmental organisations, worker's organisations, governments or individuals that Tambo met with in his work of representing the ANC, he maintained the same posture, the same honesty and earnestness that were a reflection of his beliefs.

His Leadership of the Armed Struggle

In his words to members of the ANC's military arm, Umkhonto We Sizwe was not just like any other army, it was a people's army, the justification for its existence was in the political aspirations of South Africa's people, in their daily experience in the hands of a brutal racist system. MK existed purely to fulfil the political mandate of the people; it was a tool in their hands. "MK is a volunteer's army, so no one is a prisoner here, whenever one feels they do no longer wish to serve in MK, they can opt out."⁴¹

Hence the emphasis that members of MK ought not to allow themselves to be brutalised by the armed struggle even as they prepared to engage in bitter battles. "While we do not look forward to the armed struggle with joy, we must harden ourselves to that conflict."⁴² In other words, it was a task that ought to have been carried out without the nature of the task being allowed to transform those carrying out the task, of whom it was expected to act in a restrained manner, always mindful of their premise and to never allow themselves to be pushed towards acts of unnecessary brutality and to always respect the sanctity of life. Tambo was the leader of the ANC delegation (in November 1980) when the organisation signed the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and Protocol 1 of 1977, committing to observing the protocols governing humane conduct in war, among combatants and towards the civilian population.⁴³ Referring in part to the Geneva

³⁹ Mafumadi (2011, 9, 120).

⁴⁰ Mafumadi (2011, 77).

⁴¹ Author's own recollections of the address by O. R. Tambo to members of MK, Malange Province, Angola, December 1983; see also in the revised MK code of conduct. http://theirwords.org/media/transfer/doc/za_anc_mk_1985_04-049b0e9f3197bf917203f2b417069dd1.pdf. Accessed February 22, 2019; See also Manong (2015, 189).

⁴² OR Tambo (1972). <https://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/speech-oliver-tambo-sixtieth-anniversary-african-national-congress-lusaka-8-january-1972>; also Ben Turok's words in Jordan (2007, 229).

⁴³ <https://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/speech-oliver-tambo-signing-declaration-behalf-anc-and-umkhonto-we-sizwe-adhering-geneva-con>.

Convention, he particularly cautioned members of the MK Security Department who were manning the ANC's prison facility in Angola:

We must treat the inmates in this facility with the utmost humane consideration, for if we do not, we will risk the danger of losing our own humaneness and thus become like the enemy.⁴⁴

Tambo's MK had a code of conduct, with strict rules that prohibited wayward behaviour and other anti-social practices. Rape and murder were placed under the category "Enemies of a Guerilla," deemed as serious offences carrying the ultimate penalty. In the case of minor misconducts, constructive correction measures were to be adopted instead of punitive vengeance. Mechanical discipline was discouraged in favour of conscious discipline.⁴⁵ Tambo was a champion of the emancipation of women, interpreting this concept in terms of the ANC's policies and not that of the "Women's Lib" as espoused by others, but as a clear principle that recognised women as an *integral part of society equal* to their male counterparts, which, in the South African context of the time, placed them at the forefront of the struggle and recognised their skills and talents as much as those of others.⁴⁶

Tambo encouraged a spirit of free debate and the exchange of ideas rather than lecturing, promoting the practice of criticism and self-criticism, as was the holding of regular "ANC political meetings" in the military camps to avoid the development of a petty military commandism tendency among the personnel.⁴⁷ The task of leadership was described as that of building the "new man" (and woman), as different to that produced by the apartheid system. The concept of the "new man endowed with the ability to help transform society" can be likened to the idea of Christian "disciples" who would carry their work "throughout the inhabited World, at the command 'go ye forth and teach, and teach.'"⁴⁸ Wherever they would be, members of MK would represent the spirit of the ideals "enshrined" in the Freedom Charter.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Author's interview with a former senior member of the ANC/MK Security Department, Johannesburg, 2017. Please note that the above may not have been Tambo's exact words, but they do carry the gist of his message.

⁴⁵ See in http://theirwords.org/media/transfer/doc/za_anc_mk_1985_04-049b0e9f3197bf917203f2b417069dd1.pdf. Accessed February 22, 2019. Regarding the term "Enemies of a Guerrilla," this is found in the Introduction to Theme 1 of the *MK Manual for Battle Tactics*. See also Shubin (2008, 95).

⁴⁶ See in <https://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/january-8th-statements-statement-national-executive-committee-occasion-72th-anniversary-anc>. Accessed February 23, 2019.

⁴⁷ Hani, interviewed by Callinicos (1993).

⁴⁸ See in the King James Version of the Christian Bible (Matthew 28:19).

⁴⁹ Smith and Tromp (2009, 38); Ngculu (2009, 128), as in Che Guevara's concept of the guerrilla as a "social reformer"; see also in Umkhonto We Sizwe Military Code—the ANC's concept of "a people's army." http://theirwords.org/media/transfer/doc/za_anc_mk_1985_04-049b0e9f3197bf917203f2b417069dd1.pdf. Accessed February 23, 2019.

Tendencies like “the cult of personality,” especially as it applies to leaders of states, political and social organisations, were regarded as taboo.⁵⁰ Tambo himself commanded the respect of the members of MK and was neither feared nor worshipped. He did not place himself at the centre; instead Tambo constantly reminded members of the ANC and MK that the “leadership” of the ANC was held in apartheid jails and that the task of MK was “to serve the people of South Africa” (a phrase that became MK’s watchword).⁵¹ Tambo’s ability to influence others was felt with MK’s adoption of his belief system, for he became Umkhonto We Sizwe’s main role model, the combatant’s combatant.⁵² Those who worked closely with him were not spared a gentle “pull” towards the Christian faith; he sometimes insisted that they too attended church gatherings.⁵³

Tambo was not a rabble-rouser and not a demagogue, he neither sang nor danced, but was a calm, even-toned speaker who showed great respect for his audience, whoever they were.⁵⁴ His presentation of the ANC political line, his “preachings,” were not arbitrary personal opinions but logical and well-reasoned statements that derived from the ANC’s own accumulated experience interpreted artfully and in relevant context.⁵⁵ Tambo lived by honesty; he spoke the truth, always.⁵⁶ This was part of his belief system, and as a result of this he was trusted by all, absolutely; it was a measure of the truthfulness of what came out of his mouth that many years after his passing, none of what Tambo ever said has been proven to have been false or malicious. His words are still quoted to this day for their truthfulness as well as their wisdom.

He provided leadership to members of MK, by force of example and from the front, by way of his *ministry*, not only to be well behaved, but also to learn and master the military art. On occasion he also showed his own knowledge in the theory and practice of guerrilla warfare, his efficiency in weapons’ handling.⁵⁷ He inspired members of MK in being prepared to pay the supreme sacrifice; he confirmed, by his own actions, that this was a cause worth dying for. Tambo was noticeably present at most particularly significant moments in MK’s life. He was there when the Luthuli Detachment was preparing to cross into Rhodesia at the start of the Wankie Campaigns; he slept out there in the open with the men on the banks of the Zambezi even before the day of the actual crossing;⁵⁸ he shared their excitement at the prospect of going home to confront the

⁵⁰ Tambo (2014, 19).

⁵¹ Manong (2015, 74).

⁵² Manong (2015, 190–191).

⁵³ Jordan (2007, 160).

⁵⁴ Hani, interviewed by Callinicos (1993).

⁵⁵ Thabo Mbeki’s account of Tambo’s precision in the words he used to communicate messages, in Gevisser (2007, 415); also see about the absence of “braggadocio” in Tambo’s manner of speaking (Gevisser 2007, 486).

⁵⁶ Hani, interviewed by Callinicos (1993).

⁵⁷ Manong (2015, 97).

⁵⁸ Smith and Tromp (2009, 95).

enemy. It was he who “christened” the group the “Luthuli Detachment” after Chief Albert Luthuli as they had got word of the death of the ANC president whilst they were preparing to cross the Zambezi. It was he who gave the final order to commence operations and saw the whole group crossing the Gorge into Rhodesia.⁵⁹

He was there when the first Cuban-trained contingent, MK’s June 16 Detachment, graduated and marched past, at the end of 1977,⁶⁰ a great occasion for the continuity of the armed struggle in South Africa, especially considering that it was a decade after Wankie and Spolilo and all had been quiet on the “home” front regarding the armed facet of the ANC’s struggle. Surely the Wankie veterans were beginning to age by then, so the injection of the Soweto generation must have come as a welcome relief to the ANC leadership as a youthful group that would be able to populate the active ranks. It must have been a confirmation to those who had left their country of birth in the early 1960s, that indeed South Africa’s people, still in bondage, were prepared to fight for their freedom, and that they, the veterans of the armed struggle, would not be easily forgotten.

In October 1978 he led an ANC delegation to a free Vietnam at the start of the ANC’s process of its strategy review programme, a moment that produced the ANC’s historic *Green Book*.⁶¹ The following year saw him being placed at the forefront of MK’s Special Operations Unit, which confirmed him as the ANC army’s commander-in-chief.⁶²

When Solomon Kalushi Mahlangu,⁶³ a member of the June 16 Detachment, was sentenced to death by an apartheid court, Tambo personally led the campaign to spare his life. He was so emotionally close to the whole action that at the end he even penned an ode to this martyred hero.⁶⁴

Tambo was in Maseru, Lesotho in 1982 after 42 members of the ANC and Lesotho nationals had been murdered by the South African Defence Force. He attended the mass funeral, at great risk to his personal safety, against the advice of his family and friends,⁶⁵ and this was after the Victor Matlou (Zinjiva Winston Nkondo) incident of 1980.⁶⁶ He flew over South African territory, twice, almost daring the apartheid government to do their damndest.

With all the evidence of the presence of apartheid death squads in Lesotho, Tambo attended like any other mourner. After the formal service he took the time to shake the

⁵⁹ Smith and Tromp (2009, 94); also see Nqose (2007).

⁶⁰ Ngculu (2009, 70).

⁶¹ Gevisser (2007, 407).

⁶² Gevisser (2007, 413).

⁶³ See in Mavimbela (2018, 105).

⁶⁴ This was in the form of a short choral song dedicated to Mahlangu.

⁶⁵ In Jordan (2007, 220–221).

⁶⁶ See TRC (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa) (1998, 126).

hands of those who had attended from South Africa, giving words of condolence and encouragement. Tambo, in his manner, *ministered* to the family members, friends and comrades of the fallen. Most of those he spoke to on this occasion still remember to this day the impact his presence had on them. They would go back to tell others that the president of the ANC was himself there in the frontline, unafraid, and that he had *ministered* to them.⁶⁷ Members of Umkhonto We Sizwe, especially those in the camps mainly in Angola, would also be greatly moved by Tambo's preparedness to literally confront the "monster."⁶⁸

Tambo was there when the *Eastern Front*⁶⁹ commenced in Angola's Malange Province in 1983. He explained the necessity for such operations and why MK should be involved in the fighting in Angola. He called on members of Umkhonto We Sizwe who would be part of this battalion unit to stand firm and to participate in the defence of Angola and their right to be in the People's Republic.⁷⁰

He would come back to the same area a few months later when things went wrong and some disturbances occurred, to yet again address the troops and clarify issues.⁷¹

He would be there when he was needed to address members of MK again in the final leg of these disturbances, in the capital Luanda.⁷²

Managing Internal Relations

Tambo also played the leading role in ensuring that the ANC/SACP alliance survived as a healthy relationship between equals who needed each other.⁷³ His beliefs enabled him to show tolerance and respect towards the views of others; even if those views would be different to his, he allowed himself to be influenced, which made him the legendary unifier he was known to be. His sincerity to the cause of freedom, his complete devotion to the task, earned him the respect of all in the alliance, communists and non-communists alike. Of these virtues, Chris Hani said:

As a communist I would trust OR with my life. Because although he is a Christian, I believe that there is a lot in common between true Christianity and Communism. The

⁶⁷ Author's conversations with United Democratic Front (UDF) activists, East London, 1986.

⁶⁸ Author's recollections.

⁶⁹ Reference is to MK military operations against Unita (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola).

⁷⁰ Author's recollections.

⁷¹ Author's recollections.

⁷² Author's recollections.

⁷³ Shubin (2008, 89–96); See also Gevisser (2007, 465).

[love] for humanity, the hatred for suffering and exploitation; and OR embodies all those qualities.⁷⁴

Tambo was not comfortable with the issue of the exclusion of non-African patriots to full ANC membership, and, as Shubin (2008) notes, Tambo did not think of the ANC as an exile organisation and was concerned that the ANC might divorce itself from South Africa's reality and deteriorate into an émigré association merely existing for the continued survival of its exiled members, a group of friends who reserved leadership positions for themselves.⁷⁵ Expressing his fear that under such conditions the people inside the country might otherwise establish their own organisation, along the lines of what they would imagine the ANC ought to be, their ANC. This is a strong indicator of how he thought about the roots of the ANC and from where the organisation should derive its path and whom it should primarily serve. Yet again, the fact that this tendency survived that much longer, till Kabwe,⁷⁶ showed Tambo's high tolerance levels; the ANC belonged to its members, not to him.

“The Call to Surrender”

If the ANC's most difficult time was its days of illegality, then the most trying time during that period must arguably have been that between 1983 and 1985; also the height of the Ronald Reagan/Margaret Thatcher alliance, the foremost “cold war warriors of the Western world.” Foremost was Reagan's policy of “constructive engagement,” informed as it was by the quest for the division of the world into spheres of influence, where world politics were interpreted in the context of the cold war, and informed by the doctrine of *containment* of a supposed “soviet expansionism” and the need for a roll-back of prior victories of such *expansionism*.⁷⁷

According to Reagan's policy, the ANC was a dangerous, pro-communist movement whose aim was to effect immediate change; and so the ANC was placed alongside white extremists who wanted apartheid to rule forever. It was further claimed that this scenario would lead to chaos in that “soviet expansionism” would take advantage of P. W. Botha, who was shown as a moderate who deserved the support of the free world; gradual reforms were hailed as the way to go.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Hani, interview by Callinicos (1993).

⁷⁵ Shubin (2008, 151).

⁷⁶ Reference to the fact that only the Kabwe conference actually took the decision to open membership of the ANC to all race groups in South Africa; See Shubin (2008, 221).

⁷⁷ Stokes (2003, 571–574). Whilst Stokes uses Columbia as a case study of US foreign policy after the Second World War, he also illustrates administration's policy conduct towards the countries of the “Third World,” including anti-colonial movements; See also Crocker (1992, 36); For co-operation between the apartheid state, Renamo and Unita, see Turton (2010, 237–240, 304–333).

⁷⁸ Elliot (2011); See also Gevisser (2007, 485–486).

In the late 1970s, before coming to power, Reagan had expressed support for South Africa's plan of "setting up separate republics for each (black) tribe," urging the US to support the first such state, the Republic of Transkei, noting that the "new little Republic was pro-Western and anti-communist."⁷⁹ The "roll-back" principle included generous financial and military support to groups fighting against newly free anti-colonial peoples. In the Southern African sub-region, the beneficiaries of this support were Renamo, Unita and others who fell under the supervision of apartheid South Africa. The wars against the governments of Mozambique, Angola and Zimbabwe intensified as bolstered by such US government aid. The positions of particularly the ANC and Swapo in Angola were threatened; Unita commenced with attacks on ANC logistics supply convoys especially in the east of Angola, which was what the ANC was responding to by opening up the *Eastern Front* in that country. The ANC was simultaneously under pressure in Mozambique, Lesotho and Swaziland, with the Inkomati Accord resulting in the loss of numerous MK lives during a short period of time.⁸⁰

In his addresses as a form of consultation with them, Tambo informed members of MK that the demands laid down by the countries of the West, in exchange for the ANC being legalised in South Africa, were: that the ANC renounced violence and disassociated itself from the SACP and from the ideology of communism, and that it accepted the status of a human rights group.⁸¹

If we take the ANC's own internal disturbances, the threat by Britain and the USA to declare the ANC a terrorist organisation, with the aim of closing down official ANC representation in those countries and to "roll back" the organisation's diplomatic achievements, and to further blacklist those countries and organisations that would insist on supporting the organisation, and add to these the threat of physical annihilation, as the ANC suffered a lot more casualties inside and outside the country, in personnel killed and captured, than at any other stage of its armed struggle, it becomes clear that this was the ANC's most difficult moment. It must be mentioned though, that this period coincided with the most promising in as far as developments inside the country were concerned, with more and more people responding to the ANC's call to resist apartheid, to the point of symbolically unbanning the ANC.⁸²

In spite of the odds, Tambo refused to be bullied into submission by the Reagan/Thatcher grouping,⁸³ and like a true believer, in circumstances of extreme pressure, he rose to the occasion, declaring that the ANC would not heed this arrogant call to surrender. He restated that all revolutions were about state power and that the

⁷⁹ Gleijeses (2013, 179).

⁸⁰ Kasrils (2013, 155–165); See also in Shubin (2008, 198–203).

⁸¹ Author's recollections.

⁸² Seekings (2006, 207–208).

⁸³ Tambo (1986b).

ANC's own was no different, that the apartheid government as the purveyors of violence had to renounce violence.

The call made on us to renounce violence, as it is put, is nothing but a ruse to render us impotent precisely for the purpose of ensuring the perpetuation of the apartheid system. We shall certainly not fall into that trap.⁸⁴

In 1984, Nobel Peace Laureate Bishop Desmond Tutu visited the United States. Addressing the House of Representatives he agreed with Tambo's opinion and denounced Reagan's policy as "immoral, evil and totally un-Christian."⁸⁵ The tide of opinion in the US would turn, Reagan's own party would turn against him, overriding his veto of the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act in the Senate.⁸⁶ The Reverend Sullivan would renounce his own code,⁸⁷ P. W. Botha would confirm his true intentions with the Rubicon speech⁸⁸ and yet more repressive measures against black political expression. A little later the US Congress would vote for the imposition of economic sanctions against apartheid South Africa, the Chase Manhattan Bank was to call in their loans to the apartheid state and other banks would follow,⁸⁹ a major economic crisis was facing P. W. Botha's rule, the scales were tipping in favour of O. R. Tambo's mission.

As the ANC's journey leaned towards a peaceful settlement, Tambo's grasp of the South African situation enabled him to again take the lead in this new era. Through him the ANC did not hesitate but "seized the moment" towards the path to negotiations, adopting a clear position regarding such an eventuality. Tambo embarked on a punishing schedule of explaining the ANC's position regarding negotiations; he personally travelled from capital to capital around the world, meeting and consulting with the leaders of the frontline states, the OAU, the Commonwealth, the socialist countries, and other friends of the ANC. This process culminated in the 1989 Harare Declaration;⁹⁰ it also affected the health of Tambo adversely as he literally worked to the last ounce of his strength,⁹¹ like the *missionary* he was, towards the fulfilment of his dream, the freedom of his people.

Having mentioned all of the positive attributes that O. R. Tambo possessed, this text could be easily mistaken for that of the portrait of a near saint, which Tambo as a mortal was not. But even his fiercest critics, from Stephen Ellis to Chester Crocker among

⁸⁴ See Tambo (1986a).

⁸⁵ Tutu (1986). <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/07/23/world/tutu-denounces-reagan.html>.

⁸⁶ Gevisser (2007, 488).

⁸⁷ http://articles.latimes.com/1987-06-03/news/mn-2780_1_sullivan-principles. Accessed February 25, 2019.

⁸⁸ <https://omalley.nelsonmandela.org/omalley/index.php/site/q/03lv01538/04lv01600/05lv01638/06lv01639.htm>. Accessed February 25, 2019.

⁸⁹ Thompson (2014, 233).

⁹⁰ Gevisser (2007, 549–550); See also Shubin (2008, 281–285).

⁹¹ Gevisser (2007, 417).

others, find it difficult to fault him on his personal conduct. And where men of such high calibre as Ellis and Crocker tried and did not succeed, it is difficult to imagine who would. But Tambo's faults though may best be seen in those of the ANC itself, the organisation he led: the faults of an oppressed and embattled people striving to be free, and Tambo's human limitations to "clone" them all in his own exemplary image.

Yet it cannot be reasonably denied that a unique combination of beliefs, including religion and patriotism, converged on O. R. Tambo, resulting in a rare personality able to marshal his people through a difficult moment of their history, to a higher order in their lives.

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