

## "A Revolution Marches on Two Feet:" The ANC's People's War in N'wamitwa

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*Abstract: In the waning days of apartheid, an operative of Umkhonto we Sizwe, the armed wing of South Africa's most powerful dissident organization the African National Congress, returned to his home community of N'wamitwa after over a decade in exile. His mission was to spark a people's war, an imported form of revolutionary warfare developed by Mao Zedong and perfected by the North Vietnamese in their revolutionary struggles. The goal of a people's war is ultimately to involve an entire population in a conflict, eventually crushing a powerful state actor between a mobilized populace and a guerilla army. Through interviews with an insurgent who took part in the uprising in N'wamitwa, this piece seeks to tell the story of the early stages of the people's war in N'wamitwa and to place the uprising in the context of the ANC's national revolutionary strategy.*

As dusk fell on the evening of April 12, 1989, a car approached a temporary South African Defence Force (SADF) camp in the township of Nkowankowa, outside the city of Tzaneen.<sup>1</sup> Several weeks prior, the army had commandeered the football stadium as a forward operating base in response to a broad-based civil uprising in the nearby Gazankulu homeland. For over a month, the homeland had been wracked by violence. The Gazankulu police, backed by the national army, sought to suppress the insurrection. Now, the resistance prepared to hit back. As the car pulled to a halt, two blocks away from the stadium, four men exited, armed with AK-47 assault rifles and hand grenades.<sup>2</sup> The operation was meticulously planned. For several days, the operation's getaway driver had carefully observed the soldiers' movements and routines.<sup>3</sup> As the ranking commander of the group, hereafter referred to as Comrade J, took up a firing position, the other three approached the high fences of the stadium, grenades in hand. The quiet of the night was abruptly shattered as five or six explosions ripped through the camp.<sup>4</sup> As the bombers ran for the safety of the car, their comrade covered their escape, firing on pursuing

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<sup>1</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission Amnesty Committee, *Attack on Rita Township and the Murder of Mr. Shingange*, May 23, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

soldiers with his AK-47.<sup>5</sup> Piling into their getaway car, the insurgents peeled out into the night to return to their base of operations: the rural community of N'wamitwa.

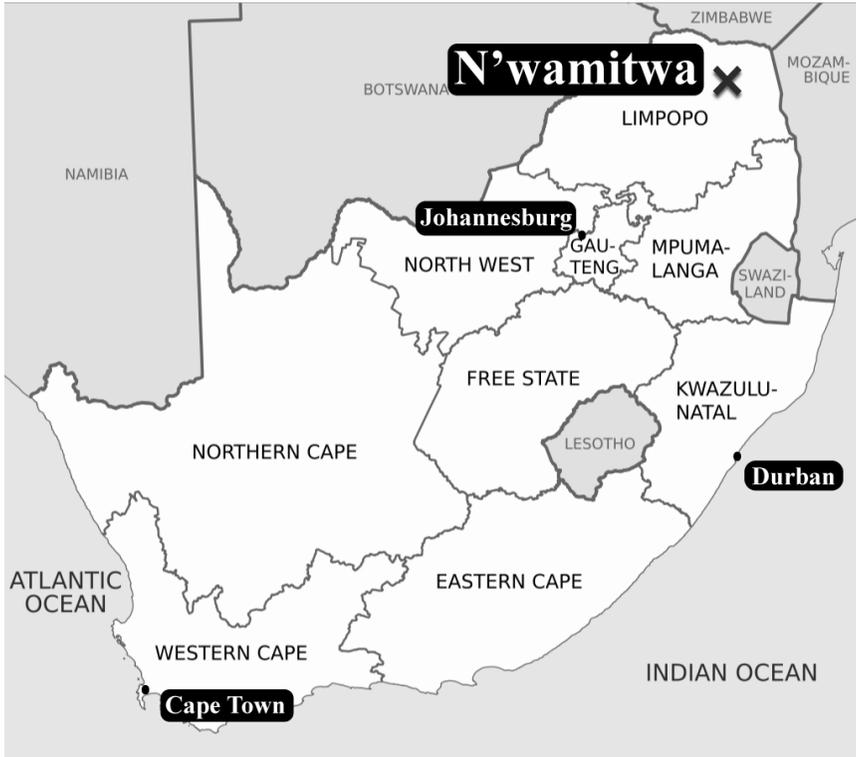


Figure 1: Map of South Africa showing the rural community of N'wamitwa.

The attack on the stadium in Nkowankowa was a single action in the decades-long war for control of South Africa between the African National Congress (ANC) and the apartheid state. This wider conflict was organized along the lines of a people's war—an imported form of revolutionary warfare. The military aspect of the struggle encompassed large-scale conventional military operations, guerilla warfare, sabotage, and terrorism. From the late 1970s onwards, these military actions were coordinated to support a campaign of mass mobilization and a sophisticated propaganda offensive. This campaign of destabilization and mass mobilization is the focus of this work. I will describe the doctrine of

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

a people's war, sketch out the political context in which the ANC chose to adopt the strategy, using the rural community of N'wamitwa as a case study to explore how the early stages of a successful people's war are implemented.

Many secondary sources have informed my scholarly approach. However, none have influenced my work as much as Anthea Jeffery's *People's War: A New Light on the Struggle for South Africa*. Jeffery challenges several commonly held views on the history of South Africa's 'miracle' transition to democracy, and ties policy decisions made by the ANC leadership in exile to events in South Africa. She successfully matches directives issued by the ANC leadership with events on the ground to make a compelling case that the ANC's adoption of the people's war strategy was a vital and understudied turning point in South African history. An aspect of Jeffery's methodology that has carried over into my own work is her use of primary sources on people's wars in East Asia to examine and analyze events in South Africa. Sources used heavily by Jeffery that also appear in this piece are the works of Mao Zedong, Võ Nguyễn Giáp, and Douglas Pike.

There have been several scholarly treatments of ANC's armed wing, referred to in this article by its colloquial acronym, MK, that use oral history as a component, such as the work of Tom Lodge, Janet Cherry and Thula Simpson.<sup>6</sup> The strategy of the ANC was predominantly urban, and the scholarship of the liberation struggle reflects this. Thus, this article by focusing largely on the story of a rural guerilla unit is somewhat unique to the literature of the South African Freedom Struggle. This article is an excerpt of a wider thesis project that tells the story of the insurgency in N'wamitwa in the words of those who took part. The bulk of the primary research for this project comes from ten days of fieldwork in N'wamitwa in early 2018. I focus largely on the experience of one member of the insurgency in the first year of the people's war in the area from October 1989 to August 1990.

### **“Working Ass Backwards:” People's War and the ANC**

The road that led to the attack in N'wamitwa began with the founding of a secret organization and another bombing three decades earlier. The

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<sup>6</sup> Janet Cherry, *Spear of the Nation: Umkhonto Wesizwe South Africa's Liberation Army, 1960s-1990s* (Cincinnati: Ohio University Press, 2012); Thula Simpson, *Umkhonto We Sizwe: The ANC's Armed Struggle* (Pretoria: Random House Africa, 2016). Tom Lodge, "Resistance and Reform 1973-1994," in R. Ross, A. Mager, and B. Nasson (eds.), *The Cambridge History of South Africa Vol. 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 409-491.

vanguard of the ANC's people's war was its armed wing: *Umkhonto we Sizwe* or Spear of the Nation (MK). The founding of the MK in 1961 was not without controversy. At that time, the ANC was a devoutly Christian organization dedicated to the cause of non-violent resistance. However, the banning of the ANC and the 1960 massacre of unarmed protesters in the township of Sharpeville convinced many in the movement that the only way to counter the reactionary violence of the state was with revolutionary violence of their own. On December 16, 1961, a day of great symbolic importance to South Africa's ruling Afrikaner community, the MK announced its creation with a series of coordinated bomb attacks throughout the country.<sup>7</sup> The government's response was characteristically harsh and efficient. Within 18 months most of the MK's leadership had been arrested or killed. What remained of the MK was forced to take the "Northern Highway" into exile.<sup>8</sup> For the remainder of the 1960s and early 1970s, the ANC was at its lowest ebb and the organization was forced to rely on the help of friendly nations and sub-national groups for its survival.

For much of the 1960s and 1970s, the ANC was largely unknown by the masses within South Africa, or was openly disliked. The ANC's commitment to a non-racial South Africa played very poorly with the angry and disenfranchised black working class who tended to gravitate towards the Africanist philosophies of the Black Consciousness Movement.<sup>9</sup> The ANC's alliance with the South African Communist Party also raised suspicions among many South Africans, particularly those with a more traditionalist or Black Consciousness outlook. As did their willingness to accept aid from non-African nations, particularly the USSR and other Eastern Bloc countries.<sup>10</sup> Lastly, the fact that they operated as an exiled resistance movement meant that the ANC had little opportunity to build up grassroots support within South Africa. While the ANC had been sidelined for over a decade, two events in the late 1970s marked a decisive shift in the ANC's resources and strategy.

The first of these turning points occurred on June 16, 1976, and in

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<sup>7</sup> December 16<sup>th</sup> commemorates the remarkable Afrikaner victory over the Zulu at The Battle of Blood River. Stephen R. Davis, *Apartheid's Rebels: Inside South Africa's Hidden War* (Newhaven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), 16-17.

<sup>8</sup> Ronnie Kasrils, *Armed and Dangerous: My Undercover Struggle Against Apartheid* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Hienemann, 1992), 77.

<sup>9</sup> Davis, *Apartheid's Rebels*, 24-25.; Stephen Ellis and Tsepo Sechaba, *Comrades Against Apartheid: The ANC and the South African Communist Party in Exile* (London: Peter Currey, 1992), 66.

<sup>10</sup> Davis, *Apartheid's Rebels*, 29.; Ellis and Sechaba, *Comrades Against Apartheid*, 66.

the months immediately following. A student walkout in the Johannesburg township of Soweto erupted into unprecedented violence. The protesters were met with “overwhelming military force.”<sup>11</sup> Among black South Africans, Soweto marked a shift from weary resentment to open hostility. Riots erupted across the country. In the face of intensified repression, thousands of newly radicalized young men and women fled South Africa to seek guerrilla training in the newly independent frontline states.<sup>12</sup> Soweto proved to be a mixed blessing for the ANC. The MK’s fighting capacity grew as more and more young people fled repression at home to seek military training abroad. These new recruits brought a new sense of militancy into the MK and were to form the core of the organization throughout the 1980s. However, the uprising had caught the ANC leadership completely by surprise and showed that the movement was troublingly out of touch with the population they claimed to represent.<sup>13</sup>

In 1978, at the urging of the Soviet Union, a delegation of high-ranking ANC cadres visited the newly unified People’s Republic of Vietnam. Through meetings with the Vietnamese leadership, including the legendary guerilla commander General Võ Nguyên Giáp, the ANC sought to learn the formula for a successful people’s war.<sup>14</sup> The doctrine of people’s war was honed by communist insurgencies in East Asia and, by the late 1970s, it had become a model for revolutionary groups to defeat militarily superior opponents. The axiom of people’s warfare is “a revolution marches on two feet”—one military and one political. In a successful people’s war, military operations play an ancillary role to mass organization and action.<sup>15</sup> By mobilizing an entire populace, a people’s war is meant to neutralize the military superiority of an adversary by

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<sup>11</sup> Martin Murray, *South Africa: Time of Agony, Time of Destiny* (Norfolk: Thetford Press, 1987), 201.

<sup>12</sup> Annette Seegers, *The Military in the Making of Modern South Africa* (London: International Library for African Studies, 1996), 174. The Frontline states represented the independent African nations bordering or in close proximity to South Africa. These included Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

<sup>13</sup> Anthea Jeffery, *People’s War: A New Light on the Struggle for South Africa* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2009) Kindle edition, location 619.; Ellis and Sechaba, *Comrades Against Apartheid*, 83.

<sup>14</sup> I root my analysis of people’s war in the works of Mao Zedong, Võ Nguyên Giáp, and Douglas Pike – all of which can be considered primary theoretical sources on the strategy. I also use the work of South African Scholar Anthea Jeffery to understand how the strategy was imported into South Africa.

<sup>15</sup> Douglas Pike, *Viet Cong: The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam* (Boston: MIT Press, 1966), 36.

turning a military conflict into a protracted battle of wills.

A people's war progresses along three stages: the defensive, the stalemate, and the counterattack. The first stage represents a period of relative weakness for the resistance. The defensive stage of a people's war is marked primarily by political organization and agitation. Networks of grassroots organizations with loose or hidden links to the insurgency are used to galvanize resistance in the form of protests, strikes, and other legal mass actions.<sup>16</sup> In turn, a mobilized populace provides protection, manpower, and legitimacy to the underground armed struggle. Political mobilization is matched with a "programme of violence," the goal of which is to destroy the mechanisms of local government and replace them with political organs operated by the resistance.<sup>17</sup>

As the power of the state is increasingly destabilized and the resistance gains momentum, the people's war enters the second phase of stalemate.<sup>18</sup> The stalemate can be considered a period of attritional warfare where the insurgency is expected to take enormous casualties. However, if the defensive stage has progressed as it should, the resistance will have a near endless supply of manpower and public support to draw on, wearing down the forces of the state over decades if need be. The third stage, the counterattack, is marked by a reversal of the power dynamic, an all-out blitz assault waged by conventional means to topple what remains of the state.<sup>19</sup> Luckily for South Africa, this period of large-scale conventional warfare never materialized. However, it is interesting to note that by the end of the struggle, the MK might have become the world's most overqualified guerilla army. The majority of MK personnel remained in exile, training in sophisticated combined arms tactics for an invasion of South Africa that would never come.<sup>20</sup>

The 1978 visit to Vietnam proved to be revelatory for the leadership of the MK. Upon leaving Vietnam, Joe Slovo, the organization's chief strategist, commented that for two decades the ANC had been "working ass backward."<sup>21</sup> While the ANC had counted on armed actions by the MK to create a political base, their experience in Vietnam had shown the primacy of political mass mobilization to galvanize armed struggle. In the

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<sup>16</sup> Pike, *Vietcong*, 117.

<sup>17</sup> Jeffery, *People's War*, location 1262.; Pike, *Vietcong*, 113.

<sup>18</sup> Mao Zedong "On Protracted War" in *The Selected Works of Mao Tse Tung, Marxists Internet Archive*, [https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2\\_09.htm](https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2_09.htm) (accessed December 13, 2017).

<sup>19</sup> Mao, "On Protracted War."

<sup>20</sup> Lodge, "Resistance and Reform," 409-491, 435.

<sup>21</sup> Jeffery, *People's War*, location 1455.

wake of their visit to Vietnam, the Revolutionary Politico-Military Commission of the ANC met in the Angolan capital of Luanda to discuss a bold strategic pivot. The end result of the Luanda meetings was the decision to import the Vietnamese style of revolutionary warfare into South Africa.<sup>22</sup> The trip to Vietnam and the period of debate and introspection within the high command of the MK that followed led to a reappraisal of the relationship between their military struggle and the political struggle waged by the wider ANC.

Among the recommendations that came out of the Luanda conference was a commitment to drastically increase the underground presence of the ANC within South Africa itself.<sup>23</sup> The infiltration of trained ANC and MK cadres into South Africa was meant to aid in the creation of “genuine mass organisations among all sections of our people.”<sup>24</sup> As we shall see in N’wamitwa, guerilla activity would be coordinated alongside and subservient to mass action. Under the directives of a people’s war, the mass democratic movement played a dual role. The first was deemed the above-ground or legal struggle. This entailed organized boycotts, stayaways, strikes, and protests aimed at disrupting South Africa’s economy, society, and international image.<sup>25</sup> These activities were largely a result of popular mass mobilization, but there was certainly coercive pressure to support mass actions. Refusal to do so could often result in injury or even death.<sup>26</sup> The TRC notes that “militant youth often took it upon themselves to monitor and enforce boycotts.”<sup>27</sup>

The campaign to uproot the power of the state in black majority areas was paired with an escalation of terrorist activity, aimed at South Africa’s power structures and white population and carried out by the

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<sup>22</sup> African National Congress, “The Green Book: Report of the Politico-Military Strategy Commission to the ANC National Executive Committee August 1979,” Marxists Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/subject/africa/anc/1979/green-book.htm> (accessed December 14, 2017).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Davis Welsh and J. E. Spence, *Ending Apartheid* (Harlow, UK: Pearson, 2011), 108.

<sup>26</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa*, Vol. 2 (London: Macmillan Reference, 1998), 381.; Martin Murray, *The Revolution Deferred: The Painful Birth of Post-Apartheid South Africa* (New York: Verso Books, 1994), 55.

<sup>27</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa*, Vol. 2, 381.

MK.<sup>28</sup> Terrorist attacks rose considerably through the mid to late 1980s, with 136 incidents recorded in 1985, 227 in 1986, and over 300 in 1989, making MK attacks a near daily occurrence.<sup>29</sup> These attacks did little to dent the overall effectiveness of state security structures, but they did have an important psychological effect for both blacks and whites. While the strategic impact of these actions was negligible, they demonstrated that the ANC had military as well as political muscles to flex.<sup>30</sup> The cost of this campaign was high for the MK operatives who took part. It is estimated that during this period, MK operatives in South Africa suffered a near 100 percent casualty rate.<sup>31</sup> One former MK operative estimated that in the field, the average survival period for guerrillas was six months.<sup>32</sup> It is estimated that of all the casualties the MK suffered over their 34-year armed struggle, over half occurred between 1985 and 1990.<sup>33</sup>

By the late 1980s, with many of the state's methods of control disrupted in black majority areas and with violence worsening, the South African government imposed a state of emergency.<sup>34</sup> The SADF was forced to intervene, which further inflamed tensions—in 1986 alone, 39,000 SADF soldiers were deployed in the townships.<sup>35</sup> During this period of increased destabilization, the ANC launched their most ambitious covert operation to date, Operation Vula. The goal of Operation Vula was to smuggle senior members of the ANC and MK leadership into the country in order to coordinate and direct the mass democratic movement and armed struggle.<sup>36</sup> The MK had a special role to play within the wider context of Operation Vula. While special operations units still engaged in sabotage and armed propaganda actions, specially trained MK cadres were infiltrated into South Africa with a new mandate: to begin the process of arming and training a guerilla army within the borders of South

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<sup>28</sup> For a much more in-depth discussion of this process than is feasible to give here please see Cherry, *Spear of the Nation* and Jeffery, *People's War*.

<sup>29</sup> Lodge, "Resistance and Reform," 462-463.; Cherry, *Spear of the Nation*, 38.

<sup>30</sup> Lodge, "Resistance and Reform," 462-463.

<sup>31</sup> Thula Simpson, "Toyi-Toyi-ing to Freedom: The Endgame in the ANC's Armed Struggle, 1989–1990," *Journal of South African Studies* 35, no. 2 (2009): 507–521, 509.

<sup>32</sup> Howard Barrell, *MK: the ANC's Armed Struggle* (Johannesburg: Penguin, 1990), 60.; Cherry, *Spear of the Nation*, 39.

<sup>33</sup> Lodge, "Resistance and Reform," 462.

<sup>34</sup> Murray, *The Revolution Deferred*, 53.

<sup>35</sup> Lodge, "Resistance and Reform," 470.

<sup>36</sup> Robert D.A. Henderson, "Operation Vula Against Apartheid," *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 10, no. 4 (1997): 418--455, 420.; Cherry, *Spear of the Nation*, 39.

Africa itself.<sup>37</sup> Vula also represented what is likely the largest gun smuggling operation in South African history, with thousands of small arms flooding into the country between 1988 and 1990.<sup>38</sup> It was presumably under the auspices of this operation that Comrade J returned in secret to his home community of N’wamitwa after over a decade in exile.

### **The Return of Comrade J: Preparations for the People’s War**

N’wamitwa is a communal territory comprised of a collection of 32 villages and is currently home to roughly 74,000 people.<sup>39</sup> Under the apartheid system, N’wamitwa was part of the Gazankulu homeland, devised by the architects of apartheid as a semi-autonomous enclave for the Tsonga ethnic group.<sup>40</sup> The homeland system within South Africa stands as a stark illustration of the institutionalized injustice of the apartheid system. Described by the famous South African dissident Steve Biko as “sophisticated concentration camps,” the homelands were kept as deliberately impoverished “tribal dumping grounds” under the control of local strongmen.<sup>41</sup>

For virtually the entirety of its existence as a homeland within South Africa, Gazankulu was under the control of one man: Professor Hudson Ntsanwisi. Ntsanwisi is somewhat of an enigma—in the historical memory of the former Gazankulu area, he is remembered as both a collaborator with apartheid and as a Tsonga renaissance man who published several novels in his native language.<sup>42</sup> The Ntsanwisi family was also involved with various business interests in Gazankulu, particularly the distribution of alcohol.<sup>43</sup> In *The Revolution Deferred*, political scientist Martin Murray ranks Ntsanwisi alongside the infamous Buthelezi clan in Kwazulu as the ANC’s most implacable opponents

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<sup>37</sup> Mac Maharaj and Pendrag O’Malley, *Shades of Difference: Mac Maharaj and The Struggle for South Africa* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 283.

<sup>38</sup> Connie Braam, *Operation Vula* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2004), 399.

<sup>39</sup> “N’wamitwa population statistics received from Ben Shipalana. Elizabeth Vibert, personal communication.

<sup>40</sup> “Hudson Ntsanwisi: Leader of Gazankulu, 72.” *New York Times*, March 26, 1993.

<sup>41</sup> Andile Mngxitama, *Biko Lives: Contesting the Legacy of Steve Biko*, ed. Andile Mngxitama Amanda Alexander and Nigel C. Gibson (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 12; Murray, *The Revolution Deferred*, 63-65.

<sup>42</sup> “Prof. Hudson Ntsanwisi, former Chief Minister of Gazankulu, dies in Johannesburg,” *South African History Online*. <http://www.sahistory.org.za/dated-event/prof-hudson-ntsawisi-former-chief-minister-gazankulu-dies-johannesburg> (accessed April 24, 2018).

<sup>43</sup> South African Institute for Race Relations, *South African Institute of Race Relations Annual Report 89/90* (Johannesburg, 1990), 497.

within the homeland system.<sup>44</sup> *The Sowetan*, an ANC-aligned newspaper, described Ntsanwisi as ruling the homeland with an iron fist.<sup>45</sup> "He wields so much power that even his name, which is mentioned in hush-hush tones, has become synonymous with the homeland."<sup>46</sup> Ntsanwisi's rule was enforced by a local army and constabulary loyal to him. Rural mobilization is a self-acknowledged blind spot in the ANC's people's war and up until the late 1980s, the violence engulfing much of the country had largely passed Gazankulu by.<sup>47</sup> In his memoir *Armed and Dangerous*, Ronnie Kasrils laments that, "until 1990 at any rate, we had not sufficiently reached out to politicise rural people."<sup>48</sup>

Despite the isolation of growing up far away from the white-controlled urban centres, by the late 1980s youth in Gazankulu were beginning to chafe under the yoke of apartheid. Some were beginning to look to the ANC for a solution. Among them was "George."<sup>49</sup> George made an ideal recruit for the MK's fledgling army in N'wamitwa for several reasons. He was a rebellious and physically imposing man of 27 years, fond of picking fistfights in the local *shabeen*.<sup>50</sup> By 1989, he was also becoming increasingly political as an organizer in the Giyani Youth Congress, a radical youth organization with links to the ANC.<sup>51</sup> George remembers,

I was an activist. In fact, I was one guy who would spread the ANC message around this area by then. People would consult with me. But the majority did not know that I was also an underground operative. They know me as comrade George the

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<sup>44</sup> Murray, *The Revolution Deferred*, 67.

<sup>45</sup> "Big Brother Alive and Well in Giyani," *The Sowetan*, March 2, 1989.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> "Hudson Ntsanwisi: Leader of Gazankulu, 72," New York Times. There was a vigorous, decades-long debate within the MK on whether to focus their limited resources on rural or urban mobilization. According to Ellis and Sechaba it was finally decided that "people in the townships would take the place of the jungles and mountains which had hidden guerillas in other countries." For a more in-depth discussion of this debate see *Comrades Against Apartheid*, 111.

<sup>48</sup> Kasrils, *Armed and Dangerous*, 195-196.

<sup>49</sup> Pseudonym. "George," whose story is the lynchpin of this piece was unique among my interview participants in several ways. Of all my interviewees he was the only one to join the insurgency before the unbanning of political organizations in 1990. His role as a gun runner also gives us a fascinating insight on the process of secretly arming and organizing an insurgent army.

<sup>50</sup> A shabeen is an informal drinking establishment, one of the several Gaelic words that have inexplicably worked their way into the lexicon of Black South Africa.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with "George," February 26, 2018.

ANC guy, who talks to us about ANC.<sup>52</sup>

Aside from his physical attributes and background in political activism, George possessed something else indispensable to the resistance—his brand new, bright red *bakkie*, or pick-up truck.<sup>53</sup> Perhaps the exact reason he was selected for recruitment into the MK will never be known. However, what is known is that in October 1989, George was asked to a surreptitious meeting with a high-level figure in the ANC underground. If one were to think of the insurgency in N’wamitwa as a web, Comrade J is the spider sitting in the middle, subtly manipulating the strings. Due to his refusal to be interviewed, he remains an enigmatic – if central – figure of the people’s war as it unfolded in N’wamitwa. However, through his own testimony and appeal for amnesty during the course of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and through interviews with former comrades, we can trace some aspects of his time as an exile and as the paramount commander of the MK during the people’s war in N’wamitwa.

We know Comrade J was born in Mavele village around 1960. By all accounts he was a gentle and soft-spoken child. A distant cousin who later served under him as a member of the MK, described Comrade J as “a fine man, gentle, he wouldn’t harm a fly.”<sup>54</sup> Due to a congenital defect in one of his legs he was left physically disabled from an early age and attended a school for the disabled in Letaba.<sup>55</sup> Here he distinguished himself as a brilliant student, particularly excelling in math and the sciences.<sup>56</sup> It remains unknown what caused Comrade J to renounce his life in South Africa and pursue a career as a stateless militant. However, we do know that he left N’wamitwa in 1977 when he was in his late teens.<sup>57</sup> This timing coincided with the wave of student activism that followed the Soweto riots and the subsequent government crackdown. It is widely assumed that J was one of the thousands of young South Africans who took the Northern Highway into exile during this period, in order to undergo military training in the frontline states. From J’s testimony we know his time in exile was not spent idly. In his own words:

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Interview with “Participant,” February 24, 2018.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with “George.”

<sup>56</sup> Interview with “Participant,” February 23, 2018.

<sup>57</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission Amnesty Committee, *Attack on Rita Township and the Murder of Mr. Shingange*.

I joined the ANC in 1977 in Mozambique. I then went to complete O levels for two years at Sierra Leone. I then went to ... Tanzania, where I stayed until March 1980. I then went to Cuba to study Chemical Engineering. I returned in 1986 and went to Dakawa, Tanzania. In 1987 I was sent to Angola to do military training. Thereafter I went to Zambia to await infiltration into the country.<sup>58</sup>

According to a former associate, someone in the MK command saw Comrade J's potential, grooming him to be their man in N'wamitwa.<sup>59</sup> It is impossible to know exactly what happened to J during his decade in exile. How this sensitive, physically disabled young man made it through the MK's notoriously brutal military training is equally mysterious. What is known is that by October 1989, J had returned to N'wamitwa via the ANC's smuggling routes in Swaziland.<sup>60</sup> Presumably, he was one of the hundreds of MK operatives smuggled into South Africa as part of Operation Vula. It seems that under the alias Norman Mangani, J re-established contact with his sister in Mavele village and used her home as a kind of forward operating base. As he explains, "My mission was to reconnoitre and establish an MK presence in the area. I had orders to establish underground units which I commanded. I also trained and recruited MK cadres in the area."<sup>61</sup> It appears that Comrade J returned to N'wamitwa a changed man. Despite his cousin's description of a gentle soul incapable of harming the local insect life, the image of the man who returned from exile is that of a hardened covert operative, absolutely dedicated to the cause of liberation and more than willing to use violence to achieve it.

Despite Comrade J's use of an alias, George recognized him immediately.

I told him look man I know you. You were at school in Letaba, the school for the handicapped, there he was learning along with my younger brother ... And he used to tell me that you skipped the country somewhere around '77 ... I know what you are doing and I want to work with you.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Interview with "Participant," February 23, 2018.

<sup>60</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission Amnesty Committee, *Attack on Rita Township and the Murder of Mr. Shingange*.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with "George."

Even without George's firsthand experience from Letaba, by 1989 Comrade J had become something of a hometown hero amongst the rebellious youth of N'wamitwa. According to a former associate:

We heard of this one guy who had skipped the country as early as 1978.<sup>63</sup> He decided "I can't stay here as long as we are suffering," he decided to cross the country and get military training ... We only knew that around our area there was one student who decided to leave everything ... and go and fight for my country.<sup>64</sup>

In discussions with various informants about their time working under Comrade J, two character traits stand out, traits shared by many guerilla commanders throughout history: charisma and brutality. One of the young men he recruited into the MK remembers,

[J] was very stubborn. We were very afraid of him. He was too aggressive to an extent that we thought he was crazy but he was not. He looked crippled sort of, but whatever he would say, we were going to do it.<sup>65</sup>

As will be discussed later, this fear was well-founded. Still, many informants describe Comrade J as a charismatic leader who led by example and inspired a great deal of loyalty in those who served under him. According to another teenage MK recruit, "we all wanted to be like him."<sup>66</sup> It also seems that J was a canny judge of character; "it was almost like he could read someone's mind."<sup>67</sup> Upon his first meeting with his new commander, George was suitably impressed.

I had read books about the guys who had sacrificed for our freedom ... I read about Chief Albert Luthuli and his call let my people go ... I've read books like... *Your Country is Beautiful* by Alan Paton. So I was fascinated by these people who were bold enough to stand up and say apartheid is wrong, and it must be abolished. And when I saw Comrade [J] I saw a guy who responded to that inner call that says do something for your

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<sup>63</sup> From Comrade J's TRC testimony we know he actually left in 1977. Truth and Reconciliation Commission Amnesty Committee, *Attack on Rita Township and the Murder of Mr. Shingange*.

<sup>64</sup> Interview with "Participant," February 23, 2018.

<sup>65</sup> Interview with "Participant," February 23, 2018.

<sup>66</sup> Interview with "Participant," February 22, 2018.

<sup>67</sup> Interview with "George."

country. And he was ... I mean physically this problem of walking. Yeah, and I was like why is this man doing this when he has this condition and I am fine. But I am doing nothing. I think I need to join this man ... he really inspired me.<sup>68</sup>

George's induction into the shadowy world of the MK was a carefully managed affair, marked by small tests of competence and loyalty as well as an incremental escalation of his responsibilities. The first duty George was asked to perform was relatively innocuous. He was told to transport Comrade J to meet surreptitiously with his mother in nearby Jopie village.<sup>69</sup> George helped facilitate several secret meetings for his new commanding officer, but always had the sense of being carefully observed.<sup>70</sup> Eventually, he was asked to move from transporting fugitives to a much more delicate cargo, weapons. George's career as N'wamitwa's chief gun runner began somewhat inauspiciously. The comrades he was meant to rendezvous with never appeared and after a nerve-wracking night of waiting, George was forced to return home in defeat.<sup>71</sup>

In retrospect, George is certain that this event was yet another test. When asked if the guns ever did arrive, he laughed: "lots of them."<sup>72</sup> From November 1989 onwards guns began to flow into N'wamitwa at an astonishing rate. The weapons that George transported were largely from the Eastern Bloc. The cargo consisted mainly of the ubiquitous AK-47 and the Škorpion, a cheap Czech-made submachine gun.<sup>73</sup> According to George:

We had hand grenades, we had landmines, and these ones that you put on electric pylons [likely some kind of limpet mine]. So we had those things. And lots of bullets of course for the Škorpions, for the AK's, they were there too.<sup>74</sup>

Naturally, George and his cohorts took part in some unsanctioned target practice, behavior he later described as "naughty."<sup>75</sup> Like many insurgents the world over, George had a particular fondness for the AK-47. George

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid. Here "George" almost certainly means the famous *Cry the Beloved Country* by Alan Paton.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

noted that “anyone could use an AK-47. Once it’s automatic, you just go like that [miming holding and aiming a gun] and shoot until the magazine is finished.”<sup>76</sup> The methods the MK used to communicate the location of weapon caches were low tech yet effective. As George describes,

To fetch weapons ... they would give us a map and say on the road it will be marked ... He would make mark like this [miming an x] ... Then there will be a tree somewhere and under that tree there will be a mark and you’ll start digging. You get the weapons and put them in the car and drive back.<sup>77</sup>

The guns would then be hidden by George in a discrete, but easily accessible location.

It was very difficult but we just ... make it somewhere in the bush, far away from people, and we would try to make sure people wouldn’t realize that the soil has been disturbed. We tried our level best and it was not easy.<sup>78</sup>

As can be imagined, moving guns for an insurgency in an authoritarian state was a delicate undertaking. Caution could easily bleed over into paranoia. The MK cell in N’wamitwa was small and tightly controlled by bonds of secrecy. It quickly becomes apparent from the TRC report that each member of the cell operated under a nom de guerre, obscuring their identities from their comrades.<sup>79</sup> George, as the man in charge of moving the weapons, operated largely independently from the rest of the cell. Due to constant fear of informers and police raids, he worked entirely from memory. He recalls,

It was memory because there was soldiers all over, there was security branch all over. Anytime at some stage they recognized what we were up to, and we were marked people. So they could have arrested us, beaten us, and we could have said “there they are.” They used to raid our places, they could have obtained documents, so you had to keep it in your head. If they killed us even [J] and the other guys would have forfeited the guns ...

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission Amnesty Committee, *Attack on Rita Township and the Murder of Mr. Shingange*.

they never would have found where the weapons were.<sup>80</sup>

George's description lines up precisely with that of Mac Maharaj, the architect of Operation Vula, who noted that during his time as a covert operative in Natal "certain people had access to caches ... but only one person knew where every cache was."<sup>81</sup> Similarly, George knew very little about who else, other than his close associates, was working with the movement or their activities.<sup>82</sup> Despite taking these precautions, the MK had at least one close call which cost their unit a cache of arms.

Those guys made an arms cache during the day and there was this old man looking after the cattle. He saw them digging that pit for the guns. He went back to tell his headman, his induna, and then the induna went to report to the soldiers here in N'wamitwa ... So they came with metal detectors and took everything.<sup>83</sup>

### **"We Were Giving Our People Hope:" Armed Propaganda and Popular Revolt in Gazankulu**

From the testimony of Comrade J at his amnesty hearing, we can glean some tantalising details about the ANC's supply networks and command structure in the area. The war in N'wamitwa seems to have been run out of the neighboring Kingdom of Swaziland. According to J, the guns were coming over the border from Swaziland. The kingdom also played host, most likely unknowingly, to a mysterious figure operating under the nom de guerre Timen.<sup>84</sup> Timen appears to have been J's direct superior, and in charge of arming and coordinating the people's war from the relative safety of Swaziland. It seems that J was given a large amount of personal discretion as a commander. As he states,

When you are trained militarily ... you are taught to identify the enemy, then on that basis you know who to target and who not to target. Under certain circumstances, you can get orders to say that: "Deal with this person," but under certain circumstances, you as a commander on the ground, you choose which person to

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<sup>80</sup> Interview with "George."

<sup>81</sup> Maharaj and O'Malley, *Shades of Difference*, 283.

<sup>82</sup> Interview with "George."

<sup>83</sup> Interview with "George." It is unclear whom "Those guys" refers to.

<sup>84</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission Amnesty Committee, *Attack on Rita Township and the Murder of Mr. Shingange*.

deal with, based on the information that you have.<sup>85</sup>

While he was largely given free rein by his superiors to plan operations as he saw fit, Comrade J remained deeply tied to the ANC command structure during this period. As he notes: “Each action that I participated in, no matter how minor it could have been, a report was sent back to my commanders.”<sup>86</sup> J makes reference to remaining in contact with his superiors through couriers, although he also notes he made the journey himself several times to meet with his commanders in person.<sup>87</sup>

During their period of activity from October 1989 to June 1990, the MK carried out several armed actions in N’wamitwa and the surrounding area, targeting policemen and members of the security branch. Ngabenziwa Thomas Shingange, a “notoriously cruel” member of the homeland police force, was assassinated when the MK felt he was getting too close to discovering their identities.<sup>88</sup> By examining his assassination, we can extrapolate how the MK in N’wamitwa chose its targets and operated. According to J’s testimony, Shingange “was notorious for harassing political activists.”<sup>89</sup> J determined that an example was to be made “to show other black policemen not to follow in the footsteps of Shingange.”<sup>90</sup> Through analysis of the TRC testimony of three of the combatants involved in the assassination that occurred in the spring of 1990, we can create something of a post-mortem on this act of political violence.

It was decided that the MK would hit Shingange on his way to his cousin’s memorial service. Shortly after picking up his sister, his car was ambushed by two MK gunmen.<sup>91</sup> Shingange was killed instantly while his sister Lilly was shot in the leg. In a victim impact statement given at the TRC she described the experience:

When we went out to the car after walking some metres ... we heard some shots. I was in the middle. Between myself and my brother two bullets passed. He was struck by the third bullet. After the shots went off, the car went off the road and inside another yard ... I was crying by then. I was calling for my mother

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Interview with “George.”

<sup>89</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission Amnesty Committee, *Attack on Rita Township and the Murder of Mr. Shingange*.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

to come see us before we died. After that I can't remember ...  
When I woke up I was in the hospital.<sup>92</sup>

The Shingange assassination fits into the pattern of how MK hit squads tended to operate while on assignment in South Africa there was a short burst of targeted violence against a high-profile individual.<sup>93</sup> George also notes there were several skirmishes with security forces around the intersection leading to Tzaneen, the nearest large town.<sup>94</sup> Fitting with the first stage of a people's war, many of these can be considered acts of armed propaganda meant to dispel notions of the enemy's invulnerability and to ignite the spirit of resistance in a downtrodden population, rather than to harm the state militarily. In the words of George,

We were sort of waging an [armed] propaganda struggle giving our people hope that it is possible to fight the regime even though it was so powerful, and we were not even closer to defeating them I must acknowledge. Although my friends wouldn't like to hear this, the Afrikaners were heavily armed and prepared for war, more than prepared for war.<sup>95</sup>

The power discrepancy between the MK and the South African state cannot be overstated. Still, it seems that an important part of MK political training involved drawing on the triumphs of other successful Third World liberation movements for inspiration. George discusses how he and others in the MK were heavily influenced and encouraged by the successes of revolutionary movements in Cuba and Vietnam.

Historically we knew that even if a regime was so powerful, it's possible to defeat them. You will know about the Cuban struggle there, they managed to win back their country. You will remember about your country's involvement in Vietnam.<sup>96</sup> A very, very small country, but it resisted the might of the USA, until the USA withdrew. So we studied those things, we knew

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> For one of the best descriptions of the day-to-day operations and procedures of MK assassination squads see *A Just Defiance: The Bomb makers, the Insurgents and a Legendary Treason Trial* (London: Portobello Books, 2011), by the South African human rights lawyer Peter Harris who painstakingly recreates the activities of his clients.

<sup>94</sup> Interview with "George."

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> It seems that in much of rural South Africa, Canada is relatively unknown as a sovereign nation and is often believed to be a state within the United States.

about those things. That it is possible, as long as you win the support of the local population, you can win the struggle. But if you don't win the support of the local population then you have a problem.<sup>97</sup>

As is to be expected in the context of a people's war, the actions of Comrade J's MK cell were a relatively minor aspect of a much wider political effort to bring the Gazankulu homeland to its knees. Throughout the late 1980s, the ANC began to increase efforts to raise its profile among the inhabitants of the Gazankulu homeland under the guise of various civic organizations. At the time, non-political civic organizations were allowed freedom of assembly, enabling them to organize and recruit. One interviewee for this project worked with a civic organization during this period that was ostensibly dedicated to improving the road system within the Gazankulu homeland. According to him, "we'd be working on the pavement but really we'd be preaching the gospel ... we'd say one, two, three, who wants to join ANC."<sup>98</sup>

In February 1990, student activists spearheaded by the Giyani Youth Congress began to rise up against what they perceived as a corrupt and sub-par educational system. At the same time, the civil service of Gazankulu began a stay-away from work demanding better pay and the resignation of Gazankulu's Chief Minister Hudson Ntsanwisi. The South African Institute for Race Relations' annual Race Relations Survey estimated that the stay-away was "virtually total." These actions were coordinated with a large-scale boycott of businesses owned and operated by the Ntsanwisi family. Many of these businesses were also burned to the ground, along with the homes of policemen and those unwilling to take part in the strike.<sup>99</sup> Within two months, most aspects of administration within the homeland had been paralysed and the government was unable to deliver even basic services to the people.<sup>100</sup> For the first time in his 21 years as Chief Minister, Hudson Ntsanwisi found himself fighting for his political life.

While these actions were largely popular grassroots responses to an unpopular and ineffectual political system, there was a hard edge of

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<sup>97</sup> Interview with "George."

<sup>98</sup> Interview with "Participant", February 23, 2018.

<sup>99</sup> South African Institute for Race Relations, *South African Institute of Race Relations Annual Report 89/90*, 497.; "4 Shot Dead in Gazankulu," *The Star*, February 22, 1990. "Boycott and Stayaway Continues in Gazankulu," *The Star*, February 23, 1990.

<sup>100</sup> South African Institute for Race Relations, *South African Institute of Race Relations Annual Report 89/90*, 499.; "Gazankulu Workers Urged to Return to Jobs," *The Star*, March 8, 1990.

coercion. The hand of the MK can be seen in a series of grenade attacks, largely against the homes of policemen, as well as against businesses who refused to shutter their doors in solidarity with the strikers.<sup>101</sup> During this time a pamphlet, allegedly from the MK, circulated around the community threatening with execution any civil servants who did not take part in the strike.<sup>102</sup> The *Cape Times* also reported several shooting incidents involving automatic weapons directed at the police in Giyani and at the homeland's transportation networks.<sup>103</sup>

The response on the part of the state to these disturbances was characteristically heavy-handed. By April 1990, over 2000 people in Gazankulu had been arrested, and at least 29 killed, largely in clashes with the homeland police force.<sup>104</sup> Newspapers from the time record many incidents of the homeland police using deadly and overwhelming force on protesters during the unrest.<sup>105</sup> With the situation within Gazankulu rapidly deteriorating, Ntsanwisi was forced to call in outside help. On February 21, 1990, a detachment of SADF soldiers entered Gazankulu as an occupying force in order to help the homeland forces restore order.<sup>106</sup> The MK's response to the occupation has become the stuff of legend in N'wamitwa. On April 12 1990, MK guerillas staged a brazen attack on a temporary SADF base at the stadium in Nkowankowa, as was described at the beginning of this article. Four national servicemen were injured. It is worth noting that even before the attack on April 12, the local SADF commander stated that the countryside was "dangerously uneasy" and that travel between villages at night was deemed extremely hazardous.<sup>107</sup>

As is typical of armed propaganda actions, the cultural and political impacts of the "battle of Nkowankowa stadium" far outweigh any effect on the military balance of power in the area. Still, the attack held tremendous symbolic importance for two reasons. Firstly, it marked the first time the resistance had directly targeted the hated army of the apartheid state within the homeland. Secondly, the stadium in Nkowankowa held symbolic value as a focal point of resistance. Before it

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<sup>101</sup> "Unrest in Gazankulu Not Caused by ANC," *Cape Times*, April 6, 1990.

<sup>102</sup> South African Institute for Race Relations, *South African Institute of Race Relations Annual Report 89/90*, 500.

<sup>103</sup> "Unrest in Gazankulu Continues," *Cape Times*, April 11, 1990.

<sup>104</sup> "Protest March Against Hudson," *The Soweton*, April 5, 1990.

<sup>105</sup> "4 Shot Dead in Gazankulu," *The Star*, February 22, 1990.; "Unrest in Gazankulu Continues," *Cape Times*, April 11, 1990.

<sup>106</sup> "SADF Clamp: Troops Sent to Giyani as Youth's Body Found," *The Soweton*, February 21, 1990.

<sup>107</sup> South African Institute for Race Relations, *South African Institute of Race Relations Annual Report 89/90*, 498.

was taken over as a temporary base by the SADF, it had been an important staging point for political rallies. For instance, during the previous month the stadium had hosted 30,000 people for the highly politicized funeral of two young men who had died in clashes with the police.<sup>108</sup> Comrade J also notes that by attacking the stadium at Nkowankowa the MK sought to undermine notions of the SADF's invulnerability. In his words, "by attacking them [we were] showing them that the soldiers were also vulnerable."<sup>109</sup>

In the aftermath of the attack at Nkowankowa, George found himself in the cross hairs of the apartheid state. "I was banned by the soldiers. They said if they should see my bakkie anywhere near Nkowankowa they would shoot to kill."<sup>110</sup> Similarly, those with suspected links to the insurgency faced constant raids on their homes.<sup>111</sup> Despite increased pressure on the insurgency by the forces of the state, in the end the seeds of the cell's destruction were sown by internal dissention and ill-discipline within the unit. It seems that sometime in mid-1990, one of the insurgents who had taken part in the attack on Nkowankowa committed a senseless crime. Using weapons provided by the MK, he attacked a hostel for boarding students of Mahwahwa High School in the village of Nkambako, terrorising the students and raping two young women.<sup>112</sup>

Needless to say, Comrade J was furious. His subordinate's actions risked squandering the goodwill that the MK was trying so hard to build with the local community. Given the importance that the ANC put on winning over the local population, his actions could not stand. He was given a stark choice—either go into exile or be executed. Choosing the former, it fell to George to smuggle him down to Mpumalanga and over the border to Swaziland.<sup>113</sup> George notes that during the ordeal he didn't sleep for two days.<sup>114</sup> If J thought the issue had been dealt with, he forgot one important detail: the man's wife.<sup>115</sup> It seems that despite MK's insistence on secrecy, their now exiled comrade had shared considerably more about the membership of the movement with his wife than he should

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<sup>108</sup> "Force Chief to Quit," *The Sowetan*, March 5, 1990.

<sup>109</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission Amnesty Committee, *Attack on Rita Township and the Murder of Mr. Shingange*.

<sup>110</sup> Interview with "George," February 26, 2018.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

have. After his exile, possibly as an act of vengeance against the men who had forced her husband to leave the country, she turned informer.<sup>116</sup>

### **"I Might Have Been Hanged:" The Death and Rebirth of the MK in N'wamitwa**

At the time, this was of course unknown to Comrade J who was already planning his next operation: a brazen attempt on the life of George Rasebotse, the police chief of the neighboring village of Rita.<sup>117</sup> At around 10:00PM on the night of June 15, Comrade J and three associates lay in wait near Rasebotse's home.<sup>118</sup> This time however, it was the guerrillas who were ambushed. As the four lay in wait their position was illuminated by a spotlight mounted on a SADF armoured car.<sup>119</sup> After a brief firefight the insurgents were forced to scatter.<sup>120</sup> J's TRC testimony reveals a tragic post-script: as he sought to escape his pursuers, J jumped the fence of a nearby technical school in search of a hiding place, dropping a hand grenade in the process.<sup>121</sup> While he tried to retrieve the bomb, in the chaos of his escape it was lost in the tall grass, later exploding and killing an unnamed civilian.<sup>122</sup>

One can perhaps see the hand of the exiled man's wife in the ambush in Rita township. Whether or not the army knew about the attempt on Rasebotse's life, they knew who was responsible, and sprang into action based on her information. George, along with much of the MK membership in N'wamitwa, was arrested. "When that policeman was killed the police had a list of us. So the policeman was killed in the evening, and in the morning I was running out of the house dressing myself while running away from the police because they were coming for me."<sup>123</sup> George was taken to the police station and interrogated. However,

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission Amnesty Committee, *Attack on Rita Township and the Murder of Mr. Shingange*.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> This is one of several points in J's story where I have trouble reconciling his displays of athleticism with his apparent physical disability. According to Basani, my research collaborator, there are rumors that John underwent a medical procedure while in exile that increased his mobility; Truth and Reconciliation Commission Amnesty Committee, *Attack on Rita Township and the Murder of Mr. Shingange*.

<sup>122</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission Amnesty Committee, *Attack on Rita Township and the Murder of Mr. Shingange*.

<sup>123</sup> I found no evidence George Rasebotse was killed during the gunfight in Rita township. Given that "George" was not present during the operation, it is safe to assume that he is confused as to the outcome; Interview with "George."

he was told that there was insufficient evidence to hold him, and he was released.<sup>124</sup>

As was mentioned previously, Comrade J was an excellent judge of character, and did not appoint George to his important role within the organization lightly. The police had continued to detain many others within the unit who had far less affiliation with the movement than George did.<sup>125</sup> As such, he suspected that he was being surveilled in the hopes he would panic and lead the police to the weapons.<sup>126</sup> Twenty-eight years later, George still grins mischievously as he describes his attempt to bore the policemen tailing him into submission. “I just went to the *shabeen* and drank and drank every day until they came and took me away.”<sup>127</sup> Despite the fact that George was far too canny an operative to fall into the trap set for him, the fact remains that by the end of June 1990 the police had successfully rolled up the MK’s entire operation in N’wamitwa. Even Comrade J was caught and incarcerated. According to George, when police raided the property where J was staying, they found several AK-47s hidden in the thatched roof of his rondavel.<sup>128</sup>

George was indicted on six felonies including kidnapping, murder, arms trafficking, transporting fugitives, and intimidation.<sup>129</sup> In the words of George, “if it was not ... 1990/91 I might have been hanged.”<sup>130</sup> Despite the obvious fact that the arrests were disastrous for the MK in N’wamitwa, they could not have come at a better time. On August 7 the ANC suspended the MK’s 29-year armed struggle, leading to the mass release of political prisoners.<sup>131</sup> Among the 1,300 prisoners released were Comrade J and George, after just over a month in prison.<sup>132</sup>

While the initial stages of the insurgency in N’wamitwa lasted only nine months, Comrade J’s unit achieved many of the goals outlined by Mao for the early phases of a people’s war. The MK had made their presence known through acts of armed propaganda. Their armed propaganda struggle took place alongside a mass civil uprising against the homeland government. This combination of targeted guerilla activity in support of mass action conforms to the ANC’s nationwide strategy as

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> “ANC Agrees to End Armed Struggle,” *The Washington Post*, July 8, 1990.

<sup>132</sup> Interview with “George.”

discussed in the Green Book.<sup>133</sup> The stalemate phase was brought to a screeching halt by the disastrous fallout from the defection of the exiled man's wife and the ambush in Rita township. However, events occurring on the national level resurrected the MK's presence in N'wamitwa. These actions had also begun to shift perceptions of the ANC from being a group of unruly terrorists to that of a government-in-waiting. Furthermore, the uprising fatally weakened the homeland government of Hudson Ntsanwisi, who was able to secure his short-term political future only by negotiating with—and ultimately endorsing—the ANC.<sup>134</sup> Comrade J's unit would remain active in the N'wamitwa area until the democratic transfer of power in 1994. However, after his release in August 1990, Comrade J and his subordinates moved increasingly from destabilizing the area to administering it; laying the groundwork for an electoral takeover.

Today, N'wamitwa is a quiet rural community tucked away in the north of Limpopo province, one of South Africa's least developed regions. On the surface, N'wamitwa shows few signs of its tumultuous recent history. I spent a month there on another research project in 2014 with little idea that this story lurked under the surface. The stadium at Nkowankowa has largely returned to its original purpose, although it is still a major venue for political rallies. The stadium remains influential in local life and has served as a springboard for what is quickly becoming a South African phenomenon: Soccer Grannies.<sup>135</sup> For his part, Comrade J remains an influential figure in the area he first left 42 years ago. Due to his refusal to be interviewed, one can only wonder how he would reflect upon the changes in the community he fought to liberate.

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<sup>133</sup> African National Congress, "The Green Book: Report of the Politico-Military Strategy Commission to the ANC National Executive Committee August 1979."

<sup>134</sup> "Five SA Homelands Support the ANC," *The Star*, May 6, 1990.

<sup>135</sup> Started in 2003 by Limpopo social worker Rebecca Ntsanwisi this soccer league made up entirely of elderly women now boasts over 40 teams nationwide. "Soccer Grannies," found on <https://www.soccergrannies.com/> (accessed July 25 2019).

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Figure 1: *Map of South Africa showing the rural community of N'wamitwa.* Map by Darren Reid.

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