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The Sharpeville Massacre, Violence,
and the Struggles of the African National Congress, 1960-1990

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On May 26, 1948, the South African white electorate placed the exclusively Afrikaner National Party into power under Prime Minister Dr. Daniel Malan. Fearing the strong African majority, the National Party implemented a complex series of discriminatory laws that ended up being the basis of 40-years of institutionalized racial segregation, which became known as apartheid. The Afrikaner-dominated South African government sought to remove “black danger” from society through the passing of laws like the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act, the Immorality Act, which banned interracial sex, and the Population Registration Act, which labeled all South Africans by race. Malan further resettled thousands of black South Africans into poverty-stricken Bantustans, and South African society was forever changed.¹

Obviously, most black South Africans were unhappy about these changes, as they had yet to be enfranchised. Organizations like the African National Congress (ANC) devoted themselves to non-violent resistance against apartheid, and it began to soar in both membership and

¹ Heidi Holland, *The Struggle: A History of the African National Congress* (New York, NY: George Braziller, INC., 1989), 69.

influence.² The ANC's initial Defiance Campaign proves that their preferred method of resistance was peaceful and non-violent. Boycotts, hunger strikes, and grassroots organization were the cornerstone of the ANC's pre-Sharpeville methods of liberation. However, the Sharpeville Massacre marked a turning point where, seeing the shortcomings of a purely non-violent resistance, Nelson Mandela shifted the ANC's methods to incorporate the practicality of violence. His plan to combine non-violent resistance with sabotage and the building of an ANC military wing post-Sharpeville demonstrates this change. ANC internal writings prove that the Sharpeville Massacre on March 21, 1960, marked a change in the ANC's attitudes towards violence as a means of resistance.

The massacre and the subsequent banning of the ANC represented the urgency of the anti-apartheid movement, so Mandela and the ANC created Umkhonto we Sizwe as a quick and direct response to the National Party's reactionary actions. While never resorting to a full-scale armed insurgency, the ANC's shift towards using violence as "armed propaganda" showed Mandela's limited yet present belief in violence. Mandela's military training by the Algerian army and the actual implementation of violent sabotage diversified the ANC's toolbox of resistance. Despite Mandela's shift towards violence, the ANC continued to use peaceful methods until negotiations to end apartheid came in 1990.

The ANC's peaceful methods are most evident during their Defiance Campaign of the 1950s. Here, the ANC organized and executed dozens of highly organized, controlled, and peaceful protests. An early event of the Defiance Campaign was a response to the Separate Representation of Voters' Bill, which revoked the rights of many Africans and "coloured" men in and around Cape Town. The ANC backed the Franchise Action Council and its subsequent

² Francis Meli, *A History of the ANC: South Africa Belongs to Us* (Harare, Zimbabwe: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1988), 120.

peaceful march through the streets of the Cape.³ Similarly, “thousands of volunteers refused to obey segregationist rules at bus stops, train stations, post offices, and so on, generally in an orderly and peaceful manner.”⁴

Obedying the peaceful requisites of civil disobedience, the Defiance Campaign accepted the jailing and mass imprisonment of their volunteers. Thousands of supporters “had voluntarily to jail despite the intimidating effect of police action, of dismissal by employers, and the propaganda of the bulk of the press and the radio; some teachers who had done little before had thrown up their jobs to defy.”⁵ The ANC engaged in countless more Gandhian, as to say peaceful, methods like boycotts against Rupert Group cigarettes and the PUTCO bus service.⁶ Over the course of the 1950s the Defiance Campaign became a full-fledged non-cooperation movement, similar to its massive counterpart in India and the United States and sharing litanies of methods.

The Defiance Campaign’s commitment to non-violence was often expressed in public statements. A statement on the Defiance Campaign’s spread to the East clearly expressed that the Natal Branch of the ANC “supported the decision (...) to launch a campaign of non-violent passive resistance against discriminatory and unjust laws in the Union of South Africa with the object and hope of getting white South Africa to adopt a policy of allowing full democratic rights for all who qualify for them.”⁷ It is clear that, during the Defiance Campaign, the ANC explicitly supported the doctrine and principles of non-violence.

³ Meli, *A History of the ANC*, 120.

⁴ Gary Seidman, “Blurred Lines: Nonviolence in South Africa,” in *PS: Political Science and Politics* 33 (June 2000): 161-167, 162.

⁵ Stephen Zunes, “The Role of Non-Violent Action in the Downfall of Apartheid,” in *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 37 (1999): 137-169, 150.

⁶ Meli, *A History of the ANC*, 129.

⁷ “‘We Go to Action’: Statement on the Launching In Natal of the Defiance Campaign, August 30, 1952,” South African History Online.

Similarly, the Freedom Charter of 1955, a statement of the core principles of the ANC and its allies, symbolizes the extent to which the Congress values peace as a virtue for South Africa. Alongside demanding the right to universal suffrage, a fair justice system, and comprehensive rights for workers, the charter aimed to foster cultural change on the bases of peace, friendship, and harmony.⁸ The concept of peace was ingrained in the ANC's doctrine and actions in the 1950s, and the ANC actively denounced violence committed in its name by radicals. It is obvious that, before Sharpeville, the Congress viewed passive resistance above all other methods of struggle, and the Defiance Campaign shows the extent to which the ANC valued non-violent opposition to apartheid.

During the 1950s, the ANC was completely devoted to non-violent means of resistance. Nevertheless, the government under the National Party met this resistance with violence. Much of this violence occurred through the legal system. When jails became overcrowded with volunteers, the government hastily allowed judges to sentence demonstrators to lashings alongside three-year terms.⁹ Despite the constant repression of not only resisters but also all other Africans, there was no one specific act of brutality that the ANC could rally behind through the 1950's Defiance Campaign. So, it was difficult for the Congress to gain momentum and membership. The ANC's non-violent methods were strong, yet the government did not listen. The turn of the 1960s and the Sharpeville Massacre would be the inciting moment when the ANC realized that their tactics must shift.

On Monday March 21, 1960, an ANC breakaway organization, the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC), rallied upwards thousands of protestors together to be voluntarily arrested for not carrying their identification passes in front of the Sharpeville police station. In an attempt to

⁸ "The Freedom Charter (1955)," Historical Papers Research Archive, Johannesburg, South Africa.

⁹ Gary Seidman, "Blurred Lines: Nonviolence in South Africa," 162.

discourage protestors, the government sent jets and armored cars while armed police and angry, yet non-violent, protestors stood in deadlock. Consequently, chaos broke out and the ground was soon riddled with 69 African corpses.¹⁰ The 178 wounded, over half of them shot in the back while running away, were all placed under mass-arrest in the hospital.¹¹ The international community was appalled after seeing images of two armed police officers watching over a field filled with the dead;¹² these police were praised for their actions soon after.¹³

Following the events of Sharpeville, the federal government declared a state of emergency, jailed tens of thousands, and banned the ANC and PAC under the Suppression of Communism Act.¹⁴ The ANC, forced to go underground, realized that their methods of peaceful protest were not effective enough. In his famous “I am Prepared to Die” speech, Nelson Mandela explains that “it would be unrealistic and wrong for African leaders to continue preaching peace and non-violence at a time when the government met our peaceful demands with force.”¹⁵ Other ANC leaders agreed with Mandela’s sentiment, but of course internal opposition arose.

Mandela also realized that violence caused by impatient radicals who took matters into their own hands complicated the stance of the ANC. Mandela believed that the government leading up to and culminating in the Sharpeville Massacre “pointed clearly to the inevitable growth amongst Africans of the belief that violence was the only way out - it showed that a Government which uses force to maintain its rule teaches the oppressed to use force to oppose it.”¹⁶ Attempts to assassinate Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd the day after the banning of the

¹⁰ Holland, *The Struggle*, 120.

¹¹ Holland, *The Struggle*, 121.

¹² Holland, *The Struggle*, 120.

¹³ Holland, *The Struggle*, 122.

¹⁴ Meli, *A History of the ANC*, 140.

¹⁵ Nelson Mandela, “I am Prepared to Die,” Speech, Rivonia Trial, Palace of Justice, Pretoria Supreme Court, Pretoria, South Africa, April 20, 1964.

¹⁶ Mandela, “I am Prepared to Die.”

ANC and PAC showed the growing pains of black South Africans.¹⁷ Mandela was keenly aware of breakaways and radicals who were willing to put matters into their own hands. Realizing the frustration of an oppressed people, Mandela called for an ANC committee meeting in June 1961; here he proposed the formation of a military organization.¹⁸

It would be naive to assume that Mandela's proposal immediately created a military wing, for the Congress was by no means an ideological homogeneous party. Some like president Albert Lutuli, who was world-renowned for his belief in non-violent resistance, were quite hardline regarding adopting more violent methods. ANC member Moses Kotane was one of the most vocal critics of the adoption of an armed struggle, arguing that the Congress was not prepared for the consequences of violent resistance.¹⁹ Both moral and logistical arguments both for and against the creation of a military wing persisted.

Internal discussions continued throughout 1961, and the ANC concluded that it will still be publicly committed to nonviolent resistance. Yet, many key members organized the creation of a separate, but still associated, organization called Umkhonto we Sizwe, Zulu for "Spear of the Nation."²⁰ Along with the intense overlapping of leaders and organizers, the Congress and Umkhonto we Sizwe shared key information. Years later during the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, the ANC accepted responsibility for many violent actions committed by Umkhonto we Sizwe. While these two organizations were technically separated, Umkhonto we Sizwe was a de facto servant to the ANC.²¹

¹⁷ Stephen Ellis, "The Genesis of the ANC's Armed Struggle in South Africa 1948-1961," in *Journal of Southern African Studies* 37 (December 2011): 657-676, 665.

¹⁸ Ellis, "The Genesis of the ANC's Armed Struggle in South Africa 1948-1961," 668.

¹⁹ Ellis, "The Genesis of the ANC's Armed Struggle in South Africa 1948-1961," 668.

²⁰ Ellis, "The Genesis of the ANC's Armed Struggle in South Africa 1948-1961," 669.

²¹ Ellis, "The Genesis of the ANC's Armed Struggle in South Africa 1948-1961," 670..

Regarding the methods of Umkhonto we Sizwe, they were limited to sabotage and relatively smaller scale violence rather than an all-out guerilla campaign. During the Rivonia Trial of 1964, Mandela recalled his thought process regarding violence as a means of resistance:

Four forms of violence are possible. There is sabotage, there is guerilla warfare, there is terrorism, and there is open revolution. We chose to adopt the first method and to test it fully before taking any other decision. (...) Sabotage did not involve the loss of life (...) and this is what we said in our Manifesto, Exhibit AD, I quote: “We of Umkhonto we Sizwe have always sought to achieve liberation without bloodshed and civil clash.”²²

It would be remiss to not include the context of this quote, for Mandela was defending himself and his involvement in organizing Umkhonto we Sizwe during this trial. However, this context does not change the fact that the Congress and Umkhonto we Sizwe were committed to using some form of violence as a method of resistance.

In their December 1961 manifesto, Umkhonto we Sizwe declared that “there remain[ed] only two choices: submit or fight,” realizing that “the government has interpreted the peacefulness of the [ANC’s] movement as a weakness; the people’s non-violent policies have been taken as a green light for government violence,” so “the methods of Umkhonto we Sizwe [will] mark a break with that past.”²³ After seeing how the police and federal government reacted to civil disobedience in Sharpeville, the ANC and Umkhonto we Sizwe realized that the government would no longer permit a peaceful resistance to apartheid. So, they committed themselves to work with new methods, switching out boycotts in favor of bombings.

Letters from ANC leader Oliver Tambo seeking international support in the late 1980s revealed how the Congress reacted to the events in Sharpeville. He mentions the ANC’s history

²² Mandela, “I am Prepared to Die.”

²³ “Manifesto of Umkhonto we Sizwe,” South African History Online.

of peaceful strategy to defeat apartheid, and he that their strategies changed with Sharpeville as the turning point:

Every avenue of nonviolent protest was met with violent repression on the part of the regime, culminating in the banning of the ANC after the Sharpeville Massacre in 1960, (...) the regime turned South Africa into an armed camp. The ANC went underground, determined to find new methods of struggle, 1961 saw the formation of Umkhonto we Sizwe, our people's army, our striking force for final liberation. The violence of the regime was now to be met by the revolutionary violence of the people. Since then, the ANC has combined political and armed struggle to defeat apartheid.²⁴

Through writing their own history and narrative, the Congress attributed their violence to the events in Sharpeville. The massacre became a symbol of the ANC's frustrations, and they rallied behind this event to justify their violence. It is important to note that, while Umkhonto we Sizwe was founded as a separate organization, in this letter Tambo claims the army as being a branch of the ANC, using the possessive "our." This is important because it fully proves the connection between the Congress and Umkhonto we Sizwe; these two organizations were united despite their strategic denial of correspondence from years and trials past.

It is known that Mandela was an instrumental figure in the creation of Umkhonto we Sizwe, and his travels throughout Africa before his arrest in 1962 show his dedication to violence as an act of resistance. In 1962, Mandela met with leaders of the Algerian National Liberation Army (ALN), which at the time just overcame settler oppression. There, the ALN taught Mandela about equipment, strategies, and many other skills necessary to successfully lead an army in the future.²⁵ His detailed notes were used as evidence against him during the Rivonia Trial two years later, and Mandela admitted that he intended to educate himself on guerilla warfare in case the struggle escalated.²⁶ His experience with the ALN further proves that

²⁴ "Letter from Oliver Tambo 733," ANC Archives.

²⁵ Abdeldjalil Larbi Youcef, "The Algerian Army Made Me a Man," *Transition* 116 (2014): 67-79, 75.

²⁶ Abdeldjalil Larbi Youcef, "The Algerian Army Made Me a Man," 77.

Mandela was fully committed to using violence for liberation closely following the events in Sharpeville, and it marks a clear shift on the ANC's policy on violence.

There are hundreds of examples of violence enacted by Umkhonto we Sizwe, and most of them are outlined by South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This was a body that sought to transition the country into an inclusive democracy through restorative justice in 1996. Witnesses and victims of violence could tell their stories in public hearings, while perpetrators of said violence could request amnesty by providing information about violence committed during the years of apartheid. Due to the messy nature of resistance, some acts of violence described in the Truth and Reconciliation Report were unplanned attacks coordinated by more radical members of Umkhonto we Sizwe. It is also important to note that because this Commission was designed as a form of restorative justice aimed at fostering healing between victims and perpetrators, many acts of sabotage which only destroyed property have been excluded from the report.

One instance of violence enacted by Umkhonto we Sizwe outlined in the report was the bombing of Magoo's Bar in Durban in 1986. Here, over sixty civilians were injured and three were killed as a car bomb exploded directly outside. The ANC claimed that they were trying to take the struggle out of black-majority areas and into white ones, aiming for the nearby 'Why Not' Bar that many off-duty Security Branch officers frequented. The Umkhonto we Sizwe militant, Robert McBride, who carried out this attack, stated that "Magoo's was never an intended target. (...) [His cell was] to kill enemy personnel. That's it."²⁷ It is necessary to note that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission found the Congress, rather than Umkhonto we Sizwe, responsible for the actions carried out during the anti-apartheid bombing campaigns.²⁸

²⁷ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report, 29 October 1998: 325-392, 330-331.

²⁸ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report, 29 October 1998: 333.

This shows that, while it was technically a separate yet associated organization, Umkhonto we Sizwe was under the authority of the ANC.

Umkhonto we Sizwe also engaged in other forms of violent resistance from the mid-1960s to the end of apartheid; they killed dozens of individuals that they deemed enemies and/or defectors. They also planted landmines in public spaces and sometimes necklaced their targets, forcing them into tires coated in kerosene and burning them alive. While the Congress did not order these necklacing attacks, they neither acted firmly to control their youth militia nor publicly condemned these gross violations of human rights.²⁹ It is clear that the ANC either directly supported, took responsibility for, or turned a blind eye towards Umkhonto we Sizwe's violent methods.

It is important to also recognize the continuity of the ANC's ever-present use of nonviolent resistance, which continued past Sharpeville until the negotiations in the early 1990s. Methods similar to the ones used in the American Civil Rights Movement were used later in the ANC's anti-apartheid campaign. The Congress backed and expanded regional acts of civil disobedience, a notable example being when strikes by meat workers in the Western Cape turned into nationwide red meat boycotts.³⁰ The ANC also helped spread the Transvaal rent boycotts against abysmal living conditions over the course of two years; eventually, 60% of black South Africans were not paying rent.³¹ The Congress' peaceful methods were just as strong as, if not stronger than, the Defiance Campaign before the Sharpeville massacre. They managed to keep their focus on passive resistance as Umkhonto we Sizwe backed up their campaign with smaller acts of armed propaganda.

²⁹ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report, 29 October 1998: 346.

³⁰ Zunes, "The Role of Non-Violent Action in the Downfall of Apartheid," 154.

³¹ Zunes, "The Role of Non-Violent Action in the Downfall of Apartheid," 156.

The ANC also organized and supported many nationwide general strikes. One strike in Transvaal in 1984 had 800,000 people and 400,000 more students refusing to go to work or school. Government-owned plants that produced oil, coal, iron, and steel saw production screech to a halt; worker militancy, another form of peaceful protest, was used to place some of the government's most profitable parastatals under pressure.³² Four years later, three million workers were able to immobilize industry across Pretoria, Cape Town, and Johannesburg.³³

In the late 1980s, the ANC's toolbox of resistance was filled to the brim. The Congress saw participation soar as South Africa's people became exponentially frustrated with the system apartheid, and they finally had the numbers to effectively challenge the government. Umkhonto we Sizwe's attacks became more frequent and more extreme throughout the late 1980s. The South African government and economy grew weaker as the international community imposed economic sanctions. Domestic pressures, whether they be violent or peaceful, and foreign ones eventually led to negotiations to end apartheid in the early 1990s. The end of apartheid and the creation of a new constitution based on the principles outlined in the 1955 Freedom Charter showed the ANC's multifaceted effort finally bearing fruit.

Before Sharpeville, the Congress was completely devoted to non-violent means of resistance with its Defiance Campaign. Sharpeville changed everything, and the ANC realized the government's refusal to accept any peaceful protest. The ANC escalated its methods and began to respond with their own violence in the form of its military wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe. It is evident that the Sharpeville Massacre was the breaking point for the ANC, and internal dialogues led by Mandela in response to the government's crackdown on non-violent resistance best exemplifies this change.

³² Zunes, "The Role of Non-Violent Action in the Downfall of Apartheid," 155.

³³ Zunes, "The Role of Non-Violent Action in the Downfall of Apartheid," 156.

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Reese Hollister '23, studying at Manhattan College in The Bronx, is a History and International Studies major who concentrates on Africa and the Middle East, minoring in the Arabic language. He is pursuing a career in research and teaching, and he is currently a Supplemental Instructor for a First Year Seminar on Human Rights in World History. In his free time, Reese is an avid skateboarder. He would like to thank the entire Manhattan College History Department for their continued support and inspiration.

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