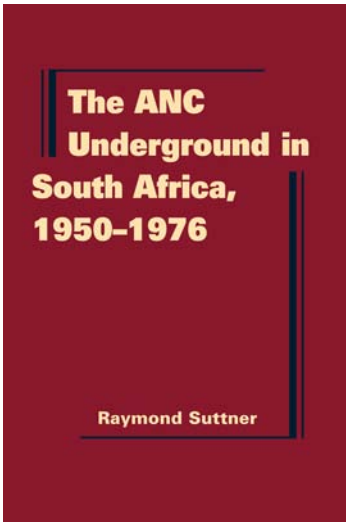
EXCERPTED FROM

The ANC Underground in South Africa, 1950–1976

Raymond Suttner



ISBN: 978-1-935049-13-5 hc

FIRSTFORUMPRESS

A DIVISION OF LYNNE RIENNER PUBLISHERS, INC.

1800 30th Street, Ste. 314
Boulder, CO 80301
USA
telephone 303.444.6684
fax 303.444.0824

Contents

1

Introduction

This work started as a much broader project examining the cultures of the African National Congress (ANC) of South Africa. The intention was to probe the imprint of exile, the military wing uMkhonto weSizwe (MK, 'The Spear of the Nation'), prison, underground organisation, the United Democratic Front (UDF) and a variety of other influences, in order to gauge the salience of these different experiences – many of them arising from people's own belief systems predating membership of any organisation – for the current character and potential trajectory of the ANC.

As the title of this book suggests, the project has narrowed down to one feature: the underground operation. But the earlier scope has not been lost entirely. Indeed, the definition of underground organisation that is adopted here is a wide one, incorporating several of the original themes. This is because there are many interfaces, overlaps and intersections in practice. Instead of seeing exile and 'internal' underground activities, or prison and underground, as distinct experiences, we need to be alive to their connections and interrelationship.

The ANC leadership came to be located outside the country from the mid- to late 1960s. Exile was in many ways intimately connected with underground organisation, for it was in exile that many people were trained or briefed to perform the acts they undertook as operatives inside South Africa. It was often in exile that operations were planned, though the degree of autonomy allowed 'inside' would vary. It was from exile that many underground groups were supplied, and from where various forms of logistical and financial support were provided. It was also in the interaction between the inside and outside that intelligence was gathered and evaluated on many important issues. Since elements of the exile experience clearly underpinned underground organisation

and activity – its operation, success or failure – I treat them as an integral part of the subject.[1] To do otherwise could lead to an artificial focus on either exile or the underground as the single dynamising force; for example, it is often believed, especially by those who spent their struggle period in exile, that the establishment of underground units required exile initiation first. It also tends to see 'being ANC' as purely those who were formally inducted and provided with membership cards. This, it will be argued, excludes the large numbers who associated themselves as 'freelance' ANC activists, not being able to link up with formal structures or not trying to for security reasons.

Prison experience also fed directly into one phase of the development of the underground, especially in the early 1970s, just as it later helped the achievement of 'Congress hegemony' in the legal space that opened in the late 1970s. In some cases, prisoners were specifically mandated to join a particular underground unit on leaving prison. It was within prison too that many former Black Consciousness-aligned members 'converted' to the ANC-led liberation movement, and they were among those deployed to underground activities or specific units. Many of the prisoners who came back from Robben Island were able to give leadership, guidance and advice on organising, either because they had been leaders before imprisonment or because the hothouse atmosphere of the Island was a place of training. Thus they emerged able to transmit their skills to others, first in underground organisation and later when the public space for democratic organisation opened up.

One of the reasons for focusing primarily on underground organisation is that, precisely because of its secret character, much of what was undertaken and achieved might otherwise never appear in the historical record. The often anonymous practitioners are passing away year by year. Some documentary evidence exists of those who were arrested and tried in court but the same is not true of the many operatives who were never captured and remain unknown. There is thus some urgency to capture the story before the actors disappear. While this is true for all sites of the struggle it is most acute for the underground, because of its high degree of secrecy. In many cases we do not know who we are looking for, because very few participants were allowed to know what they were engaging in – at the time most people did not even realise that there was such work afoot.

While underground work has a connection with other forms of struggle, it has specific ways and places of functioning that distinguish it from them. It also raises complex moral, social and psychological issues that do not arise in the same way in other spheres of action. There is something extreme and often hermetic in the demands on the life of the underground operative which is not found in other forms of struggle. The people concerned made harsh choices that often led them to pay a heavy price in their personal life and opportunities for personal fulfilment. The struggle made demands that ensured that what is called 'normal life' was seldom possible. At the same time the moral issues that arose, and opportunities that the same secret life provided for both noble deeds and abuse, are worth exploring; and we shall also look at some of its effects that still keep people from functioning adequately in the present-day environment. We are dealing with a category of people many of whom may be experiencing, knowingly or not, the effects of post-traumatic stress in a fairly extreme form.

Some of what emerged in the course of this study was not anticipated. In particular, the ideological beliefs and obligations associated with membership of the ANC and the South African Communist Party (SACP) were reinforced by ideas, practices and obligations of other belief systems, especially those that may for convenience be described as 'traditional'. We touch on this intersection below in Chapter 6,[2] and also relate it to the notion that a national liberation struggle involves individuals with a range of distinct identities, some of which have not been adequately recognised in ANC thinking. While these issues have received considerable attention in Zimbabwean historiography, they have been relatively neglected in writings on the struggle in South Africa.[3]

Another issue whose significance was not initially anticipated is that of gender. In this work there is an attempt to uncover the overall gendered character of the ANC as manifested in underground organisation, gendered notions of the personal, heroism, and masculinities and femininities, as well as the potential and actual experience of abuse as it arose within underground activity. The discourse of many ANC leaders was suffused with masculinist idioms; this is contextualised and explained. The intersection of belief systems was also of gender significance within the ANC, not least where the practice of initiation

was connected to underground recruitment; the transition to manhood entailed ideas that need to be seen and discussed in the context of struggle.

The whole topic of gender arises more broadly in the general character of underground struggle, and possibly in a whole range of other revolutionary pursuits that tend to be treated as heroic (and, in some literature, as therefore performed by men). It is evident in the way that women were involved and deployed in MK and the underground generally. The evidence that follows points to a complexity and conditionality that much feminist literature does not adequately acknowledge. We touch on the notion of heroism and the manifold gender relations it may embody.

Revolutionary work impacts on the individual as an autonomous person. This study examines the fit between the organisation and the personal in matters of individual judgement, and also how interpersonal relations and conceptions of love tended to be displaced by revolutionary notions of 'love for the people' and the 'ANC as family'.

This book does not purport to be an exhaustive account of the history of the ANC-led underground, though it uncovers aspects of that history that have not been previously researched or recorded. It is a rereading of the early ANC and SACP underground and the conditions of the time in the light of existing documentation and new oral evidence. It was expected that the oral evidence would throw up new materials and insights; some of the received written history of struggle is also now shown to be open to reinterpretation, with potentially important modifications that perhaps introduce new ways of understanding.

In particular this study challenges the prevailing historiography of the underground, which speaks of the absence of the ANC–SACP in the period between the Rivonia Trial and 1976.[4] While we must concede their invisibility, which was a condition for their survival, we shall see that activity involving the ANC and SACP continued after 1964 at varying levels of intensity.[5]

The study also suggests the possibility of a greater underground presence than even the ANC documentation has claimed. This is because the ANC relied primarily on reports from officially constituted units, while this study takes cognisance of the wide range of freelance, *de facto* ANC underground activities that were mounted. The new information comes from oral evidence; this book draws far more on oral

sources than most previous accounts, and still the record is by no means complete. A full account would require many years of further work. Research is still needed in many areas of South Africa where important events took place, but this requires extensive funding, much time for travel and interviews, and linguistic resources that are not presently available to this researcher.[6] We need to recognise that without a wider geographical reach our history will remain heavily urban-biased. The South African Democratic Education Trust (SADET) has taken important steps towards remedying the problem, but would no doubt acknowledge the considerable scope that remains.

Saying that a historical account is geographically limited is not just a matter of 'finishing a job', but may change meanings, for practices in the neglected areas may vary substantially from those in the big cities and, if recorded, lead to substantially new interpretations. Some cases that bring quite different, new evidence to the fore appear in later chapters.

This book refers to actions by individuals or organisations that are meant to be outside the public eye, though they may be designed for a public impact. In other cases the activity could be covert because mere survival, albeit out of sight, may demand an underground existence of which the public has no knowledge.

Underground political activity or organisation covers a wide range of situations, some of which may be perfectly legal. Subterfuge could be used to achieve political objectives in conditions where openness would make this difficult or impossible. It could also protect people perceived as being at risk in the struggle against the state. Legality, where it existed, was always fragile, and some of what was legal had to be done without official knowledge and in secrecy.

Underground work is political activity that is not open or openly declared for what it is. Under cover of doing one thing, a person may be performing another invisibly. In clandestine action, whatever does or does not happen on the surface, the politically significant activity is done unseen. Sometimes underground and 'above ground' coexist for purely practical purposes, as when an above-ground person faces the chance of being detained by the police after someone else's arrest. The person at risk may have to 'disappear' or have a low profile or stay at

some secret place until it is clear whether or not the danger is real.

In some situations where people have rights or apparent freedom of political activity, they may nevertheless be under surveillance or be treated as if they had no legal right to exist; and it may be vital that what they are doing (or part of it) is not observed by the police. Sometimes the activity may be illegal but the organisation may not have been banned, as was the case in the 1980s when the UDF and its affiliated organisations were generally still legal but the State of Emergency prohibited certain activities, especially in areas like the Northern Transvaal (see Chapter 5). Continuing these activities underground was not generally seen as implying a permanent illegal underground existence.

People in full hiding do not surface at all. Everything about them is invisible. They might have a distinct appearance known only to a few or to those who do not know whom they are dealing with. Alternatively one may have a public face, quite distinct from the underground one, that will not be seen publicly and will only appear in disguised form or to a restricted range of people.

Illegal underground activity has often coexisted with completely legal activities, though the style of activity changed substantially at various times. This was the case when the Communist Party was reconstituted as an illegal organisation but its members still participated quite legally in the Congress Alliance (see Chapter 3 below). Likewise, in the 1970s and 1980s some activists participated in legal organisations, including UDF affiliates, while they were engaged in illegal underground activity for the ANC and SACP. Whether such combinations of legal and illegal were possible, and when and how they were achieved, would depend on the strength of the forces of repression and how well this was matched by the liberation movement.

We have already touched on a point that became more of a factor with the establishment of the ANC in exile: What are the boundaries of underground activities? This relates to both place and time. The present work does not classify an activity as underground purely according to when and where it was finally executed. The preparatory phases are part of the exercise, even if they happened much earlier and in another country. In fact, preparatory phases for entering South Africa often involved great danger and setting up a wide range of logistical arrangements or the acquisition of very specific skills. Success or failure often related to the level of training.

Little has been written on underground activity in South Africa. The reasons are fairly obvious: much of it was illegal and suggests by its very clandestine nature that the practitioner did not wish to be identified. Most published material is confined to pages or chapters of biographies or autobiographies, and these are primarily of leaders. There is a wealth of archival material but, besides offering only partial evidence (as in court records) or being difficult to access (as in the actual reports of ANC operatives), they cannot provide the wide focus and full texture which this study seeks and which oral evidence is better able to give.

Given the limitations of the existing literature, I decided to concentrate primarily on oral testimony by conducting interviews with former underground operatives. Because this is not purely a historical study, it was important that the evidence gathered should not be constrained by being presented or recorded for very distinct purposes, as is the case with the courtroom record and many other archival documents. These are generally unconcerned with extracting the social character and meanings of how people were organised and what was done. Court cases are especially problematic in that a whole range of evidence that led to the decision to commit what would become a 'criminal act' does not form part of the 'facts in issue', as the legal phrase has it. The meaning of the political activity becomes known in a very truncated form, and the primary body of testimony of the accused may well remain in lawyer's notes or go unrecorded in any way, as not admissible in the court.

The arguments for oral evidence are compelling. Many informants are old and will die without their story being told if it is not recorded now. At present, there is no longer any surviving member of the Communist Party of South Africa Central Committee of 1950, which decided to dissolve the Party. Many people may already have died without it being known that they had engaged in underground activities. There is also the fact that underground personnel are mostly unknown people. Interviewing them brings them and their actions into the public domain, as they deserve. Such sources sometimes also reveal that certain people who were known as collaborators with the apartheid regime in fact also assisted ANC–SACP or MK units. Instead of dying despised as traitors, they should be acknowledged for their involvement in the