

'Blood from stones': Censorship and the reading practices of South African Political Prisoners, 1960-1990

Archie L. Dick

Department of Information Science
University of Pretoria, Pretoria, 0002
Republic of South Africa

Abstract

This article shows how political prisoners undermined censorship in the apartheid jails of South Africa. The jail diaries, authorized biographies, autobiographies, prison memoirs, interviews and prison letters of more than fifty political prisoners and two prison censors are analyzed to describe the reading practices of South African political prisoners. The article, demonstrating the ways in which readers regulate their own reading space, concludes that the books that ended up fortuitously or filtered by censors in prison libraries in South Africa and in the possession of political prisoners, profoundly affected their thinking. From information fragments the prisoners reconstructed news and life experiences denied to them by prison authorities. Reading in a way that subverted the intentions of the censors, in effect allowed the prisoners to continue their political struggle.

Introduction

It was ironically as a political prisoner that Raymond Suttner came across a passage in Antonio Gramsci's *Letters from prison* about the reading of books.¹ Gramsci was arrested on 8 November 1926 by the fascist government of Benito Mussolini. He was sentenced on 4 June 1928 along with other Italian communists, and died six days after his release on 21 April 1937. In the passage he explained that prison libraries should not be underestimated. He added that 'a political prisoner must squeeze blood even from a stone', and that 'every book... can be useful to read.'²

This is what Ngugi wa Thiong'o discovered in Kamiti Maximum Security Prison when he came upon a statement in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, which had slipped past the prison censor. At the end of December 1977 Daniel arap Moi, then vice-president of Kenya, ordered wa Thiong'o's detention. He was imprisoned under the Public Security Act for a year without trial. The statement by Aristotle argued that an investigation of truth is both hard and easy, and wa Thiong'o interpreted this as a defense of diversity and tolerance for contradictory views and positions.³

In this article I show how imaginative ways in which books and readers interact can undermine censorship. Regulating the reading of political prisoners is a contradictory and complex affair with surprising, often unintended outcomes because books and readers defy the easy achievement of the special designs of censors. South African book history scholars claim in a different context but relevant to this argument that 'Books establish environments; they are force fields that can rearrange space and people.'⁴

Gramsci and wa Thiong'o's experiences indicate that these force fields charge prison spaces and readers with unusual qualities. Readers can generate original thoughts and experiences from the motley collection of books that end up in prison libraries and in the possession of political prisoners either fortuitously or filtered by censors. From information fragments, moreover, political prisoners can reconstruct news and life experiences denied to them by prison authorities. Readers, in other words, regulate their own reading space.⁵

This article looks at what, how and why anti-apartheid political prisoners read. Their reading practices offer insights into how censorship succeeded and failed in jail.⁶ Censorship is understood here in its classical or traditional conception as direct, concrete forms of regulatory intervention by political authorities (the apartheid state) to control the form and shape of ideas about political belief.⁷

This perspective of censorship as an authoritarian intervention by a third party between the author and the reader fits into the communication circuit and its extended application by book and reading historians. It views books as artifacts, and readers as active participants in creating meaning from texts.⁸ But the mediating influences of personal, socio-political and other forces are also analyzed here. In this way, censorship is not just a 'repressive tool with predictable results' but becomes 'an unstable process of actions and reactions in the struggle for power'.⁹

Political imprisonment and prison narratives¹⁰

Although one source claims that between 1960 and 1990 about 80 000 people were detained without trial, there were probably many more political prisoners in South Africa.¹¹ In 1978 alone there were 440 convicted political prisoners mostly from the African National Congress (ANC) and Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), of which 400 were on Robben Island and the rest in Pretoria Local and Kroonstad prisons.¹² The African National Congress, the ruling political party today, was founded in 1912 as the South African Native National Congress. It started as a moderate even conservative organization, but opted for an armed struggle against the National Party regime after being banned in 1960. Its military wing was called *umKhonto we Sizwe* (Spear of the nation). The Pan-Africanist Congress was established in 1959 by breakaway Africanist members of the ANC under the Presidency of Robert Sobukwe. Its military wing was called *Poqo* (alone or pure).¹³

These prisoners represented a cross-section of South African society that opposed the apartheid state and its policies. They included men and women, old and young, working and middle class, black and white members of several political organizations and movements. While the definition of political prisoners is vague, a special report on political imprisonment in South

Africa in April 1991 identified connections with activities that fall into three categories: armed struggle; political organization and mobilization; and popular action against the apartheid state.¹⁴

Political prisoners were held together with Common Law prisoners in the early 1960s. In a letter to the South African government in June 1964, the International Red Cross urged the separation and treatment of political prisoners as a distinctive group requiring special treatment. But the Minister of Justice and Prisons, Piet Pelser, announced in January 1967 that 'with the possible exception of Robert Sobukwe, there were no political prisoners in South Africa.'¹⁵ Pelser saw this category of prisoners instead as 'state offenders' convicted and sentenced by the Courts for serious crimes against the public safety and security of the state.¹⁶ These 'serious crimes' often consisted in belonging to a banned organization, attending a meeting, distributing a pamphlet, or simply painting a slogan.

A growing body of prison literature - jail diaries, authorized biographies, autobiographies, prison memoirs, interviews and prison letters – provides personal accounts of the most horrific kinds of torture and humiliation in apartheid South African and other African jails.¹⁷ Several prisoners died in detention, many more suffered psychological and physical harm at the hands of interrogators and security police, and a few attempted suicide in prison.¹⁸

In these prison narratives, there are also references to struggles for access to reading materials; their uses, abuses, and roles in resisting prison authorities; quarrels with prison censors; reading to shape personal and political lives and to maintain contact with the outside world; and using books to experience as 'normal' a life as possible in traumatic circumstances.¹⁹

The comments on books, censorship and reading by more than 50 political prisoners and two prison censors recorded here convey something special about their reading lives. The personal experiences and subjective meaning of books and reading during periods of detention, awaiting trial and serving sentence express a dimension that is not captured in statistics, objective reports and surveys.

Methodological concerns about the autobiographical and sometimes fictional qualities of prison literature are critiqued elsewhere.²⁰ But political prison writings are generally regarded as credible and valid documentary

sources of prison experiences. It has also become possible to crosscheck and to validate events and personal recollections in the growing number of apartheid-era prison publications. The prison narratives examined here are limited to the English language.

Raids, trials and reading material

Books and libraries were used for revolutionary purposes since the early years of the anti-apartheid struggle. Ben Turok, for example, mentions that when the ANC turned to the armed struggle in the early 1960s, some of the members 'scoured the shelves of public libraries for insights into how secret undercover action and organization might be developed.'²¹ Harold Strachan consulted the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and other books in the Port Elizabeth public library to update his Second World War experience with explosives.²² At a training camp in 1962 to identify the best recruits for *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (MK) in Mamre, just outside Cape Town, Denis Goldberg and Looksmart Ngudle read aloud from Jean Paul Sartre's short story *The Wall* and Che Guevara's writings. This was followed by a discussion on the 'world-wide struggle against oppression.'²³

It was not surprising then that books were usually seized during police raids. The Security Branch looked especially for 'suspicious' titles that could be used during trials. There was excitement when a copy of *Black Power and Liberation – A Communist View* was found during Winnie Madikizela-Mandela's arrest in 1969.²⁴ In a raid at Joe Slovo's home, Stendahl's *The Red and the Black* was seized. The book's title 'combined the two most subversive factors in South African officialdom's struggle equation.'²⁵ This was the third copy of the book that Slovo had lost in as many raids. Sometimes, anything 'with a red cover' was regarded as suspicious.²⁶ An issue of *Fighting Talk* was seized with Albie Sachs's first detention and *The Anarchist Cookbook* with Quentin Jacobsen's arrest.²⁷ A copy of *Fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism* found inside a brown paper cover labeled *Fundamentals of English Syntax* was used as evidence in Jean Middleton's trial to show that political prisoners were cunning and dangerous.²⁸

During the Rivonia trial in which Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and other political leaders were found guilty of planning and committing acts of

sabotage and conspiracy and sentenced to life imprisonment, Warrant Officer C J Dirker revealed that in eleven envelopes each containing four copies of two booklets titled *Oliver Twist* and *The World's Most Famous Detective Stories*, he had found successive issues of the 'subversive' magazine *Assegai* hidden inside.²⁹ At the same trial, the Chinese booklet *How to be a good communist* by Liu Shao Chi, and *Born of the people* - a first-hand account of the guerilla uprising in the Philippines ghost-written by William Pomeroy - were produced as evidence together with Nelson Mandela's study notes of them.³⁰

State prosecutors, however, often failed to prove links between the political activities of those on trial and the contents of their books. During Jacobsen's trial, for example, the Assistant City Librarian of the Johannesburg Public Library, read a list of library titles similar to those found in his possession. The charge of obtaining information that could be used to further the aims of communism was subsequently dismissed because the information could be found in the reference section of the public library. This left Jacobsen wondering why he had gone to such trouble for his books when he could just have gone to his local library.³¹

Although reading material was generally available for those awaiting trial, some avoided serious books during their trials, and defence attorneys often insisted on it. George Bizos who defended several political activists discouraged Jacobsen from reading philosophy or any 'heavy stuff' while he was awaiting trial in order to keep him 'as normal as possible.'³² One of Ahmed Kathrada's lawyers also told him not to read Dostoyevsky before the Rivonia trial.³³

Detention, solitary confinement and the *Bible*

Political prisoners faced greater reading difficulties during periods of detention, which usually preceded their trials. There was a basic prohibition in Section 17 of the 90-day (detention) Act of 1963 against writing and reading.³⁴ In these circumstances, the overwhelming need to maintain contact with the outside world drove political prisoners to unusual reading behaviour.

Ruth First hoisted herself up to the cell window and craned her neck to gaze at some of the letters on news posters wrapped around electric lamp

posts outside the Marshall Square police station, which she called 'reading my daily newspaper'. She used these hints to discover what was happening outside. She even read the 'Did You Know' *Chappies* bubblegum wrappers that one of her daughters slipped to her during a visit.³⁵ For a while, prison graffiti was Sachs' only reading matter apart from the *Bible*, and he added his own 'JAIL IS FOR THE BIRDS' in a Wynberg cell, which inspired Jenny Schreiner who was held there in the 1980s.³⁶

It was in fact the *Bible* that was usually allowed in detention - to reflect 'on the harm done to society and to fulfil the Nationalist government's Christian duty.'³⁷ During spells of detention and solitary confinement the *Bible* was also the only reading material.³⁸ Detainees with other religious convictions were sometimes supplied with their own holy books.³⁹ Abdulla Haron, for example, kissed and placed the Koran on his prayer mat on the day he died in detention. Fatima Meer, a Muslim, was mistakenly given the Ramayana (A Hindu epic poem), which she found 'fascinating reading.' And Zubeida Jaffer set herself the task during her second detention to read the Arabic-English Koran from 'cover to cover' with the expectation that 'When I was finished with this task, I would be released' - and she was.⁴⁰ But this concession was often maliciously manipulated. Feziwe Bookholane's *Bible* was confiscated during solitary confinement at Klerksdorp Prison. Instead, she played Scrabble with little pieces of toilet paper to prevent losing her mind.⁴¹

Religious leaders were targeted spitefully so that Methodist priest Stanley Mogoba was given a Xhosa-language *Bible* while in isolation,⁴² which ironically he used to learn that language. Reverend Frank Chikane was refused a *Bible* because a warder said 'it makes you a terrorist' and was eventually given an Afrikaans-language version.⁴³ Tshenuwani Simon Farisani, who was Dean of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, was told that he was 'always reading the wrong verses of the Bible', and regularly denied one.⁴⁴

On the other hand, Michael Dingake was refused a *Bible* because the warder at Jeppe Police Station did not want to get him 'expelled from the Communist Party.'⁴⁵ At John Vorster Square, Emma Mashinini was also refused a *Bible* on the grounds that she was a communist, but she later

received one from her husband and another as a gift from Bishop Desmond Tutu.⁴⁶ In another cynical twist on this theme, Raymond Suttner was tortured using 'his bible' (works of Marx, Engels and Lenin) to weigh down his outstretched arms while in a crouching position, and forced to read from it while lying flat on a table with just his head raised.⁴⁷

The uncertainty of detention promoted disciplined, systematic and frugal reading of the *Bible*. Sachs read for fifteen minutes in the morning and an hour before supper.⁴⁸ James Kantor rationed himself to only ten pages per day.⁴⁹ Reading it aloud during arrest and detention was not uncommon.⁵⁰ Farisani read aloud from *Isaiah* during his arrest, Susan Jobson read *Ecclesiastes* and *Song of Songs* 'out loud and in appropriate tones' while in detention and Gonville French-Beytagh chanted the *Psalms*, canticles and prayers from the *Book of Common Prayer* in his cell.⁵¹ What might be described generally as "frugal reading" applied also to other books read in detention. When Ruth First was allowed a book of crossword puzzles, for example, she restricted herself to one puzzle per day. Ellen Kuzwayo and her fellow inmates limited their time spent on a book in order to give 'each other the opportunity to read it too.'⁵²

Uncertainty and solitude also led detainees and isolated prisoners to read the *Bible* intensively. Neville Alexander read the authorized version many times,⁵³ and Rusty Bernstein read it 'twice end to end' in detention.⁵⁴ Raymond Mhlaba read it 'from front to back' during six months of solitary confinement,⁵⁵ and Winnie Madikizela-Mandela read it 'from cover to cover' during a period of detention. It sometimes gave her a 'wonderful feeling of peace and tranquillity' and at other times 'it was nothing but meaningless words.'⁵⁶ For Jama Matakata on the other hand, the words of the *Bible* inspired revolutionary thoughts. He perceived 'Jesus as a freedom fighter who came to set captives free'.⁵⁷

The *Bible* as a material artifact was also a useful resource for political prisoners. At Port Elizabeth Prison, Strachan helped to make a set of dominoes from the thicker back page of the Bible. More irreverent was to smoke the 'actual text of the Bible' even if it earned offenders six days without food.⁵⁸ When they received two packets of Boxer tobacco and flint from a warder at Leeuwkop Prison, Indres Naidoo and fellow detainees used pages

of the *Gideon Bible* and shavings from a war-issue toothbrush to make six long 'zolls'.⁵⁹ The thin leaves made excellent smoking paper. 'For the next three to four glorious days', Naidoo gloats, 'the *Bible* became slimmer and slimmer', providing less and less reading matter for one of his religious comrades.⁶⁰

Library services for political prisoners

Access to reading material in prisons, which were racially segregated, improved only through struggle by political prisoners themselves, and the right of access was withdrawn without explanation from time to time. An Appellate Division judgment relating to conditions of 90-day detention in *Rossouw versus Sachs* in 1964, for example, reversed a decision of the lower court. The original decision had held that to deprive a detainee of a reasonable supply of reading and writing material constituted a form of punishment, and it allowed Sachs access to books. The subsequent judgment, though, concluded that 'it was not the intention of Parliament that detainees should as of right be permitted to relieve the tedium of their detention with reading matter or writing materials.'⁶¹

Prison regulation number 109(3) of 1965, however, required the establishment and maintenance for all prisoners of a properly organized library containing literature of constructive and educational value.⁶² In this way, the Department of Prisons claimed that it complied with a United Nations recommendation in 1955 that called for adequately stocked libraries for all categories of prisoners.⁶³

The Department of Prisons' own provisional library services had expanded slowly in the early sixties. In 1964, it claimed that there were 4 960 books available in the Robben Island Prison Library, supplemented from Provincial Libraries on a loan scheme.⁶⁴ But Dennis Brutus says that there were only about 1 000 books in a large cell in the General Section and that prisoners 'passed and looked longingly at the window but never got any books from this section.'⁶⁵

It was only at the end of 1965 that the library in the General Section of the prison became operational. Under the supervision of a warder, it was organized and run by Stanley Mogoba, Canzibe Rosebury Ngxiki and Dikgang

Moseneke because of their educational backgrounds. They arranged boxes of books brought from other prisons into divisions like Novels, Poetry, Drama, History, Geography, Politics, and Science. Mogoba drew on his experience in a high school library and started an accession register, and books were given numbers and entered on cards for borrowing purposes.

Soon afterwards, Mogoba was put into isolation with Achmed Cassim and Sedick Isaacs (who later worked in the library) for trying to smuggle an article on prison conditions to the *Cape Times*, and for participating in a hunger strike. Ironically, he says, the 'librarian now had nothing to read.'⁶⁶ Ngxiki suffered the same fate when he used his freedom as librarian to spread the word of the impending hunger strike from cell to cell. He never returned to the library.⁶⁷ Dikgang Moseneke and Klaas Mashishi continued the library work.

In the Segregation Section of Robben Island prison that housed senior political prisoners, a common law convict brought around a list from which titles could be selected. But there were only about 30 books for the 65 prisoners in Segregation at the time, which was not enough to go around. The convict, moreover, contrived to quarrel with the political prisoners and the upshot was that they were deprived of library books.⁶⁸

Ahmed Kathrada soon ran the tiny library and was later assisted by Sbu Ndebele and Khela Shubane. A bookshop in Cape Town that closed down donated its books – mostly romances by Daphne Du Maurier or classics by Charles Dickens.⁶⁹ By June 1978 there were a few hundred books in their section.⁷⁰ Kathrada also used his position as librarian to communicate information and have discussions with General Section political prisoners when he delivered, collected and took stock of library books. At Pretoria Central Prison, the Department's own collection was strengthened when the Pretoria Municipal Public Library established a depot there in 1970.⁷¹ By June 1978, there were 110 prisons using Provincial and Municipal library services, and the issue of books and magazines from July 1977 until June 1978 was 401 294.⁷²

Library services to political prisoners improved especially when some of them obtained degrees in librarianship through the University of South Africa (Unisa) – a correspondence university based in Pretoria. In this way,

Sedick Isaacs ran the General Section library, and Kathrada headed the Special Section library on Robben Island and later in Pollsmoor Prison, as qualified librarians. Denis Goldberg also obtained a Unisa degree in librarianship. Many political prisoners included courses in librarianship as part of their university studies.⁷³

Some political prisoners were not always given access to books, and language was a discriminating factor. By 1991 at Pollsmoor Prison library's General Section there were still only 140 Xhosa-language books for about 150 Xhosa-speaking women. Of these books, 63 were 'Junior fiction' and when Palesa Thibedi enquired about this she was told that Pollsmoor Prison had been designed for whites and 'coloureds'.⁷⁴ In an attempt to overcome the language and literacy barriers, political prisoners like Caesarina Makhoere became involved in improving the literacy levels of fellow prisoners.⁷⁵ The Department of Prisons also conducted its own literacy classes, and 4 040 prisoners completed a literacy course between 1968 and 1976.⁷⁶

The prison libraries were supposed to contribute to the rehabilitation policy of the Department of Prisons that sought to educate and re-educate prisoners to reach higher spiritual, educational and social levels on their release.⁷⁷ In the 1960s, this 'rehabilitatory zeal' in library policy had guided the classification of prison library books at Pretoria Central into 'Educational' and 'Fiction'. Prisoners were allowed one 'Educational' and one 'Fictional' work. Of the bizarre classification subdivisions, Hugh Lewin says:

'Educ/Lit and Educ/Hist... happily catered for all of Dickens but only half of Jane Austen: *Northanger Abbey* made it as Educ/Lit, *Persuasion* could only make Fic/Romance; Tolstoy's *Tales* reached Educ/Lit, *Anna Karenina* only Fic/Rom; Graves got only to Fic/Hist with *Claudius the God*, while Sterne made it to Educ/Hist with *Tristram Shandy*.⁷⁸

An even stranger arrangement later was Chief warder Du Preez's catalogue of purchased books. Over time the books could not be traced because most were filed under 'T' since so many titles started with 'The.' There was little improvement by the 1970s. The library catalogue, for example, listed *The Tempest* as science fiction, and *Romeo and Juliet* appeared as 'author anonymous'

Lewin was not surprised when he once got a collection of children's ghost stories and a 'dreadful' Cecil Roberts but on another occasion was

fortunate to have the whole *Forsythe Saga*, and later received *All Quiet on the Western Front*. On one occasion, when he was given a book by Edwin Spender instead of poet Stephen Spender as he had requested, he was asked by the 'Schoolmaster' if Edwin Spender would not do since it was still Spender after all. And in spite of previously reading Dostoyevsky's *Possessed* from the prison library, his order from a university tutor's lists for Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* and plays by Sartre was refused.⁷⁹

Censorship and contraband

To achieve its rehabilitation ideals, the Department of Prisons generally allowed all books that were not banned by the state's Censorship Board. But a further regulation enabled a Prison Commanding Officer to prohibit reading matter of an overwhelmingly stimulating and sexual nature, along with stimulating photographs and anything that might promote unrest among prisoners.⁸⁰ In the case of political prisoners, censor officers had also to apply all the 'B-orders', which stated clearly that 'politics and news from outside was strictly forbidden.'⁸¹

These orders and regulations were, however, interpreted and applied more or less rigidly by different officials and censor officers. When Baruch Hirson, for example, secured a copy of the prison regulations, Commanding Officer Gericke said that he could break prisoners by the way he applied them. This was taken as a declaration of war, and Hirson and his fellow prisoners were determined to use the regulations to break as much of the system as possible.⁸²

Some officials took a different approach, and Robben Island censor officer James Gregory, for example, became convinced that censorship laws were harsh and wrong. He argued with other censor officers, and the system of censorship of letters and newspapers on Robben Island was gradually relaxed.⁸³ Warder Sotheby, moreover, allowed a young prisoner to read the *Cape Times* and tell his comrades the news. He also left the Sunday newspapers where political prisoners could find them.⁸⁴ Nelson Mandela's first prison punishment, however, was for being caught 'black-and-white-handed' for possessing a newspaper left for him by a warder.⁸⁵

Censorship was both infuriating and intriguing to political prisoners. Alexander notes that one could write an entertaining satirical essay on the astonishing obtuseness of censors in general and prison censors in particular.⁸⁶ He was refused any books dealing with marxism or communism while he was working on a Unisa assignment that required material on these subjects. Books with any reference to Marx, marxism, Lenin, leninism, Russia, China, Cuba, socialism, communism, revolution, war, civil war, violence, Africa, anti-Apartheid literature, and historic-political literature written by blacks were almost always automatically withheld. Carl Niehaus, for example, was refused *The Way of the Black Messiah*,⁸⁷ and for some time Middleton was not allowed to get *Black Prophets in South Africa*.⁸⁸

Prison censors had little formal education and were told in crash courses by higher-ranking officers what books or titles to disallow. Some books like Tolstoy's *Resurrection* were refused because prison officials knew too little to tell whether it was suitable or not.⁸⁹ Censor officer Aubrey du Toit, for example, only had a matriculation qualification and knew nothing about political science but had to censor the political science assignments of Unisa honours degree student and prisoner Andrew Mlangeni. He says 'I didn't know what I was looking for... it was a joke for an Afrikaner with Standard 10 to censor these difficult assignments.'⁹⁰

Ironically though, under-qualified censors let in many books unknowingly while many actually needed were stopped.⁹¹ Alexander admits that he read books in prison that he would never have had the time or chance to read outside. He read classics of European literature, Gibbon, Shakespeare, Dickens, African history, international law, economics, languages and lots of German literature, and adds: 'I had more banned books inside prison than I ever had outside.'⁹²

In 1977, Goldberg and seven others at Pretoria Central formally opposed the censorship of newspapers by bringing a case against the Minister of Prisons, Police and Justice. Goldberg had kept a record of the political censorship of such magazines as *Darling* for young women, *Fair Lady* for women, as well as *Reader's Digest* and *Sports Illustrated*. He was prevented from giving the lawyer, Raymond Tucker, the paper containing all this information. Tucker had to write down what Goldberg told him when a

tape recorder was also disallowed. Goldberg's case was argued in court by Sydney Kentridge with a view to getting the Minister to reconsider his position on prison censorship. The State's legal counsel, however, countered that 'the individual propensities of these so-called political prisoners could be cured by not allowing them to know what is going on.'⁹³ But Goldberg's case brought public attention to the prisoners' plight, and after a visit from the Acting Chief Justice they eventually received newspapers after sixteen years.⁹⁴

One way of getting books was through Unisa studies. Jenkin observes that white male political prisoners, who were kept at Pretoria Central and Local prisons, were mostly graduates. They generally enrolled for Unisa degrees in order to read the widest range of books.⁹⁵ This was unlike the situation at Robben Island prison where Unisa studies allowed the black and less privileged male prisoners to get an education. A number of white political prisoners also earned Unisa degrees and for Niehaus, university studies was a 'lewensnoodsaaklike verwysingspunt' (a vital reference point).⁹⁶

These study privileges were often stopped abruptly, and a rumour on one occasion was that one of the Robben Island prisoners had written revolutionary slogans in a Unisa library book.⁹⁷ Even when these privileges were restored, library books were held back for prison censors to read. The deliberate slowness of the censors, according to Mandela, meant that library books would reach prisoners after the due date and would be sent back by warders. Prisoners, he remembers, often received overdue fines without ever having received books.⁹⁸ Dingake had to request an extension retroactively when J.Morgenthau's *Power Politics* was confiscated and only allowed after an appeal.⁹⁹

Other reading inconveniences included the refusal at one time for prisoners to lend books to each other, the removal of books for courses already completed, and the installation of awkward reading desks. At Robben Island, stand-up desks that jutted out from the wall at about chest-level were not functional, and after many complaints the desks were lowered, and three-legged stools were eventually provided.¹⁰⁰ The first bookshelves were built by political prisoners from planks from flotsam, and were often forbidden or dismantled by ill-disposed warders.¹⁰¹

Censorship slowly declined to the point that Suttner observed in a letter in March 1981: 'our censorship position is becoming closer to ordinary censorship outside,'¹⁰² but books were still regularly confiscated or refused. There are indications in Kathrada's lists of fiction and non-fiction titles for the Pollsmoor Prison's B Section that censor officers still 'took away' a number of books in the mid-1980s. Sergeant Brand peremptorily removed H. Bloom's *Transvaal Episode* and André Brink's *Looking on Darkness* on 28 May and 12 November 1984 respectively, and Charles van Onselen's two studies on the history of the Witwatersrand - *New Babylon* and *New Nineveh* - were 'taken back' on 9 July 1984. More interesting, though, is that a prison official returned Menán du Plessis' *State of Fear* on 21 May 1985.¹⁰³ This book dealt with the states of emergency in South Africa, and it is unclear whether the official had taken this book to read or whether he had simply banned it for a while.

Before they started getting newspapers in 1980, political prisoners smuggled them fast and furtively.¹⁰⁴ The connection of reading material with smuggling in South African prisons probably precedes the discovery of a crate of brandy and "dagga" (a slang term for *cannabis*) smuggled into Pretoria Central in the 1920s disguised as 'Christian literature.'¹⁰⁵ From the 1960s, however, through collusion with common law prisoners, the wall of apartheid censorship was breached through smuggling. Tobacco was used to pay the smugglers for newspapers, and Goldberg started smoking again just to get a prison tobacco ration.

Often more desperately, though, newspapers were fished from toilets,¹⁰⁶ retrieved from rubbish dumps, lifted from the satchels of unsuspecting or collaborating visiting preachers, and simply stolen.¹⁰⁷ They were secreted in slop pots,¹⁰⁸ in thermos flasks,¹⁰⁹ under jerseys,¹¹⁰ in different parts of the cell,¹¹¹ in shoes and underpants, underneath jackets,¹¹² and under layers of material and grease as 'dead letter boxes'.¹¹³ And then they were read in secret and shared with others.¹¹⁴

In the case of Robben Island, smuggled newspapers were brought to a central point where they were rapidly scanned, then memorized by readers and transmitted to a smaller group that would in turn disseminate the information to another group, and so forth. The news would sometimes be

translated and transcribed and then re-transcribed to safeguard individuals. The readers usually developed their own techniques of remembering articles on political, social, cultural, scientific and sporting categories.¹¹⁵

They learned speed reading techniques from Sedick Isaacs and read as quickly as possible, and then got rid of the contraband. Pages were usually soaked because tearing was noisy, and then flushed down toilets in strips. But sometimes reading as consumption assumed a literal meaning when pages were actually swallowed and eaten to avoid detection.¹¹⁶ A brief censorship victory was recorded when the *Economist* was read for just over a year after Mac Maharaj added the title to the list of six magazines that Masla Pather could submit for possible purchase when he reached 'A' status (The privileges of an 'A' status prisoner also included writing and receiving three letters per month and receiving visits by two persons twice per month).

The authorities selected it to the surprise of political prisoners in the Segregation Section. Daniels says that it arrived unwrapped and for the first time they received uncensored world news.¹¹⁷ When Pather was released, Maharaj coincidentally became an 'A' status prisoner and asked permission to take over the subscription. It was granted and the uncensored publication was received for about a year. It was soon ordered by airmail and arrived quicker than before. But it was left lying around and a warder idly paged through it and realized it was full of news. When Maharaj received the next issue, it was the cover only.

A similar kind of victory at Pretoria Central was the books bought by 'A' status prisoners who could buy three per month. There were a couple of thousand bought over the years and when they left the books remained behind as prison property. These books were of a high quality. The Prison censor had a list of banned books but kept no record of what was ordered, and nothing was removed from their shelves. Censors were not very intelligent, and many 'subversive' books of economic and political theory with fairly innocuous titles were added to the collection.¹¹⁸ Afrikaans language books were not screened as closely as those in English, and an Afrikaans book on sabotage circulated freely among prisoners.¹¹⁹

The censorship of newspapers gradually relaxed and by 1985 the Pollsmoor political prisoners were reading the *Cape Times*, *Die Burger*,

*Sowetan, Star, Sunday Times, Rapport, City Press, Cape Herald, Leader, Graphic, Guardian (UK), Time, Frontline, Die Suid-Afrikaan and Drum.*¹²⁰

Reading practices and preferences

Political prisoners 'squeezed blood from stones' in their reading. They drew from the books whatever they needed, and used inventive reading strategies. Some of them had developed these techniques before their arrests. Jean Middleton acknowledges that her first inclinations towards communism derived partly from reading Dickens' novels 'where the gap between wealth and poverty was most painfully described.'¹²¹ She also recalls reading of the effects that literature denouncing tyranny and advocating equality and respect had on the political development of Chris Hani.¹²²

Novels from the prison library also sharpened the political imagination. Goldberg recalls the social commentary he found in George Eliot's *Adam Bede* and Charles Kingsley's *The Water-Babies*, which he read in Pretoria Local.¹²³ Prisoners received many books with pages smoked away but still 'read' these gaps imaginatively. Strachan, for example, filled in the missing pages of a history book with his own imaginary construction of what may have happened since, he said, 'most history seems to be such prostheses anyway.'¹²⁴

And Ruth First used 'a short jagged piece from the *Saturday Evening Post*' to improvise a James Bond-style jailbreak from her Pretoria Central cell.¹²⁵ More dramatically, Henri Charrière's *Papillon* – a story about a prison break out - inspired the successful escape from Pretoria Central by Tim Jenkin and two fellow political prisoners on 11 December 1979. He read the book while awaiting trial in Pollsmoor Prison, and it set him on a course to seriously consider escaping and taught him a number of valuable lessons that guided his thinking and actions. To help confuse the night-warders on the day of the escape, Jenkin left a book open on his table with his reading spectacles on top of it.¹²⁶

Forbidden and 'approved' journals and magazines were read in interesting ways. Most of the propaganda organs such as *SA Panorama*, *Lantern*, *Archimedes*, *Bantu Inkubela* (Homelands), *Fiat Lux* (Indian Affairs) and *Alpha* (Coloured Affairs) were found in prison libraries. Political prisoners

read them 'critically' by simply standing 'the news on its head', so that if an article in a government journal argued that Bantu Education was being accepted, they concluded that it was in fact being resisted.

They learned much by reading this way, and even complained when the authorities absurdly and cynically started to censor even their own propaganda magazines.¹²⁷ They were able to make intelligent deductions about the political situation through astute reading techniques. One political prisoner, for example, read in the business section of a newspaper about the huge financial losses of a subsidiary company of Sasol, which confirmed rumours of an armed attack on the oil refinery plant.¹²⁸ In another instance, at Pretoria Central, Strachan was determined to interpret something from the assortment of items on a sheet of newspaper used as a tablecloth for his mug of water 'to give a hint of the state of my nation.'¹²⁹ More interestingly, Bernstein used a technique applied when reading bedtime stories to his children to read upside down what was written down by a visiting magistrate.¹³⁰

Reading preferences often tended towards fiction and biography, preferably longer books. Steve Biko, for example, read fiction only when he was in jail. Wendy Woods took him six paperbacks that included George Orwell's *Brave New World* and *Ninety Eighty-four* while he was briefly in prison for a perjury charge.¹³¹ Of the longer novels most sought after, Tolstoy's *War and Peace* was the most popular. Ruth First was awaiting a decision on it by the time she was released. Jacobsen's request for it was denied but Mandela and Middleton did get to read this work.¹³² Sachs considered anything less than 500 pages to be a short story and enjoyed such 'long books' as *Don Quixote*, Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*, Irving Stone's *The Agony and the Ecstasy* and James Michener's *Hawaii*. He also wanted to read 'books alive with people' instead of books of philosophy, or politics or criticism.¹³³

Fatima Meer's husband Ismail, who had been detained during the Treason Trial, gave strict instructions that she should have 'light reading'. So, in addition to her university books she also read *QB VII*, *Art of Africa* and Edith Wharton's *Old New York*.¹³⁴ Others were more earnest about reading. At Robben Island prison, there was a Reading/Literature Society, and political

prisoners used library books to organize discussions, and to adapt and stage plays.¹³⁵

Conclusion

Political prisoners with life or long sentences pressed a whole lot of living out of the books they read. From some of their reflections it is clear that books and reading inhabited their most private intellectual and emotional spaces. Goldberg, for example, says of the Unisa library service that it was a 'sanity saver.'¹³⁶ In prison it was necessary, as Breytenbach puts it, to 'keep the mind breathing',¹³⁷ or in Jenkin's words 'to keep our intellects alive, and to keep at bay the darkness they wished to impose.'¹³⁸ 'By means of the pages which I hold in my hands', Sachs elaborates, 'I am restored to mental activity and, above all, I resume my position as a member of humanity.'¹³⁹

Books and reading also helped to get the life experience that imprisonment denied. The reading practices of political prisoners were an integral part of their prison and personal lives as a whole. As Suttner explains: 'Psychologically, we have needs that can't be fulfilled in real life, and... Reading had to substitute for a normal social life.'¹⁴⁰ 'Prison', Middleton contends more strongly, 'creates a social and emotional, even a sensory, desert... There was no real life worth speaking of; I had only reading, nothing else, to fulfil the need for new experience, and I have never read with such relish and delight.'¹⁴¹

The prisoners were able to cull meaningful experiences from their reading, and often emerged when they were released as intellectually stronger and more well-read people than most South Africans. Many of them still fill important positions in South African society today. Although the amount and quality of their reading is still not fully known, a recent indication is the publication of Ahmed Kathrada's copybook *A Free Mind*, which is a selection of quotations from books he read. It is a kind of intellectual biography, and the best insight to date into what political prisoners could and did read.¹⁴²

There is little doubt that some of the prisoners were voracious readers. Goldberg 'was reading 365 books a year,'¹⁴³ Sedick Isaacs was 'reading about a thousand library books a year,'¹⁴⁴ and David Kitson ignored nothing

from the prison library and 'read over 300 books a year.'¹⁴⁵ It is clear that prison censorship and the attempted regulation of reading was not as effective as the security police and prison authorities had hoped. This is due in no small measure to the ways in which readers are able to create and contest reading spaces, and to regulate their own reading. In this case, a special community of readers overcame the censorship restrictions and reading limitations of political imprisonment to extract as much as possible of life and world affairs and to continue the liberation struggle, from the books that the apartheid government sought to deny them.

Endnotes

¹ R. Suttner, *Inside Apartheid's Prison: Notes and Letters of Struggle* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2001) 177-8. An alphabetical list of the South African political prisoners mentioned in this article is provided in an appendix below.

² F. Rosengarten, (ed), *Letters from Prison – Antonio Gramsci*, volume 1, translated by R. Rosenthal (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) 262-3.

³ N. wa Thiong'o, License to Write: Encounters with Censorship, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 23:1&2 (2003) 57.

⁴ I. Hofmeyr and S. Nuttall with C.A. Michael, The Book in Africa, *Current Writing* 13: 2 (2001) 2.

⁵ For links between reading regulation and a reading culture, see A.L. Dick, Book History, Library History and South Africa's Reading Culture, *South African Historical Journal*, 55 (2006) 33-45.

⁶ Reading on Robben Island was intensive and extensive - B. Hutton, *Robben Island: Symbol of Resistance* (Johannesburg: Sached; Bellville: Mayibuye Books, 1994) 69. Some scrapbooks and notebooks are available for perusal - see Mayibuye Archives (hereafter MA)/Robben Island Collection, University of the Western Cape, Bellville, Cape Town, Boxes 53 and 73. This article does not consider the notebooks kept for political education ('umhrabulo' – drinking in) on Robben Island, which also required clandestine reading – see G. Mbeki, *Learning from Robben Island: The Prison Writings of Govan Mbeki* (London: James Currey; Athens: Ohio University Press; Cape Town: David Philip, 1991).

⁷ The 'New Censorship' advocates a broader view of censorship in which social interaction and communication is affected by 'constitutive' and 'structural' censorship – see B. Müller, Censorship and Cultural Regulation: Mapping the Territory, in B Müller (ed), *Censorship & Cultural Regulation in the Modern Age* (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2004) 1-31; R. C. Post, (ed), *Censorship and Silencing: Practices of Cultural Regulation* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 1998).

⁸ D. Finkelstein and A. McCleery, *An Introduction to Book History* (New York: Routledge, 2005) 7-27.

⁹ Müller, *Censorship & Cultural Regulation*, 25.

¹⁰ For brief biographical notices of the political prisoners mentioned in this article see Appendix

¹¹ Human Rights Commission, Violence in Detention, in B. McKendrick and W. Hoffmann (eds), *People and Violence in South Africa* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1990) 410-3; M. Coleman (ed), *A Crime against Humanity: Analyzing the Repression of the Apartheid State* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1998) 43-67.

¹² J. Schadeberg, *Voices From Robben Island* (Randburg: Ravan Press, 1994) 48.

¹³ For the ANC, C. Saunders, (ed), *Reader's Digest Illustrated History of South Africa: The Real Story* (Cape Town: Reader's Digest Association, 1989) 486; The Pan-Africanist Congress, Saunders, *Illustrated History of South Africa*, 490.

¹⁴ *Political Imprisonment in South Africa*; Special Report SR-10 (Johannesburg: Human Rights Commission and London: IDAF Publications, 1991) 3-4.

¹⁵ Quoted in *South African Prisons and The Red Cross Investigation: An Examination by International Defence and Aid Fund, With Prisoners' Testimony* (London: Christian Action Publications, 1967) 5; see also B. Hiron, *Revolutions in My Life* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press: 1995) 339.

¹⁶ J. Middleton, *Convictions: A Woman Political Prisoner Remembers* (Randburg: Ravan Press, 1998) 113.

¹⁷ A useful annotated bibliography is K. Carollo, *Contemporary African Prison Narratives: An Annotated Bibliography*. Thanks to A. Kagan for providing me with a copy. A valuable source not included in that bibliography is Maina wa Kinyatti, *Mother Kenya: Letters from Prison, 1982-1988* (London: Vita Books, 1997). For South African prison conditions in the 1950s, see S. Bunting, The Prisons of Apartheid, *Africa South in Exile*, 4: 4 (Jul.-Sept. 1960) 42-8. For reports and accounts of physical and psychological torture of South African political prisoners, see, S. Cronje, *Witness in the dark: police torture and brutality in South Africa* (London: Christian action, 1964); *Maltreatment and torture of prisoners in South Africa: report of the Special Committee on apartheid*. Rapporteur: Mr. Barakat Ahmad (India). Unit on apartheid, Department of Political and Security Council Affairs (New York: United Nations, 1973); *Political imprisonment in South Africa: an Amnesty International Report* (London: Amnesty International, 1978); *Torture in South Africa: recent documents* (Catholic Institute for International Relations; Human Rights Forum; International Commission of Jurists, 1982).

¹⁸ Looksmart Solwande Ngudle, Joseph Mdluli, Hoosen Haffejee, Ahmed Timol, Steve Biko, Neil Aggett, Imam Haron, and many others died in prison. For names of others who died in detention, see W. Madikizela-Mandela, Foreword in F. Meer, *Prison Diary: One Hundred and Thirteen Days, 1976* (Cape Town: Kwela Books: 2001) 8-9; *Deaths in Custody: Seven Recent Cases in South Africa* (Lawyers Commission for Human Rights, 1986). For accounts of attempted suicides by political prisoners see R. First, *117 Days: An Account of Confinement and Interrogation under the South African Ninety-Day Detention Law* (London: Bloomsbury, 1988) 130-1; J. Kantor, *A Healthy Grave* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1967) 106-7; for the case of Mac Maharaj see A. Sampson, *Mandela: The Authorised Biography* (London: Harper Collins, 1999) 210.

¹⁹ There are a number of books and articles about prison writing but very little on prison reading – see for example C.J. Driver, Journal Southern African Studies the View from Makana Island: Some Recent Prison Books from South Africa *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 2: 1 (October 1975) 109-19; B. Schreiner, *A Snake with Ice Water: Prison Writings by South African Women* (Johannesburg: COSAW, 1992); D. Schalkwyk, Confession and Solidarity in the Prison Writing of Breyten Breytenbach and Jeremy Cronin *Research in African Literatures* 25: 1 (1994) 23-45.

²⁰ P. Gready, Autobiography and the “Power of Writing”: Political Prison Writing in the Apartheid Era, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 19: 3 (1993) 489-523; S. Graham, Albie Sachs, Indres Naidoo and the South African Prison Memoir *Scrutiny* 2 10: 1 (2005) 29-44.

²¹ B. Turok, *Nothing but the Truth: Behind the ANC's Struggle Politics* (Johannesburg & Cape Town: Jonathan Ball, 2003) 138.

²² H. Strachan, *Make a Skyf Man!* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2004) 51-2.

²³ D. Goldberg, *The Mission – Break Down the Walls*, Version 2.1, 29 January 1998, 2-3 (copy provided by Goldberg to the author).

²⁴ A.M. du Preez Bezdorp, *Winnie Mandela: A Life* (Cape Town: Zebra; London: New Holland, 2003) 138.

²⁵ J. Slovo, *Slovo: The Unfinished Autobiography*, with an introduction by H. Dolny (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1996) 120.

²⁶ F. Matthews, *Remembrances* (Bellville: Mayibuye Books, 1995) 57.

²⁷ A. Sachs, *The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1990) 175; Q. Jacobsen, *Solitary in Johannesburg* (London: Michael Joseph, 1973) 13.

²⁸ Middleton, *Convictions* 68.

²⁹ J. Kantor, *A Healthy Grave* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1967) 209. The trial was named after the place in Johannesburg where UmKhonto we Sizwe leaders were arrested in July 1963.

³⁰ R. Bernstein, *Memory against forgetting: memoirs from a life in South African politics, 1938-1964* (London: Viking, 1999) 229.

³¹ Jacobsen, *Solitary in Johannesburg* 244; see also M. Resha, ‘Mangoana Tsoara Thipa Ka Bohaleng – My Life in the Struggle’ (Johannesburg COSAW, 1991) 187-8.

³² Jacobsen, *Solitary in Johannesburg* 164.

³³ R.D. Vassen, *Letters from Robben Island: A Selection of Ahmed Kathrada's Prison Correspondence, 1964-1989* (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1999) 14.

³⁴ This did not change in Section Six of the Terrorism Act, which was in effect from June 1967 to July 1982. The Internal Security Act's Section 29, which replaced it, differed very little and detainees remained incommunicado.

³⁵ First, *117 Days* 41, 50, 89. The newspapers where she worked were all banned, and Ronald Segal described her death as ‘the final act of censorship’.

- ³⁶ Sachs, *The Jail Diary* 130, 184, 282-3.
- ³⁷ Turok, *Nothing but the Truth* 150; First, *117 Days* 66. It is possible that the supply of *Bibles* to prisons goes back to South Africa's colonial past and that this practice was pioneered by the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge in England – J. Fyfe, *Books Behind Bars: The Role of Books, Reading, and Libraries in British Prison Reform, 1701-1911* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1992) 3-14.
- ³⁸ P.A. Kgosana, *Lest we Forget: an autobiography by Philip Ata Kgosana* (Johannesburg: Skotaville, 1988) 38.
- ³⁹ Abdulla Haron, for example, kissed and placed the *Koran* on his prayer mat on the day he died in detention – B. Desai and C. Marney, *The Killing of the Imam* (London: Quartet Books, 1978) 125; Fatima Meer, a Muslim, was mistakenly given the *Ramayana* (A Hindu epic poem), which she found 'fascinating reading' – F. Meer *Prison Diary: One hundred and thirteen days, 1976* (Cape Town: Kwela Books, 2001) 33; Kathrada was only allowed a *Bible* during his detention in 1963 but said 'it was a great help' – Vassen, *Letters from Robben Island* 182.
- ⁴⁰ Z. Jaffer, *Our Generation* (Cape Town: Kwela Books, 2003) 133-5.
- ⁴¹ F. Bookholane, Six Years Inside, in D.E.H. Russell (ed), *Lives of Courage: Women for a New South Africa* (London: Basic Books, 1989) 61-2.
- ⁴² M.S. Mogoba, *Stone, Steel, Sjabok: Faith on Robben Island*, edited by T. Coggin (Johannesburg: Ziningweni Communications, 2003) 48.
- ⁴³ F. Chikane, *No Life of My Own: An Autobiography* (London: Catholic Institute for International Relations, 1988) 56.
- ⁴⁴ T.S. Farisani, *Diary From a South African Prison*, edited by J.A. Evenson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987) 22, 49, 60.
- ⁴⁵ M. Dingake, *My Fight Against Apartheid* (London: Kliptown Books, 1987) 114.
- ⁴⁶ E. Mashinini, *Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life: A South African Autobiography* (London: Women's Press, 1989) 54, 82, 84.
- ⁴⁷ Suttner, *Inside Apartheid's Prison* 26.
- ⁴⁸ Sachs, *The Jail Diary* 64.
- ⁴⁹ Kantor, *A Healthy Grave* 46.
- ⁵⁰ The reading aloud of other materials was not uncommon - A policewoman read a newspaper aloud to two women detainees and was subsequently arrested for assisting 'terrorists - Laura (not her real name) Smit, 'A Knock at the Door' in Schreiner, *A Snake with Ice Water* 208; Jean Middleton read Gerald Manley Hopkins' poem *The Wreck of the Deutschland* out loud - Middleton, *Convictions* 123, and Ahmed Kathrada spent hours reading to Walter Sisulu when his eyesight began to fail - Gregory, *Goodbye Bafana* 241.
- ⁵¹ Farisani, *Diary From a South African Prison* 22; S. Jobson, Diary of Recent Events, in Schreiner, *A Snake with Ice Water* 174.; G. French-Beytagh, *Encountering Darkness* (London: Collins, 1973) 269.
- ⁵² First, *117 Days* 129; E. Kuzwayo, *Call Me Woman* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985) 211
- ⁵³ N. Alexander, in B. Hutton (ed), *Robben Island: Symbol of Resistance* (Johannesburg: Sached and Mayibuye Books, 1994) 69.
- ⁵⁴ Bernstein, *Memory against forgetting* 267, footnote 2.
- ⁵⁵ Raymond Mhlaba's *Personal Memoirs: Reminiscing from Rwanda and Uganda*, narrated to T. Mufamadi (Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council and Robben Island: Robben Island Museum, 2001) 132.
- ⁵⁶ du Preez Bezdorp, *Winnie Mandela* 150.
- ⁵⁷ J. Matakata, *Hills of Hope: the autobiography of Jama Matakata* (Pietermaritzburgh: Nutrend, 2004) 59.
- ⁵⁸ The Old Testament was also used for 'purposes of onanism' or 'vir draadtrekdoeleindes' - Strachan, *Make a Skyf Man!*, 105. Some male political prisoners did order magazines like *Vogue* and *Women's Own* to deal with the sex drive and relations with women – T. Jenkin, *Inside Out: Escape from Pretoria Prison* (Bellevue: Jacana, 2003) 239.
- ⁵⁹ A 'zoll' is South African slang for a hand-rolled cigarette.
- ⁶⁰ *Island in Chains – Prisoner 885/63: Ten Years on Robben Island as told by Indres Naidoo to Albie Sachs* (London: Penguin Books, 1982) 53.
- ⁶¹ Quoted in D. Foster, *Detention and Torture in South Africa: Psychological, Legal & Historical Studies* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1987) 98. In an empirical study of 176 cases of detention conducted as late as 1983/1984, only half (81) of 162 respondents said they had access to some reading material – Foster, *Detention and torture* 98, 201.

- ⁶² Government Gazette Extraordinary No. 1326, 31 December 1965. Library facilities and reading privileges at South African prisons preceded the period examined here. Herman Charles Bosman, who was in Pretoria Central Prison in the 1920s, worked in the prison library and had books by Dostoyevsky supplied to him by the Orange Free State library service - H.C. Bosman, *Cold Stone Jug* (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 1981) 66; S. Gray, *Life Sentence: A Biography of Herman Charles Bosman* (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 2005) 128. While he was held as a Political Prisoner at the Fort Prison in Johannesburg in June 1900, James Thompson Bain was reading Thomas Carlyle – J. Hyslop, A Scottish Socialist Reads Carlyle in Johannesburg Prison, June 1900: Reflections on the Literary Culture of the Imperial Working Class, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 29: 3 (Sept 2003) 639-55.
- ⁶³ Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Offenders; Regulation no. 40, in *United Nations Congress on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders*, 1st Genève, 1955. Report (New York: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 1955).
- ⁶⁴ Before that, a prison psychologist had supplied books for a library in a specially converted cell in the Zinktronk. The books, which included some political works (English biographies) and classical novels (including Dickens), were heavily censored - M. Dlamini, *Hell-Hole Robben Island: Reminiscences of a Political Prisoner in South Africa* (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1984) 171.
- ⁶⁵ *Red Cross Investigation* 27.
- ⁶⁶ Mogoba, *Stone, Steel, Sjabok* 45.
- ⁶⁷ J.K. Coetzee, *Plain Tales from Robben Island* (Pretoria: Van Schaik, 2000) 86.
- ⁶⁸ *Red Cross Investigation* 27.
- ⁶⁹ A. Kathrada, *Memoirs* (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2004) 218.
- ⁷⁰ Vassen, *Letters From Robben Island* 95.
- ⁷¹ H.J.M. Retief, *Die Leesgedrag en Biblioteekbehoefes van 'n Groep Blanke Langtermyngevangenes in Suid-Afrika*, (Unpublished D.Bibl Thesis, University of South Africa, 1978) 135.
- ⁷² Report of the Commissioner of Prisons of the Republic of South Africa for the Period 1 July 1977 to 30 June 1978 (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1978) 14.
- ⁷³ Sedick Isaacs (MA/Robben Island Collection/Boxfile 48), Ahmed Kathrada (MA/Ahmed Kathrada Collection/Boxfile 13).
- ⁷⁴ P. Thibedi, Ayiyo Trongo Yethu Le!, in B. Schreiner, (ed), *A Snake with Ice Water: Prison Writings by South African Women* (Johannesburg: COSAW, 1992) 138. Pollsmoor Prison library was used on different days by white and black prisoners.
- ⁷⁵ Accounts of literacy classes on Robben Island are well-documented. In Kroonstad Prison, Caesarina Makhoere taught fellow prisoners to read and write – C.K. Makhoere, *No Child's Play: In Prison under Apartheid* (London: The Women's Press, 1988) 113.
- ⁷⁶ Report of the Commissioner of Prisons of the Republic of South Africa for the Period 1 July 1975 to 30 June 1976 (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1976) 12.
- ⁷⁷ P.A.G. Reitz, Die Plek wat die Openbare Biblioteek Inneem in die Behandelingsprogram van Gevangenes, *South African Libraries* 38: 3 (December 1970) 176.
- ⁷⁸ H. Lewin, *Bandiet: Seven Years in a South African Prison* (London: Heinemann, 1974) 81. For Chief warden Du Preez's catalogue see B. Hirson, *Revolutions in My Life* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1995) 207; see also Jenkin, *Escape from Pretoria* 195. For the *The Tempest* and *Romeo and Juliet* see Suttner, *Inside Apartheid's Prison* 70.
- ⁷⁹ Lewin, *Bandiet* 108, 170.
- ⁸⁰ Suid-Afrika, Departement van Gevangenis, Hoofstuk 26, Wysigingstrokie no. 4/76, Biblioteekdienste en Leesstof, 28 junie 1976 (Ongepubliseerd), Staande Gevangenisdiensorder no. B.22.8 (b)(ii).
- ⁸¹ J. Gregory, with Bob Graham, *Goodbye Bafana; Nelson Mandela, My Prisoner, My Friend* (London: Headline, 1995) 105.
- ⁸² Hirson, *Revolutions in My Life* 327.
- ⁸³ Gregory, *Goodbye Bafana* 126-7, 239.
- ⁸⁴ N. Babenia, *Memoirs of a Saboteur: Reflections on my Political Activity in India and South Africa*, as told to Iain Edwards (Bellville: Mayibuye Books, 1995) 144.
- ⁸⁵ N. Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela* (London: Abacus, 1994) 493; see also Schadeberg, *Voices From Robben Island* 19.
- ⁸⁶ N. Alexander, *Robben Island Prison Dossier 1964-1974* (Rondebosch: University of Cape Town Press, 1994) 61.
- ⁸⁷ C. Niehaus, *Om te Veg vir Hoop* (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 1993) 125.
- ⁸⁸ Middleton, *Convictions* 114.

- ⁸⁹ Sachs, *The Jail Diary* 249
- ⁹⁰ Schadeberg, *Voices From Robben Island* 47.
- ⁹¹ N. Alexander, in T. Lodge, and B. Nasson (eds), *All, Here, and Now: Black Politics in South Africa in the 1980s* (Cape Town: Ford Foundation – David Philip, 1991) 302.
- ⁹² N. Alexander, in Hutton, *Robben Island: Symbol of Resistance* 69.
- ⁹³ Jenkin, *Inside Out* 165.
- ⁹⁴ E-mail to author from Denis Goldberg, 14 April 2006.
- ⁹⁵ Jenkin, *Inside Out* 182-3; see also Hirson, *Revolutions in My Life* 208-9.
- ⁹⁶ Niehaus, *Om te Veg vir Hoop* 126.
- ⁹⁷ Jenkin, *Inside Out* 182-3. Prison censors also added marginalia in books. A confiscated book returned to Suttner had the words ‘Pure Marxist formulations’ written in the margin – Suttner, *Inside Apartheid’s Prison* 108.
- ⁹⁸ Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom* 490.
- ⁹⁹ Dingake, *My Fight Against Apartheid* 177.
- ¹⁰⁰ Mogoba remarks ‘tongue in cheek’ that the stand-up desks probably accounted for the high pass rate since one could not easily fall asleep – Mogoba, *Stone, Steel, Sjambok* 43.
- ¹⁰¹ Dingake, *My Fight Against Apartheid* 174.
- ¹⁰² Suttner, *Inside Apartheid’s Prison* 98.
- ¹⁰³ Ahmed Kathrada Collection, Pollsmoor Maximum Prison B-section, MA/ File 13.3 (non-fiction books) and File 13.4 (fiction books).
- ¹⁰⁴ Helen Suzman helped to secure the concession of newspapers to political prisoners – H. Suzman, Foreword, in Alexander, *Robben Island Prison Dossier* vi.
- ¹⁰⁵ Gray, *Life Sentence* 128.
- ¹⁰⁶ Turok, *Nothing but the Truth* 160.
- ¹⁰⁷ For an account of how the *Sunday Times* of a visiting preacher - ‘Brother September’ - was stolen, see Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom* 537; also E. Daniels, *There and Back: Robben Island 1964-1979*, Mayibuye History and Literature Series, No. 83. (Bellville: Mayibuye Books, 1998) 165.
- ¹⁰⁸ Turok, *Nothing but the Truth* 160.
- ¹⁰⁹ Jenkin, *Inside Out* 167.
- ¹¹⁰ Daniels, *There and Back* 165.
- ¹¹¹ Sachs, *The Jail Diary* 250.
- ¹¹² Breytenbach, *The True Confessions* 227.
- ¹¹³ *Banned books: images of the word* (Robben Island Museum Education Department, no date) 31.
- ¹¹⁴ In prison, PAC and ANC members shared newspapers - L. Mphahlele, *Child of This Soil: My Life as a Freedom Fighter* (Cape Town: Kwela Books, 2002) 123.
- ¹¹⁵ *Island in Chains* 155-6.
- ¹¹⁶ Lewin, *Bandiet* 108.
- ¹¹⁷ Daniels, *There and Back* 162.
- ¹¹⁸ Jenkin, *Escape from Pretoria* 195-6.
- ¹¹⁹ *Banned books* 34.
- ¹²⁰ Vassen, *Letters from Robben Island* 181.
- ¹²¹ Middleton, *Convictions* 42.
- ¹²² Chris Hani was Secretary General of the South African Communist Party and chief of staff of Umkonto we Sizwe. He was assassinated on 10 April 1993. In the case of Robert McBride, however, it was *Soledad Brother – The Prison Letters of George Jackson* that influenced him politically - G. Mokae, *Robert McBride – A Coloured Life* (Pretoria: Vista University, 2003) 22.
- ¹²³ Interview with Denis Goldberg, 5 March 2003
- ¹²⁴ Strachan, *Make a Skyf Man!* 141-2.
- ¹²⁵ First, *117 Days* 72.
- ¹²⁶ Jenkin, *Inside Out* 77-8, 259.
- ¹²⁷ Dingake, *My Fight Against Apartheid* 200-3.
- ¹²⁸ *ibid.* 199; Sasol is a parastatal established in 1950 to manufacture petroleum from coal.
- ¹²⁹ Strachan, *Make a Skyf Man* 181.
- ¹³⁰ Bernstein, *Memory against Forgetting* 270-271.
- ¹³¹ D. Woods, *Biko* (London: Penguin Books, 1987) 99.
- ¹³² First, *117 Days* 142; Jacobsen, *Solitary in Johannesburg* 86; Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom* 585; Middleton, *Convictions* 123.
- ¹³³ Sachs, *The Jail Diary* 165, 250.
- ¹³⁴ Meer, *Prison Diary* 55, 73, 86, 113.

¹³⁵ Prisoner 350/64 Steve Tshwete, in Schadeberg, *Voices From Robben Island* 39; Prisoner 398/64: Joseph Faniso Mati in Coetzee, *Plain Tales from Robben Island* 24; Prisoner 376/64: Monde Colin Mkunqwana, in J.K. Coetzee, L. Gilfillian and O Hulec, *Fallen Walls: Voices from the Cells that held Mandela and Havel* (Cape Town: Robben Island Museum, 2002) 85.

¹³⁶ Interview with Denis Goldberg, 5 March 2003.

¹³⁷ Breytenbach, *The True Confessions* 210.

¹³⁸ Jenkin, *Inside Out* 196.

¹³⁹ Sachs, *The Jail Diary* 165.

¹⁴⁰ Suttner, *Inside Apartheid's Prison* 92, 94.

¹⁴¹ Middleton, *Convictions* 99, 87.

¹⁴² S. Venter, (ed), *A Free Mind – Ahmed Kathrada's Notebook From Robben Island* (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2005).

¹⁴³ D. Topouzis, Interview – South Africa: Chapters in the Struggle, *Africa Report* (Sept-Oct 1988) 59.

¹⁴⁴ Interview with S. Isaacs, *Becoming Teachers in the Struggle*, in A. Wieder, *Voices from Cape Town Classrooms: Oral Histories of Teachers who Fought Apartheid* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003) 69.

Sedick Isaacs served a sentence on Robben Island from 1964 to 1977 for PAC activities.

¹⁴⁵ Jenkin, *Inside Out* 195.

Appendix

List of South African political prisoners mentioned in the article

Neville Alexander was sentenced to the island from 1964 to 1974, after being charged and convicted of 'conspiracy to commit sabotage' via the activities of the Yu Chi-Chan Club and the National Liberation Front.

Natoo Babenia was sentenced to 16 years on Robben Island for involvement in MK activities.

Rusty Bernstein was arrested at Lilliesleaf Farm, Rivonia on 11 July 1963 and tried for sabotage. He was acquitted at the Rivonia trial.

Steve Biko was the President of the South African Students Organization (SASO). He was detained on 18 August 1977. He died 26 days later.

Feziwe Bookholane was convicted of terrorism and sentenced on 4 April 1979 to 8 years, reduced to five years.

Breyten Breytenbach was arrested in August 1975 and convicted on charges of Terrorism, and served seven years in the Pretoria Central and Pollsmoor prisons. He was released on 2 December 1982.

Dennis Brutus served a 16-month sentence on the island, and was released in July 1965.

Frank Chikane was detained on 6 June 1977 and tortured for assisting families whose members were also detained. He was held in Krugersdorp and Rustenberg Prisons. He was released in January 1978.

Eddie (E. J.) Daniels was a member of the Liberal Party and the African Resistance Movement. He was charged in 1964 with 'Sabotage against the State'. He was sentenced to 15 years on the island and was released in 1979.

Michael Dingake was a Botswana National who became involved with ANC activities. He was on the island from 1966 to 1981.

Tshenuwani Simon Farisani was detained on four occasions and accused of recruiting schoolboys for training in Botswana. He spent a total of 442 days in prisons in the 1970s and 1980s.

Gonville French-Beytagh was a British Anglican priest in Johannesburg. He was detained in January 1971 for nine days and sentenced to five years under the Terrorism Act. His appeal was successful and he left the country in April 1972.

Ruth First was detained in solitary confinement for ninety days in 1963. She was killed by a letter bomb in Mozambique on 17 August 1982.

Denis Goldberg was arrested in 1963 and convicted at the Rivonia trial. He served 22 years in Pretoria Local and Central Prisons. He was released in 1985.

Baruch Hirson was arrested in July 1964 and sentenced for his activities in the African Resistance Movement. He was held in Pretoria Central Prison and released in December 1973.

Sedick Isaacs was a PAC member and was held on Robben Island from 1964 to 1977.

Quentin Jacobsen, a British citizen, was arrested on 2 November 1971. He was detained from 21 April 1971 until 21 April 1972.

Zubeida Jaffer was a journalist and a key organizer in the formation of the United Democratic Front. She was detained briefly in 1980 and for 42 days in 1985.

Tim Jenkin was arrested under Section 6 of the Terrorism Act on 2 March 1978. He was later charged under Article 2(1) of the Terrorism Act of 1967 and Article 11(e) of the Internal Security Act of 1950 (formerly the Suppression of Communism Act) and eventually sentenced to 12 years in Pretoria Local Prison. He escaped on 11 December 1979 along with Alex Mombembari and Stephen Lee.

Susan Jobson was detained for two weeks in December 1986 at John Vorster Square for involvement in the End Conscription Campaign;

James Kantor was arrested on 21 August 1963 and charged with sabotage. He spent time at Pretoria Central, Marshall Square and the Fort Prisons. He was released on 4 April 1964.

Ahmed Kathrada was arrested in 1963 and convicted at the Rivonia trial. He was on Robben Island and in Pollsmoor Prison until 1989.

Philip Kgosana was arrested on 30 March 1960 and released on bail on 6 November 1960. He fled into exile.

Ellen Kuzwayo was the only member of the 'Soweto Committee of Ten' elected by residents in 1976 to study the local authority and report back to them. She was detained on 19 October 1977 and held at the Fort Prison under Section 10 of the Terrorism Act, which entitled her to reading material. She was released on 13 March 1978.

Hugh Lewin was arrested in July 1964 and detained under the 90-day law. He was charged under the Sabotage Act and served seven years in Pretoria Local and Central Prisons. He was released at the end of 1971.

Nomzamo Winnie Madikizela-Mandela was in detention for 18 months in 1969, and detained again in 1976. She was held under house arrest in Brandfort for several years.

Mac Maharaj was arrested in Johannesburg in July 1964. He was convicted on charges of sabotage and sentenced to 12 years on Robben Island. He was released on 8 December 1976.

Caesarina Kona Makhoere was arrested on 25 October 1976, and sentenced to five years for recruiting people for military training. She was in Kroonstad, Pretoria central and Klerksdorp prisons, and was released on 26 October 1982.

Nelson Mandela was sentenced on 13 June 1964 at the Rivonia trial. He was on Robben Island until April 1982 and was transferred to Pollsmoor Prison and to Victor Verster Prison in December 1988. He was released on 11 February 1990.

Emma Mashinini was active in the Trade Union Movement, and received an education in labour struggles from books given to her by union leaders. She was arrested on 27 November 1981 and detained under Section 22 (51).

Jama Matakata fled from South Africa on 26 December 1982 to train as an MK soldier. He was arrested on 17 December 1984. He was on Robben Island from January 1986 until 3 September 1990.

Joseph Faniso Mati was arrested for MK activities in July 1963 and sentenced to 10 years on the island;

Robert McBride was an ANC activist convicted of the 1986 bombing of Magoo's Bar in Durban. He was reprieved while on death row.

Fatima Meer was arrested on 20 August 1976 and released on 10 December 1976

Raymond Mhlaba was sentenced at the Rivonia trial in 1964. He was held on Robben Island, and transferred to Pollsmoor Prison in 1982. He was released in October 1989.

Jean Middleton was arrested on 3 July 1964 and charged for membership and furthering the aims of the Communist Party. She was held in several prisons, including Barberton Prison. She was released on 11 April 1968.

Monde Colin Mkunqwana was arrested in July 1963 and sentenced to 14 years on Robben Island for sabotage.

Stanley Mogoba was a PAC member and charged and convicted in 1962 of conspiracy to commit a crime and furthering the aims of a banned organisation. He was on Robben Island from 1964 until 1966 and then transferred to Pretoria Central Prison.

E.D Moseneke was a PAC member and was on Robben Island from 1963 to 1973.

Letlapa Mphahlele was an Apla commander and was connected with the PAC. He was captured in Botswana in the early 1980s and held in Gaborone Central Prison.

Indres Naidoo was arrested following the attempted sabotage of a signal box on a remote part of the South African Railways as a result of an informer in their group. He was sentenced in 1963 to ten years, most of which was spent on Robben Island. He was released in 1973.

Looksmart Ngudle was arrested on 19 August 1963. He died in detention on 5 September 1963.

C.R. Ngxiki was arrested in 1963 and charged and convicted for arson. He spent four and a half years on Robben Island.

Carl Niehaus was imprisoned at Pretoria Central from 24 November 1983 until 19 March 1991 for ANC activities.

Masla Pather was jailed on Robben Island for two years for allowing Nelson Mandela, Govan Mbeki and Raymond Mhlaba to meet in his house.

Albert L Sachs was arrested on 1 October 1963 under the Ninety days Law. He spent 168 days in solitary confinement. He was detained again in 1965.

Jenny Schreiner was arrested on 17 September 1987 and charged for treason. She was detained in terms of Section 29 of the Internal Security Act, and was indemnified in March 1991 along with others in the 'Yengeni' or 'Rainbow' trial of 14 anti-apartheid activists.

Joe Slovo was in detention for six months in 1960. He went into exile in 1963.

Robert Sobukwe was the first President of the PAC. He was sentenced to 3 years imprisonment in 1960, at the end of which Parliament enacted a General Law Amendment Act, which empowered the Minister of Justice to prolong the detention of any political prisoner indefinitely. He was moved to Robben Island, where he remained for six additional years. He had his own library on Robben Island.

Robert Harold Strachan was arrested and charged under the Explosives Act. He was imprisoned for four years in Pretoria Central Prison and held under house arrest for ten years after that.

Raymond Suttner was arrested on 3 May 1975 and charged under the Terrorism Act. He spent several years in Pretoria Local, Pretoria Central and other prisons in the 1970s and 1980s.

Palesa Thibedi was held in Pollsmoor prison in 1991.

Steve Tshwete was convicted of sabotage in February 1964 and sentenced to 15 years on Robben Island.

Ben Turok was arrested in 1962 and charged with treason. He was sentenced to three years in Pretoria Central and Local prisons. He was released on 26 July 1965.