

TRC Cradock Four Amnesty Hearings

Abstract: The Amnesty Hearing of the Truth and Reconciliation show the connection between the South African Apartheid state and the mysterious disappearances of four Cradock political activists. The testimonies of members of the security police highlight the lengths the apartheid state was willing to go to suppress opposition.

The fall of Apartheid and the numerous examples of state mandated human rights abuses against its opponents raised a number of critical questions for South Africans at the time. Among the many issues to be addressed, was the need to create an institution for the restoration of the justice that had been denied to the many victims of apartheid's crimes. Much like the numerous truth commissions established in Eastern Europe and Latin America after the formation of democracy in those regions, the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#) was founded with the aims of establishing a restorative, rather than punitive justice. The goal of the [TRC](#) was not to prosecute and impose punishment on the perpetrators of the state's suppression of its opposition, but rather to bring closure to the many victims and their families in the form of full disclosure of the truth. The amnesty hearings undertaken by the [TRC](#) represent these aims, by offering full amnesty to those who came forward and confessed their crimes. In the case of Johan van Zyl, Eric Taylor, Gerhardus Lotz, Nicholas van Rensburg, Harold Snyman and Hermanus du Plessis; the amnesty hearings offer more than just a testimony of their crimes. The amnesty hearings of the murderers of a group of anti-apartheid activists known as the Cradock Four show the extent of violence the apartheid state was willing to use on its own citizens to quiet any opposition and maintain its authority.

Nature of the Apartheid State and its opposition

By the 1980's the opposition to the minority white rule was growing throughout South Africa and the conflict was turning increasingly violent. The South African state which had grown out of the remnants of Dutch and British colonialism and the wave of Afrikaner nationalism which followed had effectively sought to represent only the interests of the white minorities. Numerous legislative acts were passed, which codified the oppressive tactics of apartheid, all with the aims of suppressing the black majority and reducing it to a subservient class. Stretching from 1949 to 1976 and number of acts were passed through the South African parliament with the aims of systemizing segregation and ensuring that blacks remained a source of cheap labor for the ruling Afrikaners. This political manifestation of racist ideologies was evident through the enactment of a large list of differing security legislations, all of which were specifically designed to maintain Afrikaner dominance in South Africa and prevent any sort of opposition to its rule.

However, groups such as the African National Congress ([ANC](#)) and the United Democratic Front ([UDF](#)) began to organize a more effective opposition to the state. The [UDF](#), more specifically, was a unique organization in the South African liberation movement:

'It provided an overarching umbrella for grassroots political formations to ensure that all the structures adhered to a common political platform. The oppressed could now speak and act as one mass political party of the revolution under one command. The [UDF](#) drew all sorts of people into an alliance of resistance- students, teachers, clergy, academics, trade unionists, business people and indeed anyone opposed to the evil schemes of the regime... Its country wide web of organizations and structures spread through all sections and in all centers of the country, making it impossible for the security police to infiltrate, let alone suppress or even keep track of its activities.' (The Crisis of the Garrison State, 2010)

Faced with such revolutionary opposition and unable to combat it through the less clandestine, conventional methods, the apartheid regime was forced to carry out covert actions by extension

of the security police in order to repress dissident political activists, such as Matthew Goniwe, Fort Calata, Sparrow Mkonto, and Sicelo Mhlauli - better-known as the Cradock Four.

The Cradock Four

The political activists who came to be known as the Cradock Four were well known members of their community with a history of political organizing and anti-apartheid opposition. Perhaps the most famous of these men was Matthew Goniwe. Goniwe was born in Cradock, 27 December, 1947 where he later became a very popular school teacher. Matthew's eldest brother [Jacques](#), 'the first person to burn his pass book in Cradock as part of the [ANC](#)'s defiance campaign', and [Rev Canon James Calata](#), 'a founder of the African National Congress' were instrumental figures who shaped his political views. (thecradockfour.co.za, 2010) The contact that Matthew had with his brother 'inevitably led to more political awareness...[and] his death in exile served to confirm and strengthen Matthew's commitment to the struggle for political rights in South Africa.' (Nicholson, 2004) After teaching for a while in Cradock, Goniwe went to Transkei where he joined a Marxist study group and was subsequently arrested in 1976 under the Suppression of Communism Act. (Nicholson, 2004) After his release in 1981, he was sent back to Cradock where he resumed teaching and was eventually appointed headmaster of Sam Xhallie High School in January of 1983. It was at this time that he met Fort Calata, another teacher. The pair 'discovered they spoke the same language politically.' (thecradockfour.co.za, 2010) Goniwe and Calata were to become close friends and leaders within their community.

In response to the stress of the increasing rates of rent imposed on the residents of Cradock's black township, Lingelihle, Goniwe formed the Cradock Youth Association (Cradoya) and the Cradock Resident's association (Cradora) to organize the community in protest against

the Eastern Cape Administration Board for the recent rent increases. (Nicholson, 2004) A few months after Cradora's initial mass meeting, Goniwe received notice from the Department of Education and Training that he had been transferred to a school nearly an hour's drive away as a result of the security police's need to get 'the "troublemaker" out of Craddock,' (thecradockfour.co.za, 2010) Upon refusing to transfer, he was given notice that he had effectively fired himself. After Goniwe reapplied to teach in Craddock and was denied his request, 1000 students at a Cradoya meeting staged a school boycott which further attracted the attention of the state security police to Goniwe. The 15 month long boycott was the longest in South African history. When Matthew Goniwe and Fort Calata were later arrested in March of 1984, tensions in Craddock escalated. A number of violent protests and boycotts calling for the release of the leaders of Cradora and Cradoya continued until their release in October after a 'successful seven-day boycott was called of white shops.' (thecradockfour.co.za, 2010) Though all meetings of Cradora and Cradoya had been banned, 'the mood of resistance increased as the atmosphere of oppression prevailed... [And] people continued to meet secretly and plan strategies to survive.' (Nicholson 2004) Matthew Goniwe who had become the a rural organizer for the UDF, and whose organizations Cradora and Cradoya had aligned themselves with the UDF, was the state's 'biggest problem in the Eastern Cape' and was even considered a terrorist by the security police. (thecradockfour.co.za) It was through his efforts as an anti-apartheid organizer and activist that the security policy recognized him as the source of the chaos and unrest in Craddock. In order to regain control of the situation and bring stability to the area, a plan to permanently remove Matthew Goniwe and his closest colleagues was devised.



UDF Activist Matthew Goniwe. 15 March 1985.

Photograph by Gille de Vlieg / South Photos.

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Fort Calata was a close colleague and fellow activist of Matthew Goniwe. A teacher at the same high school, Calata was also instrumental to the creation of Cradora and later became chairperson of Cradoya. (thecradockfour.co.za, 2010) The State Security Council held the same view of Calata as they did of Matthew Goniwe as another key figure responsible for the unrest in Cradock. Sparrow Mkonto and Sicelo Mhlauli were the other two activists in the Cradock Four. Sparrow was a former student of Goniwe and held a senior position in Cradora and was victim to the same sort of police harassment as Matthew Goniwe and Fort Calata. Furthermore, ‘Sparrow was a part of the second layer of leadership Goniwe was developing as a counter-strategy to the detention of leaders by the Security Police.’ (cradockfour.co.za, 2010) His association with Matthew Goniwe and Cradora made Sparrow Mkonto equally responsible for the situation in Cradock in the eyes of the apartheid state. Sicelo Mhlauli was a friend of Matthew Goniwe who had grown up with him in Cradock, a headmaster at a school in Oudtshoorn, Mhlauli was also involved with the UDF as an anti-apartheid activist.

The activities of these four men were a threat to the state’s continued enforcement of apartheid policies and the increasingly chaotic nature of the situation in Cradock a major

opposition to the security of the South African government. General Joffel Van der Westhuizen 'saw the Eastern Province as the eye of the revolutionary storm against the state' and stated that it was his job to 'still that storm', accordingly, he had said 'Matthew Goniwe and his comrades should be permanently removed from society.' (Nicholson 2004)

On 28 June, 1985 four burnt bodies with multiple stab wounds were discovered in a remote location off the road between Cradock and Port Elizabeth. The day before, Goniwe, Calata, Mkonto and Mhlauli had attended a UDF meeting in Port Elizabeth, and were due to return back to Cradock that evening. After an initial investigation by local police, it was discovered that the bodies belonged to these four men. While there was much suspicion of foul play and state involvement in the deaths of these four activists, an inquest in 1987 found only that they were murdered by unknown persons. However, a following inquest in 1993 determined that the state security forces were responsible, yet failed to expose any individuals. It would not be until over a decade later with the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that the full story would be uncovered.

In the meantime however, the deaths of the Cradock Four stirred up the Anti-Apartheid movement to a critical stage. The resulting funeral turned into a massive political rally with over 60,000 people in attendance including foreign diplomats and messages from the [ANC](#)'s leader-in-exile [Oliver Tambo](#). (cradockfour.co.za, 2010) In response to the funeral, the next day [President P.W Botha](#) declared a state of emergency in the Eastern Cape which was eventually extended to include the entire country and members of the [UDF](#) leadership were detained and tortured. The numerous grievances of those affected by this conflict between the state and its dissidents would not be addressed until after the creation of the [TRC](#).



Funeral of the Cradock Four. 19 July 1985.

Photograph by Gille de Vlieg / South Photos.

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TRC Hearings

Under the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act of 1994, the post-apartheid government of South Africa established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to:

'Promote national unity and reconciliation in a spirit of understanding that transcends the conflicts and divisions of the past; Facilitate the granting of amnesty to persons who make full disclosure of all relevant facts related to violations associated with a political objective, [And] restore the human and civil dignity of victims by granting them an opportunity to relate their own accounts of the violations affecting them.' (Chapman, 2008)

Accordingly, the widows of Matthew Goniwe, Sparrow Mkonto and Fort Calata testified before the [TRC](#) and asked for an investigation into the murders of their husbands and to 'ascertain who was responsible.' (TRC Final Report Vol. 2, 1998) They further requested assistance for their children's educations and Ms. Mhlauli requested her husband's right hand returned which was missing from the body and was believed to be kept by the security police in a jar. But above all, they wished that the 'perpetrators be brought to court so that justice could be done.' (TRC Final Report Vol. 2, 1998) In January 1997, their wishes were answered when the TRC received applications from members of the security police for the murders of the Cradock Four.

The amnesty hearings of the [TRC](#) provided a platform for those who partook in criminal activity under the apartheid government to confess their crimes and be granted amnesty given the stipulation of full disclosure, political necessity and proportionality, which ‘permitted amnesty to be denied in cases involving the most heinous and atrocious acts, even if the other criteria had been met.’ (Chapman, 2008) It was at the amnesty hearings of members of the security police dating from 23 to 27 February 1998 that the story of the murders of the Cradock Four was finally brought to light and the motivations behind it became publicly known.

The amnesty hearings of Eric Taylor, Gerhardus Lotz, Nicholas van Rensburg, Harold Snyman, Johan van Zyl, Eugene de Kock, Jaap van Jaarsveld and Hermanus du Plessis gave an account of the story of what happened to Matthew Goniwe and his colleagues on the night they disappeared. The testimony from these security officers reconstructed the events of 27 June 1985. Captain Johan van Zyl led a team comprised of Lieutenant Eric Taylor, Sergeant Gerhardus Lotz and three other black policemen who were later murdered in the Motherwell Bombing when they threatened to confess their crimes in 1989. (TRC Final Report Vol. 2, 1998) The officers intercepted Goniwe’s car as it was headed towards Cradock returning from Port Elizabeth. They handcuffed the men and drove them to an isolated area where they burned the vehicle. (Nicholson, 2004) According to van Zyl, Colonel Van Rensburg directed him to make the “attack... appear as if it was a vigilante or AZAPO attack. In other words we should use sharp objects to eliminate the individuals and that we should burn their bodies with petrol.’ (Van Zyl TRC Amnesty Hearing, 1998) Accordingly, the bodies were stabbed, the handcuffs were removed, and then they were burnt.

The hearings brought to light a number of other facts regarding the murder, such as the political motivations involved. Van Zyl in his testimony refers to the massive unrest in the black

townships and the state of chaos which made it difficult to police the area. As a result of the critical nature of the situation, from the point of view of the state security establishment, ‘there was only one way to try and stabilise the areas, and that was by means of the elimination of Mr. Matthew Goniwe and his closest colleagues’ (Van Zyl TRC Amnesty Hearing, 1998). Any other form of lawful state action such as arrest or detainment without trial under the numerous security legislations would have only led to a further escalation in the violence. Thus the security police, in an effort to counter the activities of the anti-apartheid movement, resorted to taking covert action through a ‘drastic plan...that I [van Zyl] accepted to mean that they should be eliminated.’ (Van Zyl TRC Amnesty Hearing, 1998) The security police that carried out this action and their superiors whose decision it was to carry out the operation were doing ‘what would be in the best interest of the country,’ but more specifically, the apartheid establishment. (Van Zyl TRC Amnesty Hearing, 1998) Van Zyl clearly states in his testimony that his crimes ‘formed a part of the political struggle of that time’ and that his motivations in carrying out the murder of the Cradock Four was not based on anything else. (Van Zyl TRC Amnesty Hearing, 1998) Later in his testimony, Van Zyl cites a number of other crimes he participated in such as the politically motivated murders of the PEBCO 3. Johan van Zyl’s hearing and that of the other members of the security establishment involved with the murder of the Cradock Four in front of the [TRC](#) clearly delineate the state’s political motivation in the permanent removal of the political dissidents that threaten the apartheid government.



Fort Calata's parents overlook the graves of the Cradock Four after the truth of their deaths has been made public. 20 February 2008.

Photograph by David Goldblatt / South Photos.

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The statements given by those involved with the murders of the Cradock Four, primarily that of the leader of the group of men responsible for their murders, serve to highlight the nature of the apartheid state. The covert actions undertaken by the secret police that remained a mystery for nearly 13 years after the bodies of Matthew Goniwe, Fort Calata, Sparrow Mkonto, and Sicelo Mhlauli were discovered, serve to show how willing the apartheid state was to violate the human rights of those it governed in attempts to quiet any opposition to its rule. The sad nature of the murders of the Cradock Four and the amnesty hearings of the [TRC](#) bring to light the extensiveness of the apartheid era South African government's oppressiveness and methods of dispelling political dissidents.

Key Words/ Tags:

Cradock, Four, Matthew Goniwe, Fort Calata, Sparrow Mkonto, Sicelo Mhlauli, of Johan van Zyl, Eric Taylor, Gerhardus Lotz, Nicholas van Rensburg, Harold Snyman and Hermanus du Plessis, Truth and Reconciliation Commission, United Democratic Front, Cradora, Cradoya

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Skype Meetings Notes:

10/4 – Intro and time confirmations

10/18- I told Anele my topic discussed it briefly, this was before I had begun any actual research and asked him for suggestions on places for sources other than the TRC web site, he directed me to look over the SAHO site for any mentions of it.

11/1- We discussed some links he had sent me with information on the Cradock Four, and he suggested sources for pictures

11/15- Mostly discussed how the paper was coming along by this point. He told me my outline was in good shape and he looked forward to reading the final draft. He also answered a few questions I had about the organization of the security branch and some of its acronyms.

We missed the fifth meeting, but remained in contact through email correspondence. He gave some suggestions on the final paper and some technical notes including citations and to link terms like ANC and UDF to their respective SAHO pages.