

Name: Simon Thembuyise Mndawe

Date of Birth: 1959

Date of Death: March 8, 1983

In Summary: Simon Thembuyise Mndawe was a 24-year-old Umkhonto weSizwe soldier trained by the African National Congress (ANC) in Maputo, Mozambique, who helped to recruit young members for the ANC. He was detained under Section 29 of the Internal Security Act and was found by police hanging in his cell on 8 March 1983. While his death was declared a suicide, historical records made up of evidence given by police and Mndawe's family suggest that he was actually murdered while in police custody.

It was very common for freedom fighters during the apartheid era to become symbols of a cause rather than being remembered for the person that they were holistically, outside of their political activities. They had families and jobs, all of which they were willing to leave behind to join the fight for freedom and justice; however, just because they left this part of their lives behind does not mean that it should be forgotten. The significance of documenting the lives of political activists is both a therapeutic and restorative means of addressing the past through history. One such life is that of Simon Thembuyise Mndawe who was an [Umkhonto weSizwe or 'MK'](#) soldier trained by the [African National Congress](#) (ANC) in Maputo, Mozambique, who helped to recruit young members for the ANC. Historical records made up of evidence given by police and Mndawe's family prove that he was wrongfully detained and his death on 8 March 1983 was a murder and not a suicide. His name has been relegated to the historical archive of political prisoners' deaths in detention. In an effort to supply a biographical history of Mndawe, every bit of useful information has been skimmed from the archives which are heavily geared towards the political narrative that Mndawe's life contributed to.

Simon Mndawe was born in 1959 in Lydenburg, a town located in Mpumalanga, South Africa. He resided in a township called KaNyamazane, which is located in the eastern Transvaal

outside of Nelspruit. The township, situated between Swaziland and Mozambique, was often used as a safe house for ANC members who were taking part in underground operations. The presence of the ANC in KaNyamazane put many African people in the community, including Mndawe, at high risk of police interrogation. In his early life, Mndawe attended Driekoppies Primary School and went on to teach at Shongwe Secondary after he completed his matric.

Before he went into exile for ANC training, Simon Mndawe lived in the [KaNgwane homeland](#), an under-funded bantustan created with the intent to remove Black people from South Africa. He worked with his eldest brother, Michael Jabulane Mndawe, in the department of Internal Affairs for the KaNgwane homeland government. Mndawe's father had taken on many jobs throughout his life before he passed away in 1969. His mother, Paulina, was a dressmaker for the Shongwe Mission Hospital. Mndawe also had two children, Fikile and Nkosinathi, with Thembi Majola. Majola said that Mndawe was a very caring and thoughtful man who was great with their children. Thembi recalled,

*'Whenever he came to see me he would hug me, kiss me, and would show a lot of love and affection to me. Whenever he visited his kids they used to run to him; he would lift them up one by one and kiss them. He spent a long time talking and playing with his children... He was soft-spoken and a very warm person. He was very much caring about people's welfare. He used to make me feel like a woman whenever I was in his arms.'*¹

Mndawe was also a beloved member of his community where he was an active member in his church and the Student Christian Movement, the largest student organization at Sekano-Ntoane High School.

Before Mndawe's grandfather died, Mndawe promised him that he would fight to reclaim his great grandfather's farm, called Mashoboto, that had been taken from them many years back. It is not clear under what conditions the land was taken, but given the laws and policies of the country at the time, the dispossession of land belonging to Black people was a common

¹ George Bizos. *No One to Blame? : In Pursuit of Justice in South Africa*. South Africa: 1998.

phenomenon. For example, one of these acts was the [Natives Land Act of 1913](#), which segregated the land between Black and White South Africans and made it difficult for Black South Africans to purchase land.

This motivated Mndawe's work with the ANC throughout his life. The ANC was formed as a non-violent protest group against the oppression of Black South Africans under apartheid rule; however, there was a shift from non-violent to militant protests after the ANC realized that their voices were still not being heard under the non-violent approaches. This led to the addition of the military wing, MK, and the growth of the armed struggle. The MK soldiers trained in [exile](#) due to South Africa's ban on ANC, MK, and other liberation groups. Thus, soldiers would travel to neighboring countries such as, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe to receive training. Mndawe was recruited by 'KA' Shabangu for the ANC. The first time he went into exile with the ANC, he received military training under MK in Mozambique. He returned home to spread ANC politics through recruitment, providing people with books and emblems to spread the ANC message. Mndawe then traveled to Swaziland, where he recruited people for MK training and for spreading propaganda, pro-ANC books and emblems, within the country.²

In 1983, Mndawe returned home to Driekoppies to carry out a secret ANC mission, but a family member working with police reported his location and they were immediately on the hunt for him. This family member that was working with police was one of many informers the apartheid government had working for them. Journalist Michael Parks reported: "The ANC describes the hidden world of government spies and their own counterintelligence as one of the hottest battlefronts in our war against apartheid."³ The police had informers help them catch

² Thabo Pudi. *Stories of the Liberation Struggles in South Africa: Mpumalanga Province* Xlibris Corporation, 2014.

³ Michael Parks. "Blacks Caught between Police and Apartheid Foes : S. Africa Informers: A Dangerous Game." *Los Angeles Times*, May 06, 1987

people like Mndawe in order to try and prevent the spread and growth of liberation groups and movements, especially after their ban in 1960. However, these informers brought fear and paranoia amongst their communities because people whom were once beloved members of the community were now turning against their own friends and family to help the apartheid government. Adding to this, most informers were undercover, causing stress and confusion to everyone's true motives. After they failed to find Mndawe when invading his home, police set up a roadblock around Driekoppies to capture him. However, Mndawe was aware the roadblock was for him, and jumping from the car, fired his AK 47 at authorities. Mndawe's use of the AK47 gave him away to the police as a trained MK. He fled to Tree Hill Mountain near Driekoppies, managing to evade the pursuit of the police. Mndawe continued to travel in and out of the country for many secret ANC missions right up until his arrest.⁴

On 22 February 1983, police in KaNyamazane captured Ndawe while he was engaged in an underground ANC mission. He was detained under [Section 29 of the Internal Security Act](#), which allowed police to detain prisoners for limitless durations with no legal representation or contact with family or medical doctors. This act left many loopholes for police and the government to engage in questionable actions physically and lawfully against Black South Africans, which in turn contributed to their deaths. According to the Detainees' Parents Support Committee, which monitored the treatment of security prisoners, Mndawe was the 56th prisoner to have died while in detainment under security laws.⁵ While in police custody Mndawe endured hours of brutal torture and interrogation. He recounted, *"I told them that I know nothing about the ANC. They put a cloth in my mouth and then another piece of cloth and covered my face, and*

⁴ Thabo Pudi. *Stories of the Liberation Struggles in South Africa: Mpumalanga Province* Xlibris Corporation, 2014.

⁵ Paul Van Slambrouck. "South Africa's Security Laws Draw Protests." *The Christian Science Monitor*, Mar 10, 1983.

then put a wet plastic over my head, whereupon they held the plastic against my neck and I felt like I was dying."⁶ At first he insisted he was not involved with ANC operations, but Mndawe stated that once he reached the point that he "*wished to die in order to be free from those assaults,*"⁷ he agreed to provide the written statement requested by the police, admitting to recruiting and training youths in Maputo for the ANC. The police bribed and threatened him by agreeing not to charge him as long as he remained silent and cooperated with them by acting as an informant. Mndawe was released three days later.⁸

Immediately after his release, Mndawe was re-detained under Section 29 when police found out that he had been openly sharing stories of the torture he endured during his time in police custody. When Mndawe was brought into the station, police reported him as having come in with a swollen right cheek and a graze on the right side of his forehead.⁹ However, Dr. Frans Jacobus Viljoen the district surgeon who worked part-time in Nelspruit, reported no injuries after examining Mndawe on the day of his arrest. Dr. Viljoen never questioned Mndawe about his assault or injuries, but instead relied on the story he received from the police present during the examination. The collusion and collaboration between the district surgeon and police at the expense of the prisoner is clear in many historical records. Not only is it illegal for police to be present during the examination, but it is also illegal for them to have control over what is listed in the medical record of prisoners and their injuries.

On 8 March 1983, police reported that Simon Mndawe had committed suicide in his cell at the Nelspruit police station. The Commissioner of the Police, General Mike Geldenhuys, was quick to conclude that Mndawe was a 'trained terrorist' after the discovery of his death, likely in

⁶ George Bizos. *No One to Blame? : In Pursuit of Justice in South Africa*. South Africa: 1998.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

an effort to prevent people questioning Mndawe's death. A private pathologist did not attend the official autopsy. When a private pathologist was made available, both the Department of Justice and the Nelspruit magistrate refused to allow a follow-up autopsy. However, they agreed to have a state pathologist present for a second autopsy after Mndawe's family threatened to go to the Supreme Court. Simon Mndawe's mother, Paulina, recalls the event very vividly after she was unknowingly brought by police to see the body of her son.

*'Before the police could finish explaining to me, they opened the blanket. Since I did not know where we were going, it was a great surprise to see my dead son. I could not hold myself, because they had not told me. I was worried, it was painful because he did not look like the person I knew - swollen forehead, cheek, one eye closed. While I was looking at him, I started crying. A white policeman pushed me because I was making a noise. I fell down, injuring my right leg. I bled and bled until I fainted, and woke up in a clinic.'*¹⁰

Paulina's treatment by police was common for Black people under apartheid. Race politics played a prominent role in the apartheid rule. Through years of harsh laws and regulations, the apartheid government tried to portray Blacks as being subordinate to Whites in South Africa. This mistreatment is what influenced many Black South Africans to rally in a movement against apartheid.

The conclusion that the cause of Simon Mndawe's death was suicide is highly questionable due to the excessive amount of human rights violations within many branches of the apartheid government. The first example of this violation came from the police department. The lack of rules and boundaries when it came to the treatment of detainees allowed police to get away with a significant amount of maltreatment within the police stations and prisons. Section 29 of the Internal Security Act "allowed for detention until 'all questions are satisfactorily answered' or 'no useful purpose will be served by further detention.'"¹¹ This caused thousands of

¹⁰ George Bizos. *No One to Blame? : In Pursuit of Justice in South Africa*. South Africa: 1998.

¹¹ "South Africa: Overcoming Apartheid Building Democracy." Accessed Dec 03, 2017.

Black South Africans to be held in detention for endless durations. The security laws that were passed during this time contained unclear and broad language that gave police the power to ignore the laws and not be held accountable for their abusive actions. “The system not only denies fundamental legal rights, but makes it possible for the security police to use torture and other inhumane methods of extracting information and confessions.”¹² The Internal Security Act was only one of many acts that led to the corruption of the legal system. The Aliens and Travellers Control Act was another act that affected Black South Africans because they were considered aliens in their own country by the apartheid government. This in turn led to their detainment or expulsion from South Africa. The Police Act of 1979 “granted the police further powers with regard to search and seizure.”¹³ These are few of the many acts that add to the plausibility of the argument that Simon Mndawe, along with many others, likely died from injuries sustained from police in prison, rather than having committed suicide.

Another human rights violator was the district surgeon and medical field personnel. It was routine for the district surgeon to examine a person promptly after his arrest to provide information on his well-being so that the detainee’s health needs were met and to identify any new injuries sustained while in custody. Although a gesture may have been perceived as fair treatment of detainees, it was discovered that the government had ulterior motives behind these health evaluations.

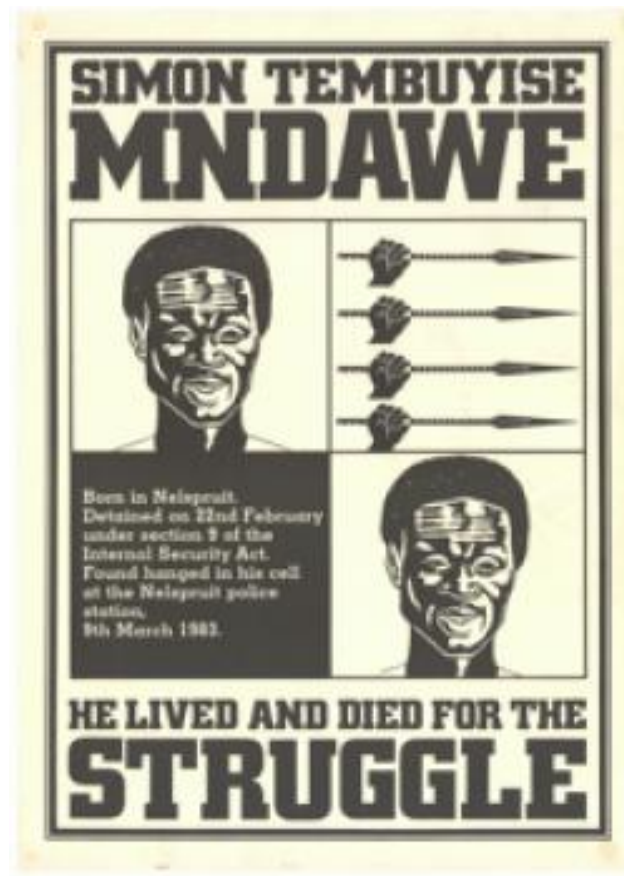
“The findings of the examination could also be used to establish the level of fitness and consequently the degree of torture a detainee is able to withstand and also identify weaknesses which might be exploited by the torturer; the fact that this medical information on individual detainees was made available to the security police was a major breach of confidentiality.”¹⁴

¹² Paul Van Slambrouck. "South Africa's Security Laws Draw Protests." *The Christian Science Monitor*, Mar 10, 1983.

¹³ "Apartheid Legislation 1850s-1970s."

¹⁴ Stephen Kershner. *Torture*. Vol. 4 (2015): 390-392

This information brings into question the ethics behind Dr. Viljoen's practice. The fact that Dr. Viljoen overlooked Mndawe's extensive injuries and allowed the police to be present during the examination served as further evidence to the case that Simon Mndawe's treatment and death in detention were unjust and contributed to his murder.



Often, political activists' deaths are used to further the plight of the struggle, which has both positive and negative implications. On the one hand, it connects the person's life and death to the cause they were affiliated with, thereby striking an emotional response from others. On the other hand, that person's life and individualism is objectified into a symbol used for the furthering of the cause they were affiliated to. It is common for the lives of the freedom fighters in South Africa to be swept into the history of the liberation movement and thus purely take on

the narrative of the struggle. The human lives that these freedom fighters led are left forgotten, unaddressed and unwritten. For example, many of them had wives, children, brothers, sisters, and parents, all of whom loved and cared for these people and mourned their death. This poster depicting Simon Mndawe as having “Lived And Died For The Struggle”¹⁵ is a prime example of the objectification of his life as a freedom fighter. Simon Mndawe’s life was more than just a number or another face of the struggle. History should also take care to remember Simon Mndawe as someone whose passion and commitments led him to join the armed struggle to claim justice for his life, that of his family’s, and Black people in South Africa.

¹⁵ Unknown. "Simon Tembuyise Mndawe; He Lived and Died for the Struggle,". 1983.

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