

Name: Peter Nchabeleng

Date of Birth: Unknown

Date of death: April 1986

In Summary: Peter Nchabeleng was a leader in the ANC, Sactu, MK, and UDF. He died in detention. His brave fight against the apartheid led to his legacy as ‘a combatant for life, [and] a patriot to the end.’<sup>1</sup>

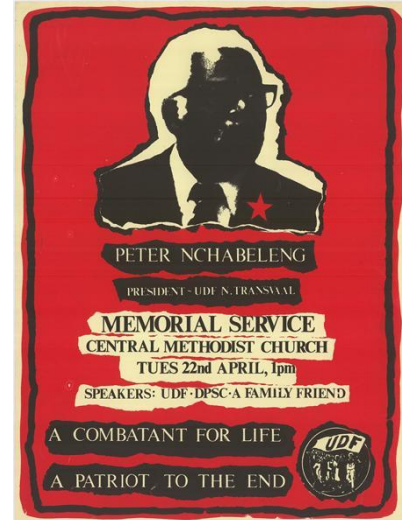


Figure 1: ‘Memorial service for Peter Nchabeleng.’ Memorial service for Peter Nchabeleng on JSTOR, [www.aluka.org/stable/10.5555/al.sff.document.pos00000422.043.053.0552](http://www.aluka.org/stable/10.5555/al.sff.document.pos00000422.043.053.0552).

Peter Nchabeleng was an activist with [African National Congress \(ANC\)](#). From the 1950s, he became a ‘member of the Pretoria branch of executives.’<sup>2</sup> The ANC was formed in

1912 in order to organize African people in the form of a political party that could fight for equal rights and equal representation.<sup>3</sup> Peter Nchabeleng lived in Pretoria during the 1950s and began to gather black South Africans to support the ANC and their politics against the apartheid.<sup>4</sup>

Nchabeleng was also active with the [South African Congress of Trade Unions \(Sactu\)](#) at this time.<sup>5</sup> Sactu was an ally of the ANC and was a non-racial trade union.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Memorial service for Peter Nchabeleng.’ *Memorial service for Peter Nchabeleng on JSTOR*, [www.aluka.org/stable/10.5555/al.sff.document.pos00000422.043.053.0552](http://www.aluka.org/stable/10.5555/al.sff.document.pos00000422.043.053.0552)

<sup>2</sup> ‘UDF President Dies in Detention.’ *SASPU National*. (1986, April). Retrieved from [http://disa.ukzn.ac.za/sites/default/files/pdf\\_files/SnApr86.1680.6867.007.002.Apr1986.4.pdf](http://disa.ukzn.ac.za/sites/default/files/pdf_files/SnApr86.1680.6867.007.002.Apr1986.4.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> NA. African National Congress (ANC). *South African History Online*, Retrieved November 20, 2017, from <http://www.sahistory.org.za/organisations/african-national-congress-anc>

<sup>4</sup> ‘UDF President Dies in Detention.’ *SASPU National*. (1986, April). Retrieved from [http://disa.ukzn.ac.za/sites/default/files/pdf\\_files/SnApr86.1680.6867.007.002.Apr1986.4.pdf](http://disa.ukzn.ac.za/sites/default/files/pdf_files/SnApr86.1680.6867.007.002.Apr1986.4.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> NA. South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU). *South African History Online*, Retrieved November 20, 2017, from <http://www.sahistory.org.za/organisations/south-african-congress-trade-unions-sactu>

Nchabelang also played a critical role in resistance to the implementation of the [1951 Bantu Authorities Act](#). During this time, apartheid policy set up a number of tribal authorities, which caused many revolts in Sekhukheneland.<sup>7</sup> Nchabelang led his people against this policy that would make traditional leaders accountable to apartheid.<sup>8</sup> Nchabelang was also an active member of Sabatakomo, a group established ‘as a defense and aid group for people arrested and charged during the uprising.’<sup>9</sup> The name Sabatakomo comes from a war cry and this small group slowly developed into a ‘rural political movement.’<sup>10</sup> He also served as the interpreter for the lawyer [Joe Slovo](#), who represented those arrested. Rural black South Africans getting physically involved in anti-apartheid movements helped highlight the horrors of the apartheid and gain more numbers in protest.

With all of Nchabelang’s involvement in anti-apartheid movements it was not until his involvement with [The Umkhonto weSizwe or the ‘Spear of the Nation,’](#) (MK) that led to police arresting him. In the early 1960s the anti-apartheid movement added sabotage to their tools of resistance with the launch of MK. MK was a group of black South Africans that realized violence was necessary in order to initiate change. Initially, anti-apartheid activists strived to promote a non-violence campaign and to fight the government with laws that protested and highlighted the racial inequalities and oppression. However, around 1961 the ANC launched a

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<sup>6</sup> NA. South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU). *South African History Online*, Retrieved November 20, 2017, from <http://www.sahistory.org.za/organisations/south-african-congress-trade-unions-sactu>

<sup>7</sup> ‘UDF President Dies in Detention.’ *SASPU National*. (1986, April). Retrieved from [http://disa.ukzn.ac.za/sites/default/files/pdf\\_files/SnApr86.1680.6867.007.002.Apr1986.4.pdf](http://disa.ukzn.ac.za/sites/default/files/pdf_files/SnApr86.1680.6867.007.002.Apr1986.4.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> ‘UDF President Dies in Detention.’ *SASPU National*. (1986, April). Retrieved from [http://disa.ukzn.ac.za/sites/default/files/pdf\\_files/SnApr86.1680.6867.007.002.Apr1986.4.pdf](http://disa.ukzn.ac.za/sites/default/files/pdf_files/SnApr86.1680.6867.007.002.Apr1986.4.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> ‘UDF President Dies in Detention.’ *SASPU National*. (1986, April). Retrieved from [http://disa.ukzn.ac.za/sites/default/files/pdf\\_files/SnApr86.1680.6867.007.002.Apr1986.4.pdf](http://disa.ukzn.ac.za/sites/default/files/pdf_files/SnApr86.1680.6867.007.002.Apr1986.4.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> ‘UDF President Dies in Detention.’ *SASPU National*. (1986, April). Retrieved from [http://disa.ukzn.ac.za/sites/default/files/pdf\\_files/SnApr86.1680.6867.007.002.Apr1986.4.pdf](http://disa.ukzn.ac.za/sites/default/files/pdf_files/SnApr86.1680.6867.007.002.Apr1986.4.pdf)

group of resisters that combatted apartheid through violence.<sup>11</sup> The apartheid government had a strong military apparatus and weapons at their disposal. Instead of targeting humans, MK targeted large significant structures that would make a point to the leaders of the apartheid, such as electrical facilities and post offices. Amongst these members was Peter Nchabeleng. The South African police responded with a number of arrests. This is when Nchabeleng was charged with ‘furthering the aims of the ANC’ and ‘sabotage’.<sup>12</sup> Nchabeleng was a crucial member of MK as before he was arrested he was a ‘section leader in MK’s Pretoria Command during the Sabotage campaign.’<sup>13</sup>

In 1962, Nchabeleng’s constant fight did lead to his arrest and ultimately his sentence to [Robben Island](#) for eight years.<sup>14</sup> Located in the Table Bay, stood an isolated island that was responsible for holding what police claimed were the worst criminals from South Africa.<sup>15</sup> Its harsh conditions were home to inmates that committed a number of crimes and specifically political prisoners who protested apartheid.

Nchabeleng returned from Robben Island around 1970, and upon his release Peter Nchabeleng’s son Elect shared a quote that helps describe his father’s thoughts, ‘he explained that he didn’t kill anyone, steal from anyone and that he did all this for the people, not for personal gain.’<sup>16</sup> This selflessness shows the character of Nchabeleng and furthers his leadership

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<sup>11</sup> UMkhonto weSizwe (MK). *South Africa History Online*, Retrieved December 05, 2017, from <http://www.sahistory.org.za/topic/umkhonto-wesizwe-mk>

<sup>12</sup> ‘Nchabeleng Combatant and Patriot.’ *SASPU National*. (1986, April). Retrieved from [http://disa.ukzn.ac.za/sites/default/files/pdf\\_files/SnApr86.1680.6867.007.002.Apr1986.4.pdf](http://disa.ukzn.ac.za/sites/default/files/pdf_files/SnApr86.1680.6867.007.002.Apr1986.4.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Thula Simpson. *Umkhonto We Sizwe The ANC's Armed Struggle*. Cape Town: Penguin Books. (2016).

<sup>14</sup> ‘Nchabeleng Combatant and Patriot.’ *SASPU National*. (1986, April). Retrieved from [http://disa.ukzn.ac.za/sites/default/files/pdf\\_files/SnApr86.1680.6867.007.002.Apr1986.4.pdf](http://disa.ukzn.ac.za/sites/default/files/pdf_files/SnApr86.1680.6867.007.002.Apr1986.4.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> NA. Robben Island. *South African History Online*, Retrieved November 20, 2017, from <http://www.sahistory.org.za/article/robben-island>

<sup>16</sup> Peter Delius. *A Lion Amongst the Cattle: Reconstruction and Resistance in the Northern*

through these constant struggles. After his sentence, the state deported his family from Pretoria to Apel in Sekhukhuneland. Upon his release he continued his fight against the apartheid while banned for five years in Apel.<sup>17</sup> Despite his ban, Nchabeleng continued to work to bring change and resistances to the more rural areas of South Africa. He also recruited his sons, who quickly became active in anti-apartheid leadership roles.<sup>18</sup> However, in 1974 he was arrested for the second time for 'breaking his banning order.' With limited information on this arrest, one can assume white authorities were beginning to gain a deeper sense of Nchabeleng's power and his mentality to never stop leading against the apartheid. Nchabeleng continued his work with the MK while he was in and out of prison, as in 1976 he was charged with 'harboring and recruiting people for military training' alongside Joe Gqabi.<sup>19</sup>

He was acquitted of this charge in 1978, but was again banned for five years.<sup>20</sup> Once this ban expired and with his ability to spark change in these areas led to his involvement in the [United Democratic Front \(UDF\)](#) in the Northern Transvaal. The UDF was an anti-apartheid umbrella organisation that incorporated a number of different groups that were able to unite together over a common goal of ending the apartheid; these groups included anything from church groups to whole villages.<sup>21</sup> Nchabeleng's work with the UDF and his leadership ability led to him eventually becoming the leader of the Northern Transversal Coordinating Committee.

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*Transvaal*. Portsmouth, Heinemann. (1996).

<sup>17</sup> 'Nchabeleng Combatant and Patriot.' *SASPU National*. (1986, April). Retrieved from [http://disa.ukzn.ac.za/sites/default/files/pdf\\_files/SnApr86.1680.6867.007.002.Apr1986.4.pdf](http://disa.ukzn.ac.za/sites/default/files/pdf_files/SnApr86.1680.6867.007.002.Apr1986.4.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> Peter Delius. *A Lion Amongst the Cattle: Reconstruction and Resistance in the Northern Transvaal*. Portsmouth, Heinemann. (1996).

<sup>19</sup> 'Nchabeleng Combatant and Patriot.' *SASPU National*. (1986, April). Retrieved from [http://disa.ukzn.ac.za/sites/default/files/pdf\\_files/SnApr86.1680.6867.007.002.Apr1986.4.pdf](http://disa.ukzn.ac.za/sites/default/files/pdf_files/SnApr86.1680.6867.007.002.Apr1986.4.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> 'Nchabeleng Combatant and Patriot.' *SASPU National*. (1986, April). Retrieved from [http://disa.ukzn.ac.za/sites/default/files/pdf\\_files/SnApr86.1680.6867.007.002.Apr1986.4.pdf](http://disa.ukzn.ac.za/sites/default/files/pdf_files/SnApr86.1680.6867.007.002.Apr1986.4.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> Jeremy Seekings, *The UDF: A History of the United Democratic Front in South Africa, 1983-1991* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000).

He was elected in February 1986 as the first president of the Northern Transvaal region.<sup>22</sup>

In his village, he remained involved as a member of the Sekhukhuneland Parents Crisis Committee and a member of the village committee. Nchabeleng was also known as the ‘people’s counselor and people always approached him for help and advice.’<sup>23</sup> This constant leadership, involvement in anti-apartheid organizations, and prior arrests, foreshadows the final detention of Peter Nchabeleng, as someone this powerful posed too much of a threat to the white government of South Africa.

Anti-apartheid activists recognized his death was not an accident. At a press conference after his death in detention, the UDF released a statement that, ‘*The Death of Northern Transvaal UDF President Peter Nchabeleng is part of a systematic campaign being waged by the apartheid government.*’<sup>24</sup> Nchabeleng was one of many anti-apartheid leaders who were searched, questioned, detained, tortured, and executed in the wake of the 25 July 1985 declaration of a [State of Emergency](#). This allowed the government and law enforcement to almost have complete control; people were detained without any trial or representation.

On 9 April 1986, police officials arrived Peter Nchabeleng’s house and began questioning him.<sup>25</sup> Nearly ten years after the death of Peter Nchabeleng, on 17 July 1996, Mrs. Nchabeleng sat down with the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#) to tell her side of the story that ultimately led to her husband being killed. Gertrude Nchabeleng shares that she heard police

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<sup>22</sup> ‘Nchabeleng Combatant and Patriot.’ *SASPU National*. (1986, April). Retrieved from [http://disa.ukzn.ac.za/sites/default/files/pdf\\_files/SnApr86.1680.6867.007.002.Apr1986.4.pdf](http://disa.ukzn.ac.za/sites/default/files/pdf_files/SnApr86.1680.6867.007.002.Apr1986.4.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> ‘Nchabeleng Combatant and Patriot.’ *SASPU National*. (1986, April). Retrieved from [http://disa.ukzn.ac.za/sites/default/files/pdf\\_files/SnApr86.1680.6867.007.002.Apr1986.4.pdf](http://disa.ukzn.ac.za/sites/default/files/pdf_files/SnApr86.1680.6867.007.002.Apr1986.4.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> ‘UDF President Dies in Detention.’ *SASPU National*. (1986, April). Retrieved from [http://disa.ukzn.ac.za/sites/default/files/pdf\\_files/SnApr86.1680.6867.007.002.Apr1986.4.pdf](http://disa.ukzn.ac.za/sites/default/files/pdf_files/SnApr86.1680.6867.007.002.Apr1986.4.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*. Case 00498. Pietersburg: Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 17 July 1996. [www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans%5Cpieters/nchabele.htm](http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans%5Cpieters/nchabele.htm).

knocking on the door and that she alerted her husband who was in bed. She shared that after he denied that he was in the ANC and admitted he was involved in the UDF, “*they then started searching the house and found Chief Luthuli's photograph and they took it, Lumumba's photograph, John Hayemba and some of the novels and some of the certificates like our marriage certificate, they took them all. After that they took my husband and they asked him if he had been arrested before, to which he replied that he had, and that he had spent time on Robben Island. They told him that this time they will kill him.*”<sup>26</sup> Mrs. Nchabeleng continued with her statement by sharing, “*they then started hitting him even in his private parts and he asked them what was going on now. They insisted that they were going to kill him, the eight years on Robben Island were nothing, they are going to kill him. We didn't even know who they were, all we knew was that they were just policemen.*”<sup>27</sup> This clear violation of human rights was furthered when he was transported to prison again, for the third and final time.

It is important to note that before the police entered the Nchabelengs’ residence, it was known that Peter Nchabeleng was in good health.<sup>28</sup> It was also reported that a chief who was also detained at the same time saw Nchabeleng being tortured further at the prison and a priest who was also detained at Schoonoord Police Station saw his body lying in the charge office.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, a few days after in April 1986, Peter Nchabeleng was pronounced dead after

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<sup>26</sup> South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*. Case 00498. Pietersburg: Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 17 July 1996. [www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans%5Cpieters/nchabele.htm](http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans%5Cpieters/nchabele.htm).

<sup>27</sup> South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*. Case 00498. Pietersburg: Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 17 July 1996. [www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans%5Cpieters/nchabele.htm](http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans%5Cpieters/nchabele.htm).

<sup>28</sup> ‘UDF President Dies in Detention.’ *SASPU National*. (1986, April). Retrieved from [http://disa.ukzn.ac.za/sites/default/files/pdf\\_files/SnApr86.1680.6867.007.002.Apr1986.4.pdf](http://disa.ukzn.ac.za/sites/default/files/pdf_files/SnApr86.1680.6867.007.002.Apr1986.4.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> ‘UDF President Dies in Detention.’ *SASPU National*. (1986, April). Retrieved from [http://disa.ukzn.ac.za/sites/default/files/pdf\\_files/SnApr86.1680.6867.007.002.Apr1986.4.pdf](http://disa.ukzn.ac.za/sites/default/files/pdf_files/SnApr86.1680.6867.007.002.Apr1986.4.pdf)

suffering from what police described as heart attack.<sup>30</sup>

Similarly to [Steve Biko](#) and other civil rights leaders who died in detention, the state attributed Nchabeleng's death to causes other than torture and police brutality. Peter Nchabeleng's death was announced as a heart attack with almost no other information released, as even Mrs. Nchabeleng was denied her husband's death certificate.<sup>31</sup> However, after hearing Mrs. Nchabeleng's testimony and knowing how the police treated him through eye witness accounts and then left him on the ground after being tortured almost suggests a need to re-open the investigation into his death. To what extent police brutality contribute to his heart failure?

After his unnatural death, *The South African Students Press Union* paid tribute to the wonderfully brave leader, Peter Nchabeleng, with a quote from the UDF stating, '*Gone are the days when our people from the countryside were servile and unquestioning of this system of justice. The replacement of tribal authorities by democratic committees had given people a taste of democracy and a sense of their own strength.*'<sup>32</sup> This quotes show that through Peter Nchabeleng's constant work through the ANC, Sactu, MK, and UDF, and his ability to use his relocation as a tool to recruit fallowers led to a united group of people that held him in the highest regard, ensuring his legacy.

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<sup>30</sup> 'UDF President Dies in Detention.' *SASPU National*. (1986, April). Retrieved from [http://disa.ukzn.ac.za/sites/default/files/pdf\\_files/SnApr86.1680.6867.007.002.Apr1986.4.pdf](http://disa.ukzn.ac.za/sites/default/files/pdf_files/SnApr86.1680.6867.007.002.Apr1986.4.pdf)

<sup>31</sup> 'UDF President Dies in Detention.' *SASPU National*. (1986, April). Retrieved from [http://disa.ukzn.ac.za/sites/default/files/pdf\\_files/SnApr86.1680.6867.007.002.Apr1986.4.pdf](http://disa.ukzn.ac.za/sites/default/files/pdf_files/SnApr86.1680.6867.007.002.Apr1986.4.pdf)

<sup>32</sup> 'UDF President Dies in Detention.' *SASPU National*. (1986, April). Retrieved from [http://disa.ukzn.ac.za/sites/default/files/pdf\\_files/SnApr86.1680.6867.007.002.Apr1986.4.pdf](http://disa.ukzn.ac.za/sites/default/files/pdf_files/SnApr86.1680.6867.007.002.Apr1986.4.pdf)

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