

The sabotage campaign

JOE SLOVO

The launching of MK and the sabotage phase which followed up to 1963 is a distinct stage in the development of MK. First of all it was the formative period with the basic purpose of the sabotage campaign which was undertaken being to make a break, in revolutionary practice, with the previous half-century of non-violent politics.

Non-violence had quite deep roots in the movement as a whole and it was necessary to demonstrate on the ground that a new phase had been embarked upon. We must remember that, initially at any rate, Umkhonto We Sizwe was not proclaimed as the wing of the liberation movement be it the ANC or any other body. When MK was formed it was decided to project it initially as an independent military body which would announce that it was acting in support of the liberation movement.

That was deliberate and there were a number of legal reasons for it. One of the political, ideological and organisational reasons for it was that we had just emerged from a phase when the whole congress movement had not officially broken with old policies. Some sectors of the alliance like the Indian Congress were very deeply committed to approaches of defiance rather than active aggression. To make an open break with the past therefore was one of the purposes of that phase.

TARGETS CHOSEN

The nature of targets chosen had a specific meaning. At that stage it was deliberately decided to go in for rather low scale kind of objectives. The proclamation (MK Manifesto-ed) which accompanied the opening of the sabotage campaign contained in it an appeal to the authorities which in effect said to them: *We are demonstrating what we can do and will grow and escalate. This is just the beginning, a mild beginning. It is not yet too late to change course and there may yet be still time for reason to break through.*

Nobody in their wild imaginings dreamt that one could actually overthrow the regime or bring about a revolution through overturning a few pylons and

putting some rather weak home-made explosives in relatively innocuous targets. Politically they were effective blows but innocuous from the point of view of the kind of target one thinks of in terms of hurting the enemy and his personnel.

We attacked the symbols of the economy like pylons, symbols of oppression like pass offices, and making sure that it was all done at night so that nobody would be injured. Not taking life at that stage was also a deliberate approach. It fitted in with the whole nature of this beginning.

The response of the regime was increased repression. It was clear to all and we had demonstrated to the movement and to the leadership elements which were in doubt that there was no way forward short of preparing for effective escalation of revolutionary violence. And, as matter of historic record, it is clear that we were not ready organisationally to take the counter offensive which was eventually launched against all levels of the movement. It is also a matter of historic record that Rivonia occurred and in the few years following Rivonia all the heroic efforts made by the movement to reconstitute in the underground failed. And for all practical purposes the internal movement as an organised structure had been destroyed.

FORESIGHT

Fortunately there was a certain degree of foresight during that period of rather low level of military activity, i.e. the sabotage campaign. When it became clear towards the middle of that campaign that it was necessary to prepare for a long term build up of a real people's army, a large part of the energy of the High Command and its structures was then devoted to sending out of the country a contingent of many hundreds of experienced political cadres at all levels who were subsequently trained in the art of guerrilla warfare and military struggle.

THE HIGH COMMAND AND THE OPERATION MAYIBUYE

To constitute the High Command the ANC appointed Mandela and the Party appointed me. We were instructed by both

bodies to make recommendations about the balance of the members of the High Command, which we did and it was endorsed. We were then given the mandate to proceed to create MK structures in all the main regions. Regional commands were established in the main urban centres, Johannesburg, Cape Town, Port Elizabeth and East London.

Initially the command consisted of Mandela, Sisulu, Mbeki, Mlangeni and Mhlaba. Joe Modise was put onto it later, before he left the country. Kathrada, Goldreich and Goldberg were involved as auxiliaries and were part of the Johannesburg Regional Command together with Hodgson and Motsoaledi. This high command produced a document called 'Operation Mayibuye', which was discussed both by the ANC and the Party. Basically its purpose was to plan for the return of the people who had been sent out to be trained as guerrillas and simultaneously to prepare politically for their return to the country.

The whole country was divided into a number of operational regions. Political organisers for each region were to be employed immediately so that structures would be prepared. At the same time a political campaign was to be prepared to coincide with the return of this trained personnel to the various parts of the country. We had a rather euphoric expectation of what the African states would be prepared to do for us. We thought they could even provide aeroplanes to drop our personnel. We were a little naive.

This is the point where I left the country. A meeting of both the ANC and the Party, having examined 'Operation Mayibuye' and having in principle adopted its main guidelines but still having to discuss details of the implementation, decided that it was urgent that this plan be taken to the external mission of the ANC so that our needs could be discussed further with the African governments. It was decided to send me and JB Marks with 'Operation Mayibuye'.

We met Tambo and the whole leadership of the external mission and discussed with them the contents of 'Operation Mayibuye'. Steps to send missions to Algeria and other places with the pur-

pose of establishing what was possible and what was not were immediately taken. Within about six weeks of my arrival there (I was due to go back with the answers and to then continue functioning underground), while awaiting for these missions to come back, Rivonia occurred. It became virtually useless to attempt to implement 'Operation Mayibuye' because of the destruction which had occurred.

Internally we had decided on a very extensive programme of beginning to manufacture our own equipment inside the country in preparation for the implementation of 'Operation Mayibuye'. Denis Goldberg was in charge of that aspect of the work. We had a programme for the manufacture of 50 000 hand-grenades. We had a way of doing it successfully, using local material. But of course everything fell by the way as a result of the Rivonia arrests.

POST MORTEM

I always say that looking back on a situation is easier than looking forward to it, because when you look back on it you know things that people in that situation did not know, which were still ahead of them. There were a number of factors which influenced the rather inexperienced approaches to aspects of what we had to do. First of all an important factor was our misassessment of the situation. We were still working on the approach that the enemy security apparatus was what we knew in the fifties. We did not sufficiently realise that the beginnings of armed struggle would lead to the very steps which the enemy took. The enemy sent out specialists for training in Algeria, the United States, from the North Korea war, Vietnam etc. They came back and completely refashioned the security apparatus. However firm the old type of policemen like Spengler were, they were not torturers.

Not only did they create a new force but they also began to legislate for new techniques. In a sense up to about 1960/61 the underground struggle was fought on a gentlemanly terrain. There was still a rule of law. You had a fair trial in their courts. Nobody could be kept in isolation. Up to 1963 I know of no incident of any political prisoner being tortured. The whole legal structure which existed lulled us into feeling that we could

do much more than we eventually discovered we could. We underestimated the potential for the growth in viciousness of the enemy security apparatus and the fact that the counter revolution learns from the revolution.

We, of course, made many wrong estimations of what could be done. Rivonia too, looking back on it, was bound to be discovered and destroyed. For an example, people like me were in Rivonia three times every day, moving from my chambers. Same with Bram Fischer and others. People who came to see the leadership from other parts of the country were taken to Rivonia. And this in a way was also determined partly by the contempt in which we held the enemy.

This euphoria was influenced

by facts like: the Communist Party was made illegal in 1950. Between 1950 and 1963 there was not a single communist or sympathiser convicted of participating in the underground. True, we had not engaged in public propaganda but our existence was known. All of us were both in the Party and the ANC, from the early 50's onwards. We had been banned and subjected to all kinds of restrictions. Yet we committed three crimes every single day of our lives: attending meetings, leaving the area you were prevented from leaving except with permission, etc. and we were hardly ever caught. The point I am trying to make is that we had a decade where the weakness of the other side lulled us into a feeling that we could do much more than in fact we were able to do later.

MK IS BORN

STEVE TSHWETE

The banning of the African National Congress in 1960 closed the chapter of "legal" non-violent struggle against the fascist clique in Pretoria. Throughout the country the pertinent question in the minds of the oppressed South Africans was what was to be done now that the vanguard of the national democratic struggle had been banned without the demands of the oppressed and exploited being met. It was a legitimate question by the majority of our people who had seen the ANC amassing strength and generating tremors of fear and panic within the ruling classes in our country.

There were views that the struggle could still be prosecuted and led by the same movement under a different name. But such a conception would have presupposed a smothering of the revolutionary demands and aims of the movement. It would also have meant a deep-going revision of our entire tactical approach to a struggle whose mass character could not be jettisoned for purposes of protecting legality.

At the same time there was the more popular idea that somehow some other methods of struggle other than "legal" should be pursued for the realisation of the freedoms enshrined in the Freedom Charter.

At that level - i.e. the masses' own understanding of the situation - there could, of course, be no precise stipulation or identification of these "other methods of struggle". Understandably so, if one takes into account the fact that at that time the reality of armed struggle still remained a strange concept to the whole of the sub-continent.

But the very idea itself of the exploration of other means and ways by which liberation could be attained was an important signal for the democratic movement spearheaded by the ANC. It was a vindication of the correctness of our strategy and tactics in just over 48 years of legal political agitation, i.e. taking the masses along with us every inch of the way and getting them to say, with their own vanguard organisation; "Here we stood and here we fell. Here we retreated and here we still fell, so let's go forward and fall marching forward".

For in the absence of that frame of mind, in a situation where the biggest majority of the people feel that other methods other than revolutionary violence could still be explored, the prospects of armed struggle cannot auger well. In our case, we plodded with the masses all the way right up to the All-