

HEROES OF OUR REVOLUTION (Johannes Nkosi 1905-30)

- ELLIOT MDUNI

From the glorious days of our ancestors our people's struggle against colonial domination, for freedom and independence has produced countless heroes and heroines, men and women who defied even death in defence of our people's noble aspirations. The taking of positions in the front ranks of this mighty revolutionary movement by the working class has moulded a fighter with a new calibre. In addition to the dauntless courage, determination and heroism inherited from our ancestors, this new fighter is armed with the iron-discipline, advanced combat ability, organisation and scientific clarity of the essence and future of our liberation struggle, qualities of the class that holds the bright future of mankind in its labour-hardened hands. One such fighter was Comrade Johannes Nkosi.

PEASANT'S SON

Johannes Nkosi, farm labourer and domestic servant (contemptuously referred to as a kitchen-boy by whites in South Africa) was born of peasant parents on the 5th September 1905, in Natal. He was born during hard times. His parents, like the rest of the African community, had been impoverished by the bloody plunder and land robbery committed by the greedy colonialists. Comrade Nkosi never enjoyed the tender parental care which all young children need nor did he receive formal education. Those were the days when our people in Natal were locked in a life-and-death conflict with the British imperialists who, in order to force our people into slave labour in the mines, had imposed upon them the heavy poll tax. This is the heroic campaign which culminated in the historic Bambata Rebellion of 1906 and which marked the closing of the first chapter of our people's armed resistance against colonialism, a series of bitter but just wars waged by our people against the enemy for more than 250 years.

At a very early age in his life, Johannes Nkosi left his parents to sell his labour power in Johannesburg in order to help them and to learn to stand on his own. At this time Johannesburg was already a prospering centre of industrial activity and it was here that young Johannes was employed as a domestic servant. No doubt the painfully sharp contrast between the glitter of the 'whites only' Johannesburg city and the squalor of the African miners' slums must have struck him like a heavy blow. The humiliation of his people which he shared, the rising militancy of the toiling African masses and his irresistible desire for their freedom drove him into revolutionary action. Thus at the age of 19 he took part in the strike against pass laws led by the African National Congress. It was during this time that he joined the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU) and developed into an uncompromising fighter for the interests of his class and people.

YOUNG COMMUNIST

A few years after its foundation in 1921, the CPSA, alongside its drive to organise African trade unions, opened night schools for teaching African workers to read and write and for political preparation of potential and other Party members. When one of these schools was opened in the slums of Ferreiras-town in 1925, under the supervision of the veteran T.W. Thibedi, workers like Moses Kotane and Johannes Nkosi were among the first pupils. In 1926, already a seasoned trade unionist, Comrade Nkosi joined the CPSA, destined to play an outstanding role in the South African revolution.

The reinforcement of the ranks of the CPSA by young African militants: teachers like Edwin Mofutsanyana, J.B. Marks and Albert Nzula; workers like Moses Kotane and Johannes Nkosi had a tremendous impact on the Party. Their contribution was remarkable in enabling the CPSA to "indigenise Marxism so as to give it meaning for the millions of our workers and peasants" to use Moses Kotane's words. Articles published in the Party's paper in Setswana, Sesotho, Zulu and Xhosa brought to the access of the masses of our country the growing relevance of the invaluable teachings of Karl Marx to our struggle for freedom. They also took an active part in organising Party branches in the country districts or concentrated in trade union work. In this way Johannes Nkosi and his contemporaries helped much in making the CPSA a vital force in the national liberation struggle led by the ANC. It was in recognition of their outstanding ability as organisers, firmness in

fighting for the interests of the working class and the entire oppressed masses and their remarkable role in the Party's development and application of its revolutionary theory to the realities of South Africa that Johannes Nkosi, Moses Kotane, Albert Nzula and others were elected to the leadership of the Party in 1929.

O R G A N I S E R

Early in 1929 the Party sent Johannes Nkosi from Johannesburg to organise a branch in Durban. There he had to work among the workers especially those organised into the ICU yaseNatal led by A.W.G. Champion, who had anti-communist inclinations.

During Sunday afternoons the ICU meetings attended by some thousands of workers at Cartwrights Flats, Johannes Nkosi would be seen carrying his usual bundle of the Party's paper, "Umsebenzi", selling it to the workers. (There were times when Champion did not allow him to sell the paper). Comrade Nkosi soon won the confidence of his fellow-workers.

Under the leadership of Johannes Nkosi, the Party grew very strong in Durban. Thus when the Party launched a nationwide anti-pass campaign which reached its climax on December 16, 1930, Durban became the hot-bed of mass political activity. While other cities drew only a few hundred demonstrators, 3000 came out in response to the call of the Durban branch.

EXAMPLE OF HEROISM

December 16, 1930, the 92nd Anniversary of the Battle of Ncome (Blood river) when hundreds of our heroes laid down their lives in defence of our land and independence against the British land-grabbers and perpetrators of genocide, was the day when Johannes Nkosi was to die at the blood-dripping hands of the police. As planned, the anti-pass meeting began at 11 am on the 16th December, 1930, at Cartwrights Flats. It was a quiet and orderly meeting, the audience beaming with enthusiasm as they listened to the speakers who for four hours urged them to intensify revolutionary action. Passes were handed in and collected in bags and, as the demonstrators prepared for the march through the city, in defiance of a police command stopping them, a large force of the Durban Borough police, like a band of wild vicious beasts let loose, charged at the surprised peaceful multitude and attacked mercilessly. The police were armed with pick handles, assegais and revolvers. With unmistakable concern, Nkosi who was on the platform, was busy

controlling the people who, though unarmed, were fuming with anger. In the process the police had fulfilled the evil intention of their masters. They killed Johannes Nkosi and three other men; Ben Pani, James Mhlongo and Joseph Sofila while many others were seriously wounded.

H. Kirst, who was present at the meeting gave a first-hand account which stated in part: "I saw Nkosi struck down from the table... When the crowd was dispersed I saw them pack the wounded on a lorry. I followed in my car. There was a trail of blood dripping from the lorry. The lorry waited outside the police station for three-quarters of an hour or more. Then they were removed to the hospital. I wired to Bunting in Johannesburg. He replied: 'Save Nkosi at all costs. Spare no expense'." Several other witnesses testified to having seen police stab the dead men, yet the police were strangely 'unable' to identify the killers. Even the arrest of 26 other demonstrators, four of them being sentenced to 6 months' hard labour, could not intimidate our people who came out to give evidence. Seven African witnesses swore that they had seen the chief constable shoot at Nkosi, who was stabbed after being arrested, but the police rejected the evidence.

If the police, the court and the entire manipulators of the repressive state machinery were bent on denying responsibility for their beastly deed while gloating over it, the fighters for freedom in our country were and still are resolved to rally around Johannes Nkosi's example of heroism and continue the struggle until victory is won.

SYMBOL OF MILITANCY

In a widely-circulated tribute to Johannes N k o s i, Albert Nzula wrote:

"An uncompromising fighter, he died as he lived, fearless and conscious of the great fight in which he was engaged, as his final message, short but characteristic shows. The message addressed, in Zulu: To the workers of South Africa: Never under the sun has a nation been so shackled with the chains of slavery. We are not even allowed to voice our opinion on the state of affairs in our own Motherland. Why not awake and stand on our feet? Men, women and young women, we must support the organisations that fight for our freedom.

A thousand Africans must take the place of Nkosi. Let his cowardly murderers know that the African Giant is awakening and nothing will stop his progress!"

Johannes Nkosi became a "martyr and a symbol of African militancy against state repression and class exploitation!"

During the fifties SACTU activists frequently visited Nkosi's grave as an inspiration in their struggle. It was only natural that when the CPSA faced one of the most testing moments in its life, when threatened with a banning by the fascist Nationalist Party government, that W.H. Andrews rallied his comrades around the name of Johannes Nkosi and other fighters of his calibre, saying: "Remembering the path which has been blazed by our members for over thirty years and inspired by the example of such fighters for freedom as Nkosi, and many others, who died for their opinions, let us face boldly the renewed and perhaps more ruthless attacks which are threatened."

T R I B U T E

The choice of Dingane's Day, 1961, for the creation of our People's Army, is a tribute to our ancestral heroes as well as those of our times as Johannes Nkosi, and an expression of our people's unflagging determination to spare neither limb nor life to win our long-cherished goal of freedom. The example of Comrade Nkosi has been followed by many other heroes of our Motherland: Vuyisile Mini, Zinakile Mkaba and Wilson Khayinga and Solomon Mahlangu - all died with honour at the Pretoria gallows. Many more, born and yet unborn will follow this example.

LESSONS FOR THE YOUTH

The life of Johannes Nkosi stands out as a shining example to all fighters for freedom in our country, especially the young ones. It was a brief but full life, a life rich with qualities which all revolutionaries should strive to develop in themselves: deep hatred for the oppressors and boundless love for his people, a high sense of responsibility, courage and determination.

Johannes Nkosi knew his goal in life and never for a moment did he deviate from the road he had chosen towards the liberation of his people. His firm grasp of the realities of the oppressive and exploitative South African society, his clarity about the aims of our people's struggle and his mastery of the weapons of victory always served as his reliable source of inspiration and unfailing guidance as he boldly marched forward on the thorny but glorious path to freedom. Certainly Comrade Nkosi had taken heed of Lenin's invaluable advice: "It takes knowledge to participate in the revolution with intelligence, purpose and success."

To imagine that such a young man, only twenty-five years old, could have made such a noble contribution towards the liberation of our people at a time when our organised revolutionary struggle was only beginning to take roots! It sounds incredible yet very true. What the life of Johannes Nkosi demonstrates is that all of us can contribute to our people's struggle to the best of our abilities no matter how young we may be, as long as we are determined and have patience to learn from our elders. There is a bit of Johannes Nkosi in each and everyone of us. And we are even fortunate in that we are living at a time when we can practically see freedom over the horizon.

Our time demands revolutionaries of Johannes Nkosi's calibre. Our long suffering people and the entire freedom-loving people in the world expect much from us - the liberation of our Motherland. This is a great challenge but one that can be achieved in our life-time. Our urgent task is to give all for the realisation of the lofty ideals for which Johannes Nkosi and all our heroes readily laid down their lives.

'They Killed Old Manku'

- LERATO MORENA

I don't remember old Manku when I was a little boy, though she had been living hardly a stone's throw from my own home - a matchbox like all the others. Now at the age of 16, I knew her fairly well. There were many stories about the reason for her plumpness. Some said she was living on the savings of her late husband who was reputed to have been excellent at betting horses, whilst others were almost certain that she was a witch. "Don't you see how even the dogs avoid her dustbin," they would add with great agitation. This was basically township gossip and those who took it seriously were very few if any. All this did not seem to affect old Manku and she continued with her silent ways, leading an unimprovable and definitely uninteresting life.