

UNDERGROUND OPERATIVES

The proscription of the ANC and PAC severely restricted their direct operations and influence inside the country. The exiled leadership of both organizations introduced new strategies and tactics to carry forward the struggle for liberation. Amongst these underground operations and activists became important part of the machinery to fight the apartheid regime. In the 1980s the ANC (and to a lesser extent the PAC) had underground activists operating inside the country. These played an important role in politicizing young people, identifying others for military training in exile.

Recalling how he was drawn into underground structures of the ANC, Serote explained:

One day I had a dream and in my dream I was looking for my friends, but they were not there ... It hit me that because they are not here then I'm skipping the country. I told Wally's [Serote] younger brother, Thabo, because he was going into exile. He told Wally and Wally said they must call me and I must stop dreaming about these things. I must join them in Botswana. I think it was 1980. I went there with Thabo because he knew how to get there. Wally had some people from the ANC and he called me and we talked. He said 'Look, your dream and when I interpret it is that you really want to fight'. I said, 'Yes, I do want to fight. And he said, 'Go back home and form a unit and we will keep on communicating about the developments'. But then he informed me how to form a unit and how many people could form a unit. I came back and I asked Thabo [Serote], 'Where do we start?'. Thabo suggested that the two of us should start the unit. Then later he said I should bring in another person. We gave each other MK (Umkhonto we Sizwe) names. Mine was Baktu George. I've forgotten his. Gezani [Ndhlovu] was one of the guys I trained. His sister, too. I got Greg Thulare but I could not pull him in into the unit, because he was already a known figure. We are (sic) operating with people who underst[ood] the political situation. They underst[ood] the aims of the underground movement. They underst[ood] the four pillars of the struggle, and that was because I took them to [Thabang] Makwetla and they trained them over the weekend and he told them that now they are (sic) members of MK. We were beginning to be a solid unit. I'm commanding it. There were five of us. It was me, my wife, Francina, and other three persons, Guy, Thabo, Steven. Oh, and another guy called David Letselebe¹⁰⁰

Serote also formed other units which specialized in propaganda, intelligence, and military attacks on properties owned by people perceived to be collaborating with the government like the councillors. Describing the underground units' operations, Sello Serote remarked:

We are operating with the people who understand the political situation, they understand the aims of the underground movement, they understand the four pillars of the struggle and that was because I took them to Makwetla and they trained them over the weekend and he told them that now they are members of MK ... We were beginning to be a solid unity. I'm commanding it. There were five of us. It was me, my wife, Francina, and Guy , Thabo, Steven, and David Letselebe. Each one had a unit. David was sharing the propaganda [unit]. Guy was someone who liked guns. And Steven was in intelligence. My wife was in communication. They were commanding [these] units. And I'm overall. The one responsible for intelligence would form a sub-unit of intelligence. All the other units formed their sub-units, except for communication because it was said it was too sensitive. Francina had to work alone. Guy was responsible for the unit dealing with guns ... I don't know if you've heard that here in Tembisa there was a Transvaal Suicide Squad. It belonged to Guy's unit. I was reporting direct to Thabang Makwetla¹⁰¹

In the mid-1980s, a substantial number of young activists left South Africa to join MK. After undergoing military training some of them were infiltrated back into the country to carry out military operations. It was at this stage that houses belonging to the government-created councillors and police in the township were attacked with hand-grenades. The first hand-grenade was detonated at the house of a security policeman. Not long after that the house of the Deputy Mayor of Tembisa, Mr Herbert Majokoana, was attacked with a hand-grenade.¹⁰²

Similarly, the PAC was recruiting young people in Tembisa to join the PAC's military wing, the Azania Peoples' Army (APLA). Jaki Seroke, who was in charge of the PAC Transvaal, recalls that his underground unit, based in Tembisa, recruited a number of young people to leave the country into exile where they would receive military training. He explains:

Personally, I was in charge of a unit. From 1984 we started recruiting youth. Every year we would "pave" routes out of the country to countries like Lesotho. We would say, for instance, take a kombi load of 15 guys four times a year to Lesotho¹⁰³



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Comrade George Nyanga, one of the Apla and PAC martyrs, died in action, in Mafikeng, on the 25 June, 1990. He was born on the 20 August, 1967, in Olifantsfontein, Transvaal. He joined Apla on the 23 September, 1988, and immediately underwent military training. At home he was an Azanyu organiser in the Tembisa branch. He was a dedicated, modest, honest and devoted freedom fighter. PAC will always remember him.

One of the young people to leave the country in 1986 to join APLA in exile is Ezekiel “Dondo” Dithebe. After relinquishing his membership in AZAPO, Dithebe joined the Azanian National Youth Unity (AZANYU), the PAC’s youth wing inside South Africa. Remembering how he left the country, Dithebe remarks:

‘I think Baker Phasha left a month before us. When we left, we were offered a lift by Thlaki Lekganyane to Joburg. In Joburg, we met other people, and one of them was Yster. The latter took us to Lesotho via Sebokeng. We used taxis belonging to the Majakathata Taxi Association. Yster briefed the driver that we didn’t have passports, so he should drop us off at Mohokari (Caledon) River. We were told that we should go a place where there was a low level crossing of water. When we get there we should be able to cross to Lesotho¹⁰⁴

Perhaps the most distinguished APLA cadre to come out of Tembisa was George Nyanga. [He] was born on 20 August 1967 in Olifantsfontein. He was the fourth child of the eighth children. He started his primary schooling at Tlamatlama Lower Primary in 1977 and went to Tshepisa Higher Primary in 1981 where he passed his Standard six. Thereafter he went to Malebo High School in Pietersburg where he did Form Two and Three. In 1987 he returned to Tembisa to do his Form Four at Thuto Ke Matla High School. And in 1988 he went to do his Form Five at

Bokamoso High School. It was at Bokamoso that he became a leading member of the SRC and an organizer. During this period he was already involved in AZANYU Tembisa branch as an organizer.

In September 1988 he left the country to join the PAC External Mission. He underwent military training in West Africa and became one of the leading members of APLA Political Commissariat. Nyanga was killed in action on 18 June 1990 in Mafikeng. According to reports, he died in a battle between the Bophuthatswana Defence Force Patrol and the APLA cadres at Ramatlabama, 35 kilometres from Mafikeng.¹⁰⁵

Ezekiel Dondo Dithebe, who, together with a fellow APLA cadre, had been infiltrated into South Africa in 1990 to carry out military actions in Mafikeng, recalls that George Nyanga and Oupa Sekoboto were supposed to join his unit when he met his death:

The people who were going to join us were comrade George Nyanga and Oupa Sekoboto. But unfortunately ... there was mis-communication. Some times it happens that you miss each other because of mis-communication ... You see, when cars approach at night we had to run into the bush to hide. Some times you end up running away from the car that had come to fetch you. So, these guys crossed successfully [and] arrived at night. The following day while waiting at the taxi rank they had a problem. They were confronted by the SADF and the Bophuthatswana soldiers. There was an attack and counter-attack that resulted in Oupa Sekoboto from Sebokeng getting arrested. And George Nyanga died in that operation¹⁰⁶

Not all young people who, after being recruited into the underground operations, left the country. Some operated underground within the country. Mncedisi Sibanyoni's story illustrates this point:

I was recruited to be an ANC's operative underground. I don't remember exactly which year was it, but it was still in the '80s. I participated and trained as an underground of Umkhonto we Sizwe. I've executed some certain tasks ... I used to be around Tembisa, around Johannesburg, and somewhere in Kwazulu-Natal¹⁰⁷

WOMEN AND THE STRUGGLE FOR LIBERATION

The struggle for liberation in South Africa was fought in all fronts and many and various people were involved. Amongst these were women and whites, particularly those who were members of organizations affiliated to the non-racial UDF. Black women were largely drawn to the struggle because of the civic grievances in their townships, and later, their children's involvement. Thandi Swakamisa remembers:

We called a rent boycott. We decided not to pay rent. We wanted the municipality to come and discuss with us on the ground and tell us why they were increasing the rent. We communicated by calling meetings, even though, as time went by, police cracked down on these meetings. You see, you'd find that when we wanted to hold a meeting at a certain place we'd find police occupying that area. So we couldn't hold them.

But then an M-Plan – Mandela Plan - was developed. That's when we formed street committees, because we couldn't hold mass meetings. ... Within the street committees an overall committee would be formed. All the information would have to go through the overall committee. The latter would pass the information to the street committees about what was to be done. Then the street committees would pass the information to the people in the street.

In 1985 ... if you had a radio you'd listen to Radio Freedom at night around 10 o'clock. So, [Oliver] Tambo would speak and say what should be done. And the following morning we would all, as committees, get that information. Well, then we were meeting in Johannesburg and we would strategize. This happened until I was identified to be in the Federation of the Transvaal Women (FEDTRAW). We had an office there at ... what's this street's name? Von Wielig and Commissioner¹⁰⁸

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WOMEN ON THE MARCH



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TEMBISA WOMEN'S GROUP

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Some of the women in Tembisa became involved in recruiting and organizing other women. Rosina Marakalala explains:

I was involved leading meetings at Mkhathini at night. You'd find us wearing dustcoats and we would be carrying bibles. When the police come we would open our bibles, and when they leave we start again. There were many of us. Some have passed on. One of them lives in Birchleigh, Mrs Radebe, Thami Mnye's mother, Mrs Hleza. They used to call us communists but we did not care. I remember we were starting an organization, FEDTRAW¹⁰⁹

Other women were recruited by female activists who had direct links with the ANC in exile. The latter used simple methods to draw women into politics by involving them in projects the women could associate with. Matilda Mabena's story illustrates this:

At that time I was not active in politics. I was a nurse at Baragwanath Hospital. But then I was recruited by a friend, Frieda Shaba, and started getting involved. And then we started building the ANCWL ... No, we did not call it the ANCWL because the ANC was banned then. We called it Women's Group.

Then most women were not interested in politics. They were interested in other things. So we would organize them and call them to a meeting to inform them about the things that might interest them. There was a person from exile, a cadre that was working underground. This cadre had a skill in making candles. So we would say to these women 'You are all aware that many of us are unemployed and we need to supplement our husbands with many things. So you are invited to a meeting where there would be someone showing us how to make candles'. They would have an interest and attend our meetings. When that person was busy showing them how to make candles we would indirectly talk politics.

The next time they come we would discuss health issues. We would sometimes get a doctor to inform them about the importance of doing pap smear and on. We also discussed gardening and sewing. But gradually we were also introducing them to political issues.

The first one and which was a huge problem in Tembisa was the bucket system. We would say 'Look, when these men who remove the nightsoil they sometimes spill the buckets in the yard and we women are the ones who are supposed to clean. So really this is not healthy'.

There were also councillors then like Mr [Lucas] Mothiba. So in one of our meetings we ... decided that we have had enough of the bucket system. Our children were getting sick because of this system. We mobilized the women and agreed that on such a date we would take all the full buckets with nightsoil and we were going to empty them at Mothiba's store.

We argued that we were supporting Mothiba's store and he was now rich because of our support. He lived in a house with electricity and a sewerage system. Women supported us. Our march to Mothiba's store was led by the late comrade Zodwa Mofokeng. When we arrived there Zodwa addressed us. When the police came they found that we had already spilled the buckets in front of Mothiba's store. After some time the police became aware of those leading the Women's Group and they started harassing and detaining us¹¹⁰



GILLE DE Vlieg

Whites, particularly women, participated in the struggle for liberation. And their involvement in some cases led to them to interact with activists living in townships. Gille de Vlieg's story illustrates this point. It was during the height of student riots in Tembisa in 1983 that Gille de Vlieg first made contact with Greg Thulare, a member of Cosas in Tembisa. Gille arrived in Durban from England in February 1944, and moved to Johannesburg in 1973. In 1982 she joined Black Sash as a volunteer and one of her responsibilities was to work with communities which were threatened with removal to the homelands. It was at this stage that she developed an interest in photography, eventually joining Afrapix, and took photographs of the political and social landscapes of South Africa.

According to De Vlieg, they first met at Khotso House when Greg and some of his comrades had come for a meeting at the UDF office in Khotso House. De Vlieg recalls:

We were sitting around just talking when I heard these voices. You walked into Khotso House from the street and over the reception area was a dome and underneath a big tapestry on the wall, which was a South African Council of Churches wall hanging which had 'Khotso, Peace – Uxolo' sewn onto it. It was a lovely place to have photographs because you couldn't miss them - you walked in and there they were. And there were these three young men who I later learnt were from Tembisa ... the UDF offices were upstairs, and they had been to a Cosas meeting, and had come down and were looking at the photographs. So I went to them and I said to them, 'Do you know what you're looking at?' I started describing the photographs to them (which were of the removal and destruction of Pageview) and why we felt it was important to have them up. Then I gave them programmes¹¹¹



TOWN COUNCIL **TEMBISA** STADSRAAD

Vergunning word verleen aan: *G. R. de Vries*
Permission is granted to :

Aantal persone in voertuig :
Number of persons in vehicle:

In Verteenwoordiger van : *Anglo American*
Representing :

Om Tembisa binne te gaan en in Tembisa te vertoef
(onderhewig aan alle wette en regulasies rakende
Tembisa), met die doel om

To enter Tembisa (Subject to all laws and
regulations relating to Tembisa) for the purpose
of

Archives Photography

Geldig *till* 31/12/85
Valid for

Motorregistrasie/Registration: *G.M.F. 227.T*

Ure : *09:00 - 12:00*
Hours:

[Signature]
TOWNSHIP MANAGER/DORPSBESTUURDER

This was the beginning of a political (and sometimes social) relationship between Gille and, first, with the members of Cosas, and later the community of Tembisa. Greg Thulare, after meeting with Gille several times in town, finally began to trust her. Before he could invite her to Tembisa, Greg tested her and, in doing so, introduced her to the politics of the ANC. Gille recalls that he came with a banned tape recording of the ANC. She remembers:

He brought me this tape which was Oliver Tambo's address to the ANC from exile. So he said to me 'can't we go somewhere I want you to listen to this'. So we went to this place on a high hill (Munro Drive) with a view of the northern suburbs. So we went there and pulled off on the side of the road and Greg slept and I listened to Oliver Tambo..... Then shortly after that he asked me to come with him to Tembisa and that's when I first went in.¹¹²

But Gille as a white person could not enter Tembisa without permission from the council. South African laws prohibited any white person from entering a black township without permission, except for the security and administrative personnel. Gille fabricated lies that she was working for Anglo American as a photographer in order to be granted permission to enter Tembisa.

In Tembisa, she met members of Cosas like Tshepo Mphuti, Reuben Mahlagare, and others who were close to Greg. Trust developed between them and Gille. When, for example, police were looking for the Cosas activists, they would hide at Gille's house in the safe northern suburbs. Gille recalls one time when they slept at her place and she woke up in the middle of the night and found them discussing a book they were reading.

They all used to sleep in the lounge. And then one night I woke up at about three o'clock in the morning ... there was a little narrow passage where you go through to the lounge and I heard all these voices in the lounge. And I went through and I quietly opened the door - and they were sitting round in a circle with a book and they were sitting and discussing this book. I said, 'What are you doing?' And they said, 'Oh, we just discussing", obviously some 'subversive' book. This made a huge impression on me. I thought this was amazing because here are these guys; they're all school children basically and yet this was so important to them that they were sitting and having this discussion at three o'clock in the morning¹¹³

Gille's photographs were varied. She did not only take photographs of political struggles but she also focused on social and everyday life in the township. She explains:

Well sometimes, you see, I was also interested in people's lives. So sometimes it wasn't like highly political photographs. They were photographs of women hanging up washing in the back yards and that type of thing; a woman washing a floor¹¹⁴

Her presence in the township was noticeable and this brought her into contact with other people outside the Cosas circle. She befriended mothers of the young people who were involved in the struggle. She used social gatherings at her home to bring these women together and to know each other. For some it was through these social gatherings that they began to appreciate the role played by their children in the struggle. Nomathemba Thulare, recalls:

Gille helped. And that was what made us to meet, because as a parent she was able to bring us together and organise parties. She would bake cakes, buy cold drinks and braai meat. And we would meet there. We would eat and talk. It would be fun¹¹⁵

Gille also assisted these mothers to visit their detained children in prison and to facilitate communication between the parents and the children in detention or in exile. Some of the activists did not understand Gille's role in the township and they would want to confront her. But other activists were protective of her. Timothy Mabena remembers a time when some of the activists questioned Gille's presence in the township:

As these developments were taking place, Gille de Vlieg was in our midst, asking us questions and so on. At some stage some of the comrades began to ask what was Gille doing in the township, because she's white and we were fighting against whites. We in the leadership said 'No, she's fine. She's one of the Democrats, who were sympathetic to our cause'¹¹⁶

