

Unsung Heroes: Soviet Military and Liberation of South Africa.

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In the recent years some serious efforts were taken to write a history of the liberation struggle in Southern Africa, in particular by the South Africa Democracy Education Trust (SADET). However one issue often remains either missing or distorted in most of the books and articles on the subject, that is the involvement of the Soviet military in the support of the ANC and Umkhonto we Sizwe in particular.

Unfortunately most of the Russian archives are still “sealed off”, but “bits and pieces” of materials are nevertheless available to researchers. Moreover, there are oral history sources, which under the circumstances are vital for painting a veritable picture of the Soviet involvement in the struggle for liberation of South Africa from the early 1960s to 1991.

Yet, the history of military co-operation between the USSR and the ANC is still to be written. So far the attempts to do so have been hardly successful, not only due to the shortage of accessible documents, but also due to an uncritical attitude to those available.

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The question of military co-operation between the USSR and the South African liberation movement was raised for the first time when Moses Kotane and Yussuf Dadoo visited Moscow in late 1961. Informing their Soviet interlocutors about the situation in South Africa they expressed the opinion that “under the conditions of the reign of terror by the fascist government which has at its disposal a huge military and police machinery, the peaceful way of reaching the tasks of liberation and revolutionary movements at present are excluded. The [South African Communist] Party has decided to proceed from the necessity of the preparation for the armed

forms of struggle". They asked the Central Committee of the CPSU to express its opinion whether such course is correct and at the same time requested "support in training several military instructors." Their position was supported by the CPSU International Secretary Boris Ponomarev who informed them that Moscow "would be able to render the SACP possible assistance using for this in particular the facilities in some friendly African countries, for example in Guinea and Ghana" and then upheld by the Central Committee Secretariat.¹

The issue of the presence of the Soviet military personnel in the ANC camps was discussed more than once by South African and Western academics. Thus, Philip Nel claims that "training personnel" from the USSR "reached the newly established ANC camps in Tanzania and Zambia" in 1964². The source of this, rather "sensitive" information, indicated by him, looks credible – a book of Kurt Campbell, then a Harvard University fellow, (and later the US deputy assistant secretary of defence!) published by Macmillan³. But Campbell also refers to a secondary source, to the book of the US academic Kenneth Grundy.

A merry-go-round? No, rather a cul-de-sac, because Campbell's reference to Grundy's book is absolutely irrelevant. Grundy writes about Chinese and Cuban involvement in training guerrillas in some African countries and then just adds one sentence: "Russian instructors were also present in early 1960s"⁴. He specifies neither the year, nor the venue, nor the name of organisation that they were involved with, i.e. the ANC is not mentioned at all! Anyhow, the truth is that the Soviet instructors in the ANC camps appeared only 15 years later, in 1979, moreover, not in Tanzania or Zambia, but in Angola.

They were sent there by the request forwarded by Oliver Tambo in October 1978 during the annual visit of the ANC delegation to Moscow. However it looks like the

¹ Russian State Archive of Modern History, Collection 4, inventory 18, file 1017, p. 61-63. Decisions taken by the instruction of the Secretaries of the CPSU Central Committee without recording in the minutes, N 478, 28 November 1961.

² P. Nel. *Soviet Embassy in Pretoria? The Changing Soviet Approach to South Africa*. Tafelberg, Cape Town, 1990, p.43

³ K. Campbell. *Soviet Policy Towards South Africa*. Macmillan, Houndsmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, 1986, p.41

⁴ K.Grundy. *Guerilla Struggle in Africa*. Grossman, New York, 1971, p.51

initiative to involve the Soviets came originally from Havana. The matter had been raised with ANC leaders by Jorje Riskyot, at that stage head of the Cuban contingent in Angola and later actively involved in talks on the Angolan-Namibian settlement. The Cuban military had become involved in training ANC cadres as soon as they arrived in Angola and when they raised this new issue they perhaps wanted to lighten their own burden (Cubans suffered some casualties in the area, when 8 persons died in the ambush set by FNLA) or to have the Soviets more deeply involved, or their decision was prompted by the combination of both.

Anyhow, over 17 years after the first discussions in Moscow, the participation of Soviet instructors in the training of Umkhonto fighters on African soil at last became possible. The first group came to Angola in October 1979. It included Captain N. Shapovalov on tactics, V. Lebedev on mines and explosives and was headed by the person who became widely known in the ANC as “Comrade Ivan” – Vyacheslav Shiryaev.

Others followed, replacing each other in two- or three-year shifts. Their number gradually increased from the three that were initially requested by the ANC leadership to several dozen. All in all more than two hundred Soviet specialists and interpreters were stationed with the MK in Angola in the period 1979-91.⁵ Soon the group included specialists on “military-combat work”, hand-to-hand fighting, communications and communications equipment repair, as well as medical doctor, interpreters, etc. Later “Comrade Ivan” as its chief was succeeded by “Comrade George (late German Pimenov), “Comrade Michael” (Mikhail Konovalenko), “Comrade Victor” (Victor Belysh),

If earlier supplies for MK were coming to Tanzania and partly to Mozambique, the creation of a reliable rear base for the ANC in Angola provided an opportunity to accumulate weapons and ammunition there. By mid-1982 the ANC formations were well-equipped and in position to operate both as regular and guerrilla units for a protracted period of time.⁶

⁵ *Segodnya*, Moscow, np 5, 1993.

According to the former Russian Ministry of Foreign Economic Relations, the total value of “special equipment”, that is military supplies to the ANC from 1963 to 1990 was about 36 mln Roubles. However this sum is counted in roubles and its simple conversion into dollars at any given rate of exchange can only distort the picture: the price of many goods, especially arms, was exceptionally low in the USSR.

A more detailed description of the equipment might give a clearer picture: several thousand AK-47s of various modifications, over three thousand SKS carbines, over six thousand pistols, 275 grenade-launchers, 90 Grad-P missile launchers, over 40 Strela 2M anti-aircraft missile launchers, 20 Malyutkas, over 60 mortars, etc.⁷

The Soviet specialists in Angola carried out what used to be called “international duty” in the remote camps, which had to be often moved, in unhealthy climate and under persistent threat from the Pretoria-led UNITA bands. Initially they stayed in Angola alone and only later the families were allowed to join. The ANC leadership involved the Soviets in training MK personnel both in regular and guerrilla warfare. There can be no doubt that the direct involvement of Soviet officers helped to raise the level of combat readiness of ANC armed units and, especially, of the organisers of the armed underground.

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As to military training of the ANC personnel in the USSR it started much earlier. Here again the issue is often distorted. Terry Bell in his *Unfinished Business. South Africa, Apartheid and Truth*, written with Dumisa Buhle Ntebeza claims that “there were also reportedly [reported by whom, when and where?] agreements in place between the US and USSR. These restricted any military aid provided to the ANC to conventional training involving artillery and tanks – not much use in the conditions of the time.”⁸

⁶ Discussion with V. Ya. Shiryaev, 2 April 2003.

⁷ *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 8 August 1992.

⁸ Terry Bell with Dumisa Buhle Ntebeza. *Unfinished Business. South Africa, Apartheid and Truth*. Verso, London-New York, 2003, p. 119.

He shares the opinion of “the veterans of the 1964 mutiny within the ANC [?]” who claimed that “Russians were pursuing their own interests” while “The SACP and ANC were being held in reserve as surrogates in the global game of superpowers”. “The assessment of the MK mutineers was based on the fact that the Russians provided orthodox military training to MK fighters”⁹

The reality was much more complicated and it is not conducive to these claims. Instead of being “orthodox military training” the courses for MK fighters and commanders from the very beginning included studies in guerrilla warfare.

During his first visit to Moscow in April 1963 Oliver Tambo highlighted the sending of activists for military training abroad as an urgent task, however large-scale training of fighters inside South Africa and in independent African countries had proved to be difficult, and he requested to organise it in the USSR.

The need for a highly specific guerrilla training was evident and partly realised from the very beginning. In June 1963 two MK groups, totalling about 40, were sent to the Soviet Union, among them were Mark Shope, who later served as General Secretary of the South African Congress of Trade Unions, Archibald Sibeko, known in Umkhonto as Zola Zembe, Lambert Moloi, later a three-star General in the SANDF and a young university graduate, Martin Thembesile Hani, who spent a year there in 1963-4 “in the environs of Moscow”, studying in a highly specialised establishment, known in the ANC as the “Northern Training Centre”. For many years it was headed by “General Fyodor” an ex-World War Two guerrilla brigade commander who, by the way, visited liberated areas of Mozambique in 1974.

Like most of his comrades-in-arms, Hani used false names; one of his was Chris Nkosana and he became known by a combination of his real name and his nom de guerre, Chris Hani. May years later in an interview 1991, Hani said: “How can the working class forget the Soviet Union? I went to Moscow when I was 21 for military training. I was accepted there and treated wonderfully.”¹⁰

⁹ Ibid. p. 274.

Hani came to the USSR for studies once again in the early 1970s and that course helped him a lot during his stay underground in South Africa and his activities in Lesotho. “We started by making individual contacts,” he recalled later. “We had undergone a course in the Soviet Union on the principles of forming an underground movement, that was our training: the formation of the underground movement, then the building of guerrilla detachments. The Soviets put a lot of emphasis on the building of these underground structures, comprising at the beginning very few people.”¹¹

Archibald Sibeko shares this opinion: “It has become fashionable to pretend that everything about the Soviet Union was rotten. No doubt we were taken to some show places, and there was much we did not see. But we were not fools. We saw many things which were good, particularly for working people, and were very impressed by public facilities. We also came to respect the Soviet army, and the internationalism which made the authorities take the side of black people from the other end of the world, and offer care, training and so much material help.

Perhaps they were weak on some aspects of democracy, but they certainly did more for our struggle for a democratic South Africa than any of their "democratic" critics.”¹²

He highly appreciates specialised training he and his friends underwent: “We were taught military strategy and tactics, topography, drilling, use of firearms and in guerrilla warfare. We also covered politics, with heavy emphasis on skills needed [for] construction and use of explosives, vehicle maintenance, feeding a mobile army and first aid in the field: everything necessary for survival under guerrilla conditions.”¹³

¹⁰ Star, Johannesburg, 11 September 1991

¹¹ Echo, 21 February 1990.

¹² *Freedom in our Lifetime* by Archie Sibeko (Zola Zembe) with Joyce Leeson, <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/congress/sactu/zz1.htm>

As to a large-scale training special courses for ANC guerrilla commanders and various specialists were organised in late 1963 Odessa, on the shores of the Black Sea. These facilities were available at the local military college; moreover this “Hero City” was famous for its resistance to the German and Rumanian invasion in 1941; and from 1941-4 the catacombs were used as hideouts by guerrillas.

The Soviet political leadership closely observed the training of the first ANC cadres in Odessa. A special group, led by Petr Manchkha, Head of the African Section of the CPSU International Department, was sent from Moscow in June 1964, and its members were impressed.¹⁴ While Manchkha’s group expressed satisfaction with the progress of the training, singling out the strict discipline and high morale of the ANC cadres, they did note the limitations of the college as far as the guerrilla training is concerned.

The need for a specific training establishment suitable for large contingents of trainees became acute, particularly as more and more requests were being made by the African liberation movements. Such a centre was created in the Crimea, in Perevalnoye, near the city of Simferopol. There the training was specialised, and made good use of the World War Two experience of the Crimean guerrillas, who operated in mountains, forest and bush – in other words, in terrain not very different from Southern Africa.

In spite of their intelligence services, South African government officials and “experts” knew surprisingly little about the Crimean training facility. Even though a number of South Africans who trained there were later captured, the name of the camp was never correctly recorded. Harry Pitman of the Progressive [?] Federal Party claimed in a speech in parliament that he knew “precisely” where the ANC members were trained. He mentioned two places in the USSR: “Jijinski in Northern Russia” and “Privali in Ukraine”¹⁵ One can only guess what he meant by “Jijinski”, there is “Dzerzhinsk”, a town close to Moscow, but no Umkhonto member has ever been trained there.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Discussion with V. Shemyatenkov, Moscow, 6 January 1997.

¹⁵ Rand Daily Mail, Johannesburg, 21 May 1982.

Later Pitman's spelling was "improved: by *Africa Confidential*, which wrote: "The Soviet camps include Provolye in the Ukraine and Centre 26, near Moscow." ¹⁶ Pretoria's police fared no better: Major General F M A in his press briefing for accredited foreign correspondents in 1984, spoke of "Prvolnye military camp" and, again, "Centre 26" ¹⁷, which, by the way, has never existed.

But perhaps we should not be too critical: even a newly-born Russian "expert on terrorism", journalist Vladimir Abarinov, who now serves as Washington correspondent of the notorious *Radio Liberty*, referred to one of the ANC dissidents as having studied in "Pirivalye", assigning this name to Privolnoye in the Nikolaev region, several hundred kilometres from Simferopol.¹⁸ And all this happened while the road sign "Perevalnoye" was prominently displayed on the road from Simferopol to Yalta!

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Training of the MK personnel in the USSR continued for almost three decades, becoming increasingly sophisticated. Let us hear about it again "from the horse's mouth", this time from General Sipiwe Nyanda, incumbent Head of the SANDF. He came to the USSR in 1985, immediately after the Kabwe Conference of the ANC with the group of the MK commanders, which included Charles Nqakula who is now Minister of Safety and Security (and the SACP Chairperson) and Nosiviwe Maphisa Nqakula, Minister of Home Affairs and the ANC Women's League President:

"In the USSR, we were staying in an apartment on Gorki street, Moscow [now renamed back into Tverskaya, it is the main street in the capital], where the lectures were conducted. For the practical exercises, we went to a place outside Moscow... We studied MCW (Military and Combat Work) as part of an abridged Brigade Commanders' course.

The course covered the following subjects, among others,

¹⁶ *Africa Confidential*, London, 10 December 1986.

¹⁷ Press briefing for accredited foreign correspondents on the history, aims, activities and the level of threat posed by the African National Congress (ANC). By - Maj Gen FMA Steenkamp - SA Police. In - The Auditorium, HF Verwoerd Building, Cape Town, 09h00 1984.02.08, p.30.

- (1) Communications
- (2) Underground work
 - Surveillance
 - Secret writing
 - Secret meetings
 - Photography
- (3) Military work
 - Ambush
 - Attack
 - Artillery effectiveness
 - Small arms

All were useful”¹⁹

One telling detail: of the first group of the ANC commanders incorporated into the new SANDF in 1994 everybody underwent military training in the USSR except one who was trained by the Soviets in Angola.

The Soviet military co-operation with the ANC continued in various forms until the radical political changes took place in Moscow in August 1991 followed by the “dissolution” of the USSR in December that year. One of the South African academics questioned my words in the book on the ANC²⁰ that though the word ‘armed’ set before ‘struggle’ was by 1988 “becoming unfashionable in Moscow... support for the ANC’s armed struggle persisted and was in fact intensified.” He claims that “[r]eading his book closely, however, the ‘intensification’ of military assistance appears to have been to prepare the officer corps for a post-settlement SA army”²¹.

True, the preparation of the officers for a new regular South African army, including pilots and seamen was increasingly carried out in the USSR from 1986-1987. But parallel to it the training on the MCW and other “sensitive” matters did intensify, and

¹⁸ *Segodnya*, Moscow, no 5, 1993.

¹⁹ Sipiwe Nyanda to Vladimir Shubin, 10 December 2002.

²⁰ Vladimir Shubin, *ANC: A View from Moscow*, Mayibuye Books, Bellville, 1999.

²¹ The name of the academic is withheld since his paper, available in the Internet “is not to be cited or quoted without permission of the author” and I have not managed to get it.

military supplies for the ANC continued well into 1990, including a large number of Stechnkin automatic pistols, a weapon highly suitable for underground conditions. If somebody really “closely” read my book it would surely notice it.²²

The Russian press has calculated that, from 1963 to 1991, 1 501 ANC activists were trained in Soviet military institutions.²³ However this figure is not all-inclusive and their total number was well above two thousand.

Perhaps the most striking example of co-operation and mutual trust in very sensitive fields was Soviet involvement in the Operation Vula, aimed at the creation of the armed underground network inside South Africa, which began in 1988 and went into post Fenruary-1990 period.²⁴ Let us hear once more from General Nyanda: “The Moscow visit of 1988 was the final leg of my preparation to infiltrate the RSA. It afforded me the opportunity to brush up on my disguises and gain more confidence on these. More identities were added to existing ones, enabling me to shed some of them as I advanced from Moscow to Schipol (Holland) to Nairobi (Kenya) and to Matsapa (Swaziland), thus breaking the trail and preparing for a safe infiltration into the RSA... From an operational point of view, the Moscow leg was probably the most important for my cover story.

Without exception, those who were not privy to the information believed I was in the Soviet Union for [military] studies. The enemy therefore never expected me to be right on his doorstep!”²⁵

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An unbiased analysis of almost three decades of the active co-operation between Moscow and the ANC in the military field is essential at least in two aspects: for

²² Vladimir Shubin, *ANC: A View from Moscow*, p. 350

²³ *Segodnya*, no 3, 1993.

²⁴ This operation is described in *Armed and Dangerous: from undercover struggle to freedom* by Ronnie Kasrils (3rd edition), Jonathan Ball, 2004 and *Talking to Vula. The Story of the Secret Underground Communications Network of Operation Vula*, www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/vula.html by Timothy Jenkin; for the Soviet involvement see *ANC: A View from Moscow*, p. 332-338, 360, 381.

²⁵ Sipiwe Nyanda to Vladimir Shubin, 10 December 2002.

better understanding of the motivation of the major players, be it the ANC, the previous government or outside actors and for building solid relations between Russia and the new South Africa in future. However this task can be achieved provided the “playing field is levelled”, the garbage of misinformation and misconceptions is removed, and the grains of truth are separated from the chaff of cold war (and post-cold war) propaganda.