

WERE THERE POLITICAL ALTERNATIVES IN THE WAKE OF THE SHARPEVILLE-LANGA VIOLENCE IN SOUTH AFRICA, 1960?*

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Abstract

In many accounts, the Sharpeville emergency of 1960 was a key ‘turning point’ for modern South African history. It persuaded the liberation movements that there was no point in civil rights-style activism and served as the catalyst for the formation of the African National Congress’s armed wing, *Umkhonto we Sizwe*. From the South African government’s perspective, the events at Sharpeville made it imperative to crush black resistance so that whites could defend themselves against communist-inspired revolutionary agitation. African and Afrikaner nationalist accounts are thus mutually invested in the idea that, after Sharpeville, there was no alternative. This article challenges such assumptions. By bringing together new research on African and Afrikaner nationalism during this period, and placing them in the same frame of analysis, it draws attention to important political dynamics and possibilities that have for too long been overlooked.

Key Words

South Africa, apartheid, historiography, nationalism, resistance, violence.

The period between Prime Minister Harold Macmillan’s ‘Wind of Change’ speech of February 1960, and the launch of the African National Congress’s (ANC’s) campaign of armed resistance to the apartheid regime in December 1961, was as tumultuous as any in South Africa’s violent modern history. There is a widely held view that the shootings of black civilians protesting against the pass laws at Sharpeville put the country on an irretrievable path of destructive conflict. According to Bernard Magubane, the massacres at Sharpeville and at Langa were a decisive turning point in South Africa’s history, which ‘marked the climax of a decade of mounting non-violent resistance to apartheid by the majority of the country’s inhabitants.’ In the view of President Thabo Mbeki ‘the Sharpeville massacre defined the moment in our history when the two great opposing forces that had confronted each other for centuries, the one standing for white minority domination, and the other for freedom from oppression, decided that they had no choice but to fight to the finish.’¹

* I am most grateful for the incisive comments of Rita Barnard, Colin Bundy, Patrick Harries, Jonathan Hyslop, Benedetta Rossi, Hilary Sapire, Keith Shear, and Andrew Thompson, on the material presented here.

1 South African Democracy Education Trust (SADET), *The Road to Democracy in South Africa, Volume 1 (1960–1970)* (Cape Town, 2004); ‘Introduction’ by Bernard Magubane, and ‘Foreword’ by Thabo Mbeki,

In many historical accounts, the relentless tempo of events over the course of 1960–1 are tidied up and telescoped into a narrative arc so as to support two complementary arguments: first, that the killings of innocent protesters at Sharpeville and Langa made armed resistance unavoidable; and second, that Prime Minister Verwoerd, emboldened by his success in driving the liberation movements into exile, went on to impose his dual ambitions of ‘grand’ apartheid and republican independence. These verities have remained essentially unaltered since they were first outlined as the respective nationalist movements’ ‘first drafts’ of history.

Histories sympathetic to the ANC and the Communist Party conclude that Sharpeville left Africans with no alternative other than to take arms against a remorseless white supremacist state. The argument is presented with practised clarity in Nelson Mandela’s own account of the period, most famously in his 1964 speech from the dock at the Rivonia Trial, and in his subsequent autobiographical writings. By contrast, the traditional Afrikaner nationalist view sees Sharpeville and its aftermath as vindication of the imperative to secure white supremacy against communist and African nationalist agitation through full-scale apartheid or ‘separate development’. Its Afrikaner nationalist inflection (no longer voiced but once dominant in official histories) stresses how, with the achievement of republican status in 1961, Afrikanerdom finally ‘mastered his opponent’ and thereby ‘disposed of all signs of its past degradations’.²

The charismatic leadership of Mandela and Verwoerd feature respectively in both nationalist accounts, yet they occupy two quite separate universes. In this article these parallel narratives and mirror images are brought into conversation so as to pay closer attention to paths not taken. The intention is to redraw attention to the intensely charged and profoundly unpredictable political moment of the post-Sharpeville period. This requires us to reconsider standard narratives and to recall events and processes that have become occluded. One means of doing so is to consider what might have happened if Verwoerd had not survived the attempt on his life in April 1960 – though the arguments presented here do not wholly depend on this having happened.

Recent re-evaluations of the Sharpeville moment focus on the decision to form the ANC’s armed wing, *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (MK) in 1961. Lively new research asks why this decision was taken, by whom, and with what consequences. In a forthright departure from standard ANC historiography, Scott Couper has argued that the launch of MK took place against the express wishes of ANC president Albert Luthuli who continued to favour nonviolent mass action. Stephen Ellis stresses the significance of Mandela’s joining of the Communist Party around this time, arguing that his role as the leader of MK marked a key moment in growing communist manipulation of the ANC. Ellis draws attention to the significance of Mandela’s presence at a key

1, ix. On Sharpeville as a historical ‘turning point’, see T. Lodge, *Sharpeville: An Apartheid Massacre and its Consequences* (Oxford, 2011), 167 and ff, 230–3.

2 B.J. Liebenberg, ‘From the statute of Westminster to the republic of South Africa, 1931–1961’, in C.F.J. Muller (ed.), *500 Years: A History of South Africa* (2nd edn, Pretoria, 1975), 437–8. The ‘opponent’ was British imperialism.

Communist Party meeting in December 1960 where it was resolved to prepare for armed struggle.³

Detailed research by Paul Landau affirms Mandela's critical role in precipitating the formation of MK between 1960 and 1961, drawing attention to the role of the 'Sophiatown group' within the ANC.⁴ Whether Mandela and his closest allies in the ANC were manipulated by the Communists or, alternatively, collaborated with them to advance their own political agenda, remains a matter for animated debate (and in some cases knowing indifference). The sensationalist tone in which these revelations have been presented has obscured distinctions between membership and cooptation, ideological commitment, and affiliation.⁵

By comparison with the rich seam of literature on South African resistance in the years after 1960, there has been rather less attention paid to developments in state power at this time. Here, Hermann Giliomee stands as a notable exception. In his authoritative account, *Afrikaners: Biography of a People*, Giliomee draws attention to the doubts expressed by some leading Afrikaner intellectuals and politicians about the wisdom of continuing to support Verwoerd's radical apartheid vision. He builds on Dan O'Meara's underestimated work on National Party rule during the apartheid era, which highlights fissures within the government in some detail.⁶ More recently, Giliomee has reassessed the role played by several leading Afrikaner politicians over the apartheid period. He speculates that Verwoerd may have been preparing to change his mind about apartheid in the final days before his assassination in September 1966.⁷

Giliomee's unprovable proposition is rooted in his view of Verwoerd as a more pragmatic politician than the doctrinaire ideologue that standard accounts allow. It is perfectly true that Verwoerd was a more complex and occasionally more flexible politician than his image as the man of granite would suggest. That Verwoerd's ideological fervour was balanced by expedience and opportunism is, however, not so remarkable: ideologically-driven politicians invariably have to act pragmatically in order to achieve their ends and a measure of pragmatism does not make him any less doctrinaire. What stands out above all in Verwoerd's character is his total belief in his own rectitude, his implacable need to retain absolute control over his party, and his refusal to brook any challenges.

These aspects of Verwoerd's authoritarian personality, coupled with his unrelenting belief in the logic of apartheid, renders implausible Giliomee's conjecture that Verwoerd

3 S. Couper, 'An embarrassment to the Congresses? the silencing of Chief Albert Luthuli and the production of ANC history', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 35:2 (2009), 331–48; S. Couper, *Albert Luthuli: Bound by Faith* (Scottsville, 2010); S. Ellis, 'The genesis of the ANC's armed struggle in South Africa 1948–1961', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 37:4 (2011), 657–76; Stephen Ellis, *External Mission. The ANC in Exile 1960–1990* (London, 2012), ch. 1, 17 and 18. Hugh Macmillan downplays the significance of communist influence on Mandela and the ANC in *The Lusaka Years: The ANC in Exile in Zambia, 1963–94* (Johannesburg, 2013).

4 P. Landau, 'The ANC, MK, and the "turn to violence" (1960–1962)', *South African Historical Journal*, 64:3 (2011), 547–8.

5 See, for example, H. Macmillan, 'Was Madiba co-opted into communism', *Mail and Guardian* (Johannesburg), 17 Jan. 2014.

6 H. Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People* (London, 2003), 522 and ff; D. O'Meara, *Forty Lost Years: The Apartheid State and the Politics of the National Party 1948–1994* (Johannesburg, 1996).

7 H. Giliomee, *The Last Afrikaner Leaders* (Cape Town, 2012), 83–4; see also H. A. Kenney, *Architect of Apartheid: H. F. Verwoerd, - An Appraisal* (Johannesburg, 1980), 262–4.

might have changed direction. And without any strong evidence we have to treat it as such. More interesting, perhaps, is the question: what might have happened had Verwoerd died when an assassin nearly succeeded in killing him just three weeks after Sharpeville?⁸

The conventional answer would be: not very much. Rather than constituting a crucial turning point in South African history, Sharpeville is typically seen as a dramatic crisis that did not fundamentally challenge white power and, in fact, led to its entrenchment. This article suggests, to the contrary, that things might have worked out differently had Verwoerd been killed or incapacitated, and had the ANC not chosen to interpret Sharpeville as a *casus belli*.

A REVOLUTIONARY MOMENT?

It is well established that Sharpeville provoked alarm, bordering on panic, throughout white South Africa. Large quantities of private and foreign capital were withdrawn from the country in 1961–2, the property market slumped, the gold price and the stock market fell sharply, and the finance ministry was forced to take strong measures to protect the government's reserves and safeguard its balance of payments.⁹ In the standard account, this crisis was short-lived. The remainder of the decade saw a rapid reassertion of state authority; an investment-led boom that continued for nearly ten years (yielding annual growth rates of nearly 6 per cent per annum) and resulted in unprecedented prosperity for whites; and the inability of the oppressed to mount any serious challenge to an invincible apartheid state until 1973–4 at the earliest.

Revolution may not have been likely in 1960. Yet, to a greater extent than is often appreciated, fundamental change or at least a fundamental change of direction was entirely imaginable and, indeed, imagined at the time. Elsewhere on the continent, 1960 was filled with hopes and optimism linked to independence struggles and decolonisation: no fewer than 16 African states joined the United Nations in 1960, the 'Year of Africa'. A distinct political lobby, the 'African Group', began to assert itself collectively at the United Nations (UN) with apartheid firmly in its sights.¹⁰ In South Africa, by contrast, the events of that year unleashed forces of reaction and counter-revolution. There is an odd symmetry to the fact that Verwoerd and Mandela both acted to close down political space in order to cement their political authority and secure their own visions of the future.

What might have transpired if more moderate figures were in a position to prevail or if different tactics were followed? A great deal turns on the decision by the liberation movements to adopt methods of violent opposition to the state. In the case of the ANC, the decision became an article of revolutionary faith. However, the lack of tangible results for more than a decade meant the question of the relative importance of armed to political

8 The bullets reportedly lodged in either side of the prime minister's neck, one near the carotid artery, yet neither did any serious damage. *Cape Times*, 13 Apr. 1960.

9 O'Meara, *Forty Lost Years*, 101; H. Adam, *Modernizing Racial Domination* (Berkeley, CA, 1971), 29, fn. 23; R. Irwin, *Gordian Knot: Apartheid and the Unmaking of the Liberal World Order* (New York, 2012), 63; Lodge, *Sharpeville*, 176 and ff.

10 Irwin, *Gordian Knot*, 51.

struggle remained a perennial source of internal debate and contestation. Joe Slovo, one of the foremost MK leaders and Communist Party theoreticians, addressed the strategic dimensions of armed struggle in an important intervention in the mid-1970s. In this rare insight into revolutionary thinking, Slovo addressed the 'objective conditions' governing the decision to take up arms and posed a series of questions: Had the time come by 1961? Was the moment well chosen? Were there alternative strategies that the leadership might have followed? Slovo's answer to his rhetorical questions was a qualified but definite 'yes'. In his view, the decision to resort to sabotage in 1961 was 'a politically useful bridge between the period of non-violence campaigning and the future people's armed struggle'.¹¹

Slovo's revolutionary reasoning was articulated towards the end of an extended hiatus in ANC activity within South Africa that had seen few signs of effective MK penetration. Reading between the lines, his confidence in the correctness of the ANC's strategic decision-making belies nagging doubts on the part of Party intellectuals about whether revolutionary change was any closer to being realised. Such doubts were not dispelled by confident statements made about the necessity of armed struggle, and its inevitable victory, which marked the fiftieth anniversary of the South African Communist Party and the tenth anniversary of MK's formation in 1971.¹²

The questions raised by Slovo and his compatriots in arms were interestingly foreshadowed by similar discussions about South Africa's readiness for revolution in the period immediately prior to Sharpeville. This was the subject of protracted debate in the pages of the left-leaning independent journal *Africa South*, edited by Ronald Segal, which offers telling insights into the ways in which the future was conceived by contemporary intellectuals and activists. It began with a contribution by the radical liberal South African lawyer and academic, Julius Lewin. Drawing on Harvard historian Crane Brinton's 1953 book, *The Anatomy of Revolution*, Lewin concluded that South Africa did not manifest the 'classic' conditions favourable to revolution: a rising but frustrated middle-class – rather than poor people suffering from outright oppression – and an inefficient state machine with uncertain control over its armed forces. In Lewin's view, 'the signs of discontent in South Africa, when all added up, do not amount to a serious situation in the sense of a prelude to revolution'. Campaigns of passive resistance, industrial strikes, and stayaways during the 1950s did not threaten the security of the state in any fundamental regard.¹³

This pessimistic view was countered by a number of responses by activists associated with the ANC and the underground Communist Party. Jack Simons detected greater

11 J. Slovo, 'South Africa – no middle road', in B. Davidson et al., *Southern Africa: The New Politics of Revolution* (Harmondsworth, 1976), 168–71, 179–80, and 186.

12 In contrast, see B. Turok, 'South Africa: the violent alternative', *Socialist Register*, 9 (1972), 275–6; S. Dubula (J. Slovo), 'Ten years of Umkhonto we Sizwe', *The African Communist*, 47 (1971), 26. '[T]he massacre at Sharpeville was a turning point ... because from that point onwards the white state geared itself for total mobilisation to smash the liberation movement; and from that point onwards a new emphasis had to be given to the revolutionary struggle'; and A. Lerumo (M. Harmel), 'Apartheid, resistance & armed struggle', *The African Communist*, 47 (1971), 50. 'By the end of the fifties it was plain that a showdown was impending between the fascist rulers of South Africa and the oppressed people ... It became increasingly clear to the masses and their leaders that new methods, a new approach, was needed in the fight against the colonialist-fascist regime.'

13 J. Lewin, 'No revolution around the corner', *Africa South*, Oct./Dec. 1958.

fluidity than was outwardly apparent, observing that ‘South Africans are no more aware of the dangers than are people living on the volcano’s edge.’ Michael Harmel, another leading Communist Party theoretician, took issue with the typology of classic revolutions (Britain, America, France, and Russia) used by Brinton and looked instead to Asia and Africa for inspiration. Democracy and self-government, he averred, were not ‘*slegs vir blankes*’ (for whites only). There were many examples of revolutionary change in the world, and these did not necessarily entail violence. The key point was that ‘no minority Government can endure, however rigid its repression or seemingly powerful its forces, once the great majority of the people have taken the path of resolute resistance and organization against it.’¹⁴

Socialist historian and botanist, Eddie Roux, who left the Communist Party in 1936 on account of his opposition to Comintern policies and later returned to politics as a member of the Liberal Party, agreed with Lewin that ‘revolution is not just around the corner’. He, too, criticised the applicability to South Africa of Brinton’s ‘classical revolutions’ in Europe and North America, suggesting that postcolonial Indonesia, Kenya, and Algeria were more apposite reference points. The major obstacle to change, in Roux’s view, was that the majority of blacks in South Africa ‘still accept their second-grade status as inevitable’. They were habituated to believe that the white man is ‘naturally the ruler’. So long as this illusion persisted, the government was invulnerable. But it was possible to ‘picture a crisis in racial relations that would require drastic remedies for its solution’. Concessions would inevitably have to be made – and once this happened ‘apartheid, *as a policy*, could hardly be revived’.¹⁵

SHARPEVILLE AND LANGA, MARCH–APRIL 1960

The test of these theories came sooner than expected. On 21 March 1960, just as ANC president and treason trial defendant Albert Luthuli was in the witness box adumbrating the ANC’s commitment to nonviolence, news filtered in of a massacre at Sharpeville township south of Johannesburg. The massacre by police of 67 protesters and wounding of hundreds more, arose out of a demonstration against the pass laws organised by the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC), the recently created rival organisation to the ANC.

In Cape Town, antipass law demonstrations at Langa and Nyanga turned violent as reports of the Sharpeville killings spread. Angry crowds, numbering at least 10,000 in the case of New Flats, Langa, gathered in protest on 21 March. A mixed contingent of black and white police responded with aggressive baton charges. When these tactics failed to disperse the crowd the commanding officer gave the order to open fire, resulting in two

14 H. J. Simons, ‘An addendum’, *Africa South*, Oct./Dec. 1958, 58; M. Harmel, ‘Revolutions are not abnormal’, *Africa South*, Jan./Mar. 1959.

15 E. Roux, ‘Revolution in South Africa’, *Africa South*, Jan./Mar. 1959. There were further contributions to the debate by British historian G. D. H. Cole, ‘The anatomy of revolution’, *Africa South* Apr./June 1959, and the leading ANC and Communist Party intellectual Joe Matthews, ‘Revolution: further reflections’, *Africa South*, July/Sept. 1959.

fatalities and 29 gunshot casualties.¹⁶ As a precautionary measure designed to reduce tension, the government temporarily suspended the pass laws. In Pretoria, Luthuli burned his passbook while reiterating the ANC's commitment to nonviolence.¹⁷

A nation-wide state of emergency was declared on 30 March and around 11,000 people of all races were detained over the next six weeks. Incensed by police arrests and beatings, 30,000 silent protesters marched peacefully to the Cape Town city centre. The government reneged on a promise made to PAC leader Philip Kgosana that he would be granted a meeting with Justice Minister Erasmus on condition that the protesters returned home – which they did. But Kgosana was arrested when he arrived for his meeting. A police and military cordon was thrown around the townships of Langa and Nyanga. Brutal raids, beatings, assaults, and arrests followed. Stayaways paralysed commercial and industrial activity in the major urban centres. On 6 April, the pass laws were reinstated and two days later the ANC and PAC were banned for 12 months. Soon after, active resistance in the urban areas was quelled.

The violence and killings in South Africa elicited an unprecedented international response. In Washington, an unusually forthright State Department statement deplored violence 'in all its forms' the day after the Sharpeville massacre (reportedly to the annoyance of President Eisenhower).¹⁸ At Westminster a strong motion against apartheid was tabled. Spontaneous demonstrations at South Africa House in London were described by the *Times* as 'something new in public protests'.¹⁹ The Indian parliament prepared to discuss a motion condemning the 'mass killings', while in Lagos a 'committee of Nigerian patriots' was formed to lead mass demonstrations.²⁰

In Cape Town, Johannesburg, and Port Elizabeth there was widespread striking in the immediate wake of Sharpeville-Langa. In these centres, Luthuli's proclamation of a Day of Mourning marked by a stay-at-home on the 28th proved highly effective. The Progressive Party member of parliament, Helen Suzman, reflected privately on the confusion and panic in government circles: 'I don't see how they will ever reinstate the old order.'²¹ She predicted – wrongly as it turned out – that the government would be forced to modify the pass law system.

On 1 April 1960, the UN Security Council passed a historic resolution (134) condemning the Sharpeville killings and called upon the South African government to abandon its policy of apartheid and racial discrimination. Britain and France abstained (in Britain's case, after agonised discussions about the wider implications for the Commonwealth and Article 2(7) of the UN Charter on noninterference in the domestic policies of

16 The Judicial Commission, 'Report of the Langa Commission of Enquiry', chaired by Marius Diemont, 14 July 1960, gave these figures. A further 23 were injured by police batons. National Archives (London), DO35/10576.

17 *Cape Times*, 28 Mar. 1960.

18 *Cape Times*, 23 Mar. 1960. The statement from Washington was the lead article in the *Cape Times* – along with two large pictures dedicated to the naming of the Queen's second son, Andrew. According to Irwin, *Gordian Knot*, 77, Eisenhower rebuked the responsible Bureau Chief and Secretary of State Christian Herter and apologised for a 'breach of courtesy' between two nations.

19 *The Times*, 23 Mar. 1960.

20 *The Times*, 23 Mar. 1960; 26 Mar. 1960.

21 H. Suzman, *In No Uncertain Terms* (Johannesburg, 1993), 52.

member states).²² The following month, the General Assembly declared South African policies to be a flagrant violation of the Charter. In a significant shift, Britain supported this position, dropping its previous position that South Africa's racial policies were essentially a 'domestic concern'. The United States' support of the Security Council resolution marked a similar change in attitude. In both cases, a groundswell of popular anger helped to shift official attitudes. The UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld prepared to visit South Africa.

Verwoerd remained recalcitrant. Reporting the events at Sharpeville to parliament on the day after the killings, he noted blithely that political unrest was neither new to South Africa nor confined to it. The 'disturbances' had little if anything to do with apartheid or with passes. Political 'troubles' were a 'world-wide phenomenon' that was now widely evident in newly-independent Africa, and also in the United States. South Africa itself had experienced political unrest before. 'These are periodic events which come in cycles, as the result of incitement in regard to some or other matter of law.'²³ Admittedly, a large number of people had been killed but this was only because blacks were becoming more assertive. They were susceptible to 'emotional incitement' and to 'intimidation' by 'agitators'.²⁴

Other hardliners weighed in. Justice Minister F. C. Erasmus claimed that the ANC and PAC represented 'less than 1 per cent of the Bantu population'. They were pursuing actions that 'border on revolution ... Their aim is to bring to its knees any White Government in South Africa which stands for White supremacy and for White leadership ... what they want is our country!'²⁵ Minister of Bantu Administration Daan de Wet Nel blamed the leader of the parliamentary opposition for inflaming the political situation and stabbing South Africa in the back. He assured himself that '90 per cent of the Bantu' were law-abiding and content.²⁶ The government's refusal to countenance the reality of the political situation prompted the *Cape Times*' parliamentary reporter to observe that 'while sten-gun fire could be heard on the edges of the city, inside the Chamber these echoes of modern South Africa were lost amidst wild cries about a republic, the victory of Majuba and what Saul Solomon did in 1887.'²⁷

DOUBT

The leading mainstream opposition newspaper the *Rand Daily Mail* demanded on 25 March: 'Verwoerd Must Go'.²⁸ But the prime minister betrayed no signs at all of changing course. On 26 March, Verwoerd addressed a large republican political rally of 70,000 at Meyerton, just ten miles away from Sharpeville, ignoring the concerns of some of his security conscious advisers. He appealed to whites 'not to lose their perspective'. It was 'only small groups who were the cause of trouble'. Warning of the dangers of communism,

22 National Archives, DO 35/10730 and 10731; also PREM 11/3163.

23 *House of Assembly Debates (HAD)* 22 Mar. 1960, cols. 3876–8.

24 *HAD*, 22 Mar. 1960, cols. 3880–2; *Die Burger*, 23 Mar. 1960.

25 *HAD*, 29 Mar. 1960, cols. 4302–3.

26 *Ibid.* cols. 4330, 4331–2; also *Cape Times*, 31 Mar. 1960 and 20 Apr. 1960.

27 'Notes in the House', *Cape Times*, 22 Mar. 1960.

28 *The Times*, 26 Mar. 1960.

a constant Cold War theme, Verwoerd reminded the West that it had little to gain by ‘throwing white South Africa to the wolves’.²⁹

On 9 April, the fiftieth anniversary of the Union of South Africa, Verwoerd opened the Rand Easter Show in Johannesburg. Having just assured the nation that ‘[w]e shall fight for our existence, and we shall survive’, Verwoerd sat down, whereupon David Pratt, a wealthy Johannesburg trout farmer and businessman with a history of depression and with no clear political affiliation, mounted the stage and fired two .22 calibre bullets into Verwoerd’s face. One hit the prime minister’s cheek, the other his ear. Verwoerd’s wife – along with his chief bodyguard – collapsed in shock.³⁰ The attempted assassination transformed the political atmosphere within government and induced a split within the ruling party.

With Verwoerd incapacitated, the Cape nationalist leader and acting prime minister, Paul Sauer, announced in a speech on 19 April that Sharpeville had closed the ‘old book of South African history’. Sauer called for a ‘new approach’ that would include easing pass law restrictions, relaxing restrictions around the sale of alcohol to blacks, as well as increasing wages.³¹ According to O’Meara, Sauer had shown the text of his speech to Cape leader Eben Dönges and also to acting Transvaal nationalist leader Ben Schoeman. Both were supportive, albeit reluctant to say so publicly. Influential Free State leader Jim Fouché supported these politicians in arguing within Cabinet for an end to the state of emergency. Rumours of coalition government circulated amongst reformists within the National Party. Meanwhile, hardliners like Eric Louw and Carel de Wet hastened to defend the Verwoerdian position.³²

Liberal Party leaders, Alan Paton and Jack Unterhalter, sought to exploit the hiatus by writing to Sauer in favour of ‘solution by consent . . . the release of the acknowledged non-white leaders and negotiations with them’.³³ Suggestions from this quarter had no impact on the ruling elite. But there were also statements of concern from various chambers of commerce and industries – Afrikaner as well as English-speaking – that carried weight. The Chair of the Wood Board, Dr Moolman, called on the government to do ‘some very hard thinking’ and to ‘amend its policies or else’ (he was forced to resign his position a few months later).³⁴ Afrikaner industrialists, represented by the *Afrikaanse Handelsinstituut*, were concerned by Verwoerd’s radical refusal to accept a permanent place for black workers in the cities or to ameliorate grievances like the pass laws and restrictions on the sale of alcohol to blacks. Anton Rupert, the leading Afrikaner tobacco tycoon, advised Verwoerd that urban blacks should be entitled to property rights on the basis of long-term leaseholds

29 *The Times*, 28 Mar. 1960; C. J. Scheepers Strydom, *Black and White Africans* (Cape Town, 1967), 101.

30 See, for example, *Cape Times*, 11 Apr. 1960; *Die Burger*, 11 Apr. 1960.

31 *Cape Times*, 20 Apr. 1960; *Die Burger*, 20 Apr. 1960; M. E. Fisher, ‘A year of decline’, AE862 G6, Black Sash archives, Historical Papers, Wits University, 9 May 1961.

32 O’Meara, *Forty Lost Years*, 104; M. Ballinger, *From Union to Apartheid: A Trek to Isolation* (Cape Town, 1969), 436–7; *Cape Times*, 21 Apr. 1960; ‘Nationalists are bewildered’, *Contact*, 7 May 1960.

33 A. Paton and J. Unterhalter to Paul Sauer, 21 Apr. 1960, ‘Memorandum on South Africa’s problems’, Ballinger papers, A410 B2.2.11 (file 4), Historical Manuscripts, Wits University.

34 *Cape Times*, 31 Mar. 1960; *Cape Argus*, 27 July 1960; *Cape Argus*, 27 Oct. 1960.

so as to give them a permanent stake in the cities. In public, Rupert called for ‘a revision of politics’.³⁵

Afrikaner intellectuals also vocalised heterodox views about Verwoerdian-style apartheid. Piet Cillié, editor of the influential newspaper *Die Burger*, stated that South Africa risked becoming a pariah state because the word ‘apartheid’ was so unpopular. Writing under the editorial pseudonym ‘Dawie’, he pressed for a resolution of the difficulties faced by urban blacks.³⁶ Cillié’s deputy, Schalk Pienaar, was likewise critical of the direction in which Verwoerd was taking the country. Pienaar’s recent travels in Africa persuaded him that African nationalism could not simply be ignored or denied.³⁷ At the University of Stellenbosch, a politically nonaligned student *besprekingsgroep* (discussion group) gave voice to a range of comments that were critical of apartheid.³⁸ In a statement on his retirement as secretary for Bantu Administration, Dr Werner Eiselen, a key architect of apartheid planning, remarked with dismay that he was handing over ‘something that was not quite in order’.³⁹

Within the Dutch Reformed Churches (DRC), there was deep discomfort at the gulf between apartheid’s purported moral foundations and its operation in practice. The fact that regional synods of the interdenominational DRC exercised significant independence meant that dissenting views were frequently aired. In the aftermath of Sharpeville and Langa, there were numerous instances in which individual clergymen or clusters of theologians challenged the authority of the ‘apartheid bible’, preferring to see apartheid as an ethical policy rather than a matter of religious dogma.⁴⁰ In March, a dozen ‘influential’ DRC ministers were reported to have rejected apartheid as ‘unethical, unbiblical and without any foundation in the scriptures’. The following month a dominee based at Paardekraal, Krugersdorp, informed his congregants that ‘bullets and imprisonment could not solve the Native problem’ (shortly after, he resigned his office).⁴¹

The Afrikaans Church hierarchies moved determinedly to clamp down on dissent, yet they could not conceal levels of anguish and moral confusion within their ranks. In December 1960, an interdenomination consultative conference was held at Cottesloe, Johannesburg. Its remit was to discuss South Africa’s racial situation in the light of Sharpeville. Organised by the World Council of Churches, the ecumenical event was

35 Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, 522; T. Lodge, *Sharpeville*, 139; E. Dommissie, *Anton Rupert: A Biography* (Cape Town, 2009), 157–9; South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR), *A Survey of Race Relations 1959–60*, 90–1; Ballinger, *Union to Apartheid*, 435–6.

36 Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, 523; *Die Burger* (‘Die Dood van ‘n Woord?’), 16 Apr. 1960; also ‘Aat Kaptein’, 20 Apr. 1960.

37 A. Mouton, *Voorloper: Die Lewe van Schalk Pienaar* (Cape Town, 2002), 40–2, 46.

38 *Cape Argus*, 26 May 1960.

39 *Cape Times*, 7 Apr. 1960. In September 1961, Eiselen criticised the manner in which apartheid was being implemented and called for ‘a new deal for Natives’. *Cape Argus*, 7 Sept. 1961.

40 J. Kinghorn (ed.), *Die NGK en Apartheid* (Johannesburg, 1986), 120–1.

41 *Survey of Race Relations, 1959–1960*, 94; S. Trapido, ‘Political institutions and Afrikaner social structures in the republic of South Africa’, *American Political Science Review*, 57:1 (1963), 84–5, fn. 39; O’Meara, *Forty Lost Years*, 103. See also National Archives, PREM 11/3109, Inward Telegram to Commonwealth Relations Office from Cape Town, 2 Apr. 1960, reporting calls from within the Dutch Reformed Church movement and Afrikaans newspapers for pass law reforms and improvements in wage structures and the operation of the migrant labour system.

notable for the participation of two of the three Dutch Reformed churches. The consensually arrived at joint statement questioned the scriptural foundation of key aspects of apartheid (for example, the prohibition on mixed marriage) and criticised low wages and the disintegrative effects of migrant labour. Under political pressure, delegations from the Cape and Transvaal *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk* (NGK) church immediately issued a clarificatory statement, insisting that policies of racial differentiation could be justified from a Christian point of view.⁴²

Shortly before Cottesloe, a group of leading Dutch Reformed theologians published a book, *Vertraagde Aksie (Delayed Action)* which cast doubt on apartheid's scriptural foundations. One of its leading contributors, Professor A. S. Geysers, was forced to resign his chair at the University of Pretoria, accused of heresy. Verwoerd personally intervened to rebuke the dissident churchmen in his 1961 New Year's message and an orchestrated right-wing backlash ensued. The synods of the NGK duly resolved to withdraw from the World Council of Churches. But doubts and soul-searching persisted. One indication was the formation of the Christian Institute by Beyers Naudé in 1963, an organisation that went on to become one of the most important sources of anti-apartheid resistance within the country over the next decade.⁴³

Afrikaner nationalist unease with Verwoerd stemmed from a number of sources. Senior politicians on his own side grumbled about his dictatorial tendencies. This fed into long-standing and deep-seated divisions between the regions (the more moderate Cape as opposed to the harder-edged republican north). There was internal disapproval of Verwoerd's dogmatic insistence on the exclusion of 'coloureds' from the voters' role. His newfound enthusiasm for independent black homelands was widely seen as politically dangerous and bitterly resented by right-wingers who felt it amounted to 'pampering the blacks'. Verwoerd introduced his radical Bantu Self-Government Bill in 1959 – which envisaged political independence for the Bantustans – without consulting his parliamentary caucus.⁴⁴

Some internal critics were apartheid purists or 'visionary' intellectuals associated with the Bureau of Racial Affairs (SABRA) think tank. Men like Nic Olivier and G. B. A. Gerdener were critical of Verwoerd's rejection of the government's voluminous Tomlinson Commission, which concluded in 1955 that genuine apartheid required economic sacrifice on the part of whites. Olivier antagonised Verwoerd when he spearheaded a SABRA attempt in 1959 to meet with black leaders. In the aftermath of Sharpeville, SABRA reminded the government of the necessity to develop the black homelands and drew attention to problems affecting urban areas. Incensed, Verwoerd moved to purge SABRA of its troublesome independent-minded thinkers in 1961.⁴⁵

SABRA's free-thinking intellectuals were concentrated at the University of Stellenbosch. Another intellectual grouping of ideological purists at odds with Verwoerd were based

42 *A Survey of Race Relations in South Africa*, 1961, 63 and ff.; Kinghorn, *Die NGK*, 119–20.

43 C. Ryan, *Beyers Naudé: Pilgrimage of Faith* (Cape Town, 1990), chs. 6–8.

44 J. Lazar, 'Verwoerd versus the "visionaries": the South African Bureau of Racial Affairs (SABRA) and apartheid, 1948–1961', in P. Bonner et al. (eds.), *Apartheid's Genesis 1935–1962* (Johannesburg, 1993), 385.

45 *Ibid.* 367 and ff, 380–1.

at the University of Potchefstroom, a hotbed of neo-Calvinist Christian-nationalist philosophy. One of its most outspoken figures was L. J. du Plessis, a maverick law professor and intellectual who had long been a bitter opponent of Verwoerd. From the late-1950s, their enmity revived as du Plessis became a proponent of full apartheid – in part because he thought this was the most morally consistent Calvinist position, but also because he was earlier attuned to the implications of decolonisation and continental African nationalism than Verwoerd. Du Plessis argued in 1958 that the government should do more than merely deal with its African ‘hirelings’ in the homelands. Genuine political compromise entailed enlarging the homelands and engaging directly with educated black leaders like the ANC’s president Luthuli (though not the communists). In the immediate aftermath of Sharpeville, du Plessis, together with two other Potchefstroom professors, called for the pass laws to be rescinded as well as the unbanning of the ANC. The high point of his campaign came immediately after Verwoerd’s shooting, but the prime minister was never one to take unsolicited advice and he was riled by accusations that he lacked theoretical consistency. The message went out that du Plessis should be ostracised. In July 1960, du Plessis resigned from the influential *Afrikaner Broederbond*, of which he was a past chair, railing against timid political leaders and accusing Verwoerd of peddling a fraudulent version of apartheid.⁴⁶

A few days after returning home to convalesce from his gunshot wounds, Verwoerd prepared a lengthy statement which cabinet minister Dönges read out in parliament on 20 May. Here Verwoerd reiterated the need to ‘guard . . . against the tendency . . . as a result of internal and external propaganda, to see the disturbances in the wrong perspective, and in the second place against the attempts of opponents to try to use the events and the atmosphere to encourage a change to a supposedly altogether new policy, or a revision of policy’.⁴⁷ Verwoerd insisted that the government should press ahead with ‘separate development’ as South Africa’s own response to decolonisation. He announced steps to prevent ‘incitement or agitation’. He specifically rejected calls to abandon the ‘reference book’ or pass system. There would be no broad government commission into the disturbances.⁴⁸ This was virtually the last parliamentary word on the matter: parliament voted to adjourn itself until January 1961, thereby permitting the government to exercise its newly-minted emergency powers without restraint.

Less than two months after the shooting, Verwoerd returned to active politics. His survival, against the odds, was greeted by *Die Burger* as a ‘miraculous escape’ wherein ‘all believers will see the hand of God himself’. Verwoerd turned the incident to his advantage. He suggested that he owed his life to the intervention of Divine Providence, intimating that he was thereby authorised to fulfil his God-given task.⁴⁹ Verwoerd’s recovery

46 C. Marx, ‘From trusteeship to self-determination: L. J. du Plessis’s thinking on apartheid and conflict with H. F. Verwoerd’, *Historia*, 55:2 (2010), 60–1, 71–2.

47 *HAD*, 20 May 1960, col. 8337.

48 *HAD*, 20 May 1960, cols. 8337–43. Ballinger, *From Union to Apartheid*, 442–5; Kenney, *Architect of Apartheid*, 188–9, 194.

49 Kenney, *Architect of Apartheid*, 195; A. Hepple, *Verwoerd* (Harmondsworth, 1967), 154.

and refusal to buckle under pressure ‘created a “mystical bond” between him and the Afrikaner people’.⁵⁰ The prime minister’s authority was augmented by the lurid reports of postindependence chaos and racial violence in the former Belgian Congo. Victory in the republican referendum in October confirmed Verwoerd’s grip over his party and demonstrated, too, that significant numbers of English-speaking voters were persuaded to support him in order to protect white supremacy.⁵¹

Prior to Sharpeville, the prime minister had powerful political rivals in his cabinet. As we have seen, Sauer and Dönges, the Cape politicians most likely to have succeeded him, expressed serious doubts about his vision of apartheid. B. J. Schoeman, another heavy-weight cabinet member, was often dismissive of Verwoerd’s grandiose ideas.⁵² Had Pratt succeeded in killing Verwoerd it is possible that Verwoerd would have been succeeded by a law and order hardliner. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that anyone else would have been able to exercise similar dominance over his party, let alone muster the conviction required to entrench apartheid in the rigorous, unrelenting way that Verwoerd was subsequently able to do.

ARMED RESISTANCE

The significance of Verwoerd’s survival becomes even more intriguing when set in the context of the history of African nationalist resistance. Some in the ANC and the Communist Party – including key figures like Mandela, Walter Sisulu, and Raymond Mhlaba – were actively pursuing the idea of alternatives to nonviolence from around 1953. In assuming the leadership of *Umkhonto we Sizwe*, Mandela and his closest colleagues were decisively reorienting the ANC away from mass-based forms of nonviolent resistance and securing their position as revolutionary leaders. The M-Plan (a cellular street-based form of mobilisation advocated by Mandela) as well as overseas meetings with the Chinese and Soviet leaderships in 1953 provides strong corroboration of the genesis of this alternative strategy.⁵³ On this account, Sharpeville and Langa were not so much the proximate cause of the turn to sabotage as the trigger for a plan that had been discussed in small circles for some time.

The timing of MK’s creation was also a reaction to the turn to violence by other political groupings. In December 1961, the PAC announced the formation of *Pogo* – meaning ‘pure’ or ‘go it alone’ – promising in a pamphlet circulated in Cape Town, ‘We die once. Africa will be free on 1 January. The Whites will suffer – the African people will rule.’⁵⁴ A few months earlier, a flyer issued by the PAC entitled ‘Poqo, Poqo, Poqo’ accused the ANC-led Congress Alliance of cowardice, warning that it wanted ‘our people to become

50 Kenney, *Architect of Apartheid*, 195; D. M. Scher, ‘Triumph over imperialism’, in B. J. Liebenberg and S. B. Spies (eds.), *South Africa in the Twentieth Century* (Pretoria, 1993), 369–70; Mouton, *Voorlooper*, 46.

51 Kenney, *Architect of Apartheid*, 199, 223; Giliomee, *Last Afrikaner Leaders*, 75.

52 Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, 523; ‘Cabinet of 15 left without a leader’, *Times*, 11 April, 1960.

53 Magubane et al., ‘The turn to armed struggle’, 54; R. Suttner, ‘The African National Congress (ANC) underground: from the M-Plan to Rivonia’, *South African Historical Journal*, 49:1 (2003), 123–46.

54 B. V. Maaba, ‘The PAC’s war against the state, 1960–1963’, *The Road to Democracy*, 264.

RUSSIAN slaves'.⁵⁵ Poqo's nonhierarchical insurrectionary style was simple and direct: unlike the ANC, it had little compunction about attacking people or using terror. In place of theorising and planning, the PAC hoped that exemplary militant action would arouse a spontaneous wave of popular resistance and so overwhelm white supremacy.

Although Poqo was by far the most important rival to MK, it was not alone. On 29 September 1961 an offshoot of the Liberal Party, styling itself the National Committee of Liberation (later the African Resistance Movement), attempted without success to torch the Johannesburg Bantu Administration tax office. It subsequently mounted around twenty successful sabotage operations, bringing down electricity pylons and radio masts with stolen explosives. This campaign came to an end in July 1964 when a petrol bomb placed in the concourse of Johannesburg railway station killed a civilian and injured 23 more.⁵⁶

Seen in this context, the announcement of MK's formation on 16 December 1961 was not just a bid by a revolutionary vanguard to seize the initiative from the mainstream ANC. It was conditioned, too, by the need to retain the ANC's primacy in the liberation struggle. The fact that the PAC was responsible for initiating the antipass campaign in 1960 that eventuated in the Sharpeville massacre, and that the PAC was the main organising force in Langa and Nyanga, meant that it threatened to eclipse the ANC and the Congress movement at the cutting edge of militant action.

In contrast to Poqo's bellicose pronouncements, MK justified the need for violence in measured tones. A pamphlet announcing MK's formation stated that the time had come 'when there remain only two choices: submit or fight. That time has now come to South Africa.' More equivocal was the assertion that the government had left the people no choice and that in opting for violence: '[w]e hope that we will bring the government and its supporters to their senses before it is too late.'⁵⁷ This left open the possibility of reasoned discussion with the government. It signalled doubt as to whether MK envisaged its campaign of sabotage as an adjunct to political campaigning – namely, as 'armed propaganda' – or as a prelude to full-scale guerrilla war.

Doubts within the ANC about the move to armed struggle were partly about the moral dimensions of violence. They were also conditioned by pragmatic and strategic considerations. Chief Luthuli's Christian beliefs disposed him to persist with passive resistance. In this, he was supported by several Indian Congress leaders, including Maulvi and Yusuf Cachalia, as well as Dr Naicker. The spirit of Gandhi as well as of Christian forbearance remained powerful influences. Moses Kotane, a key figure in both the ANC and the Communist Party, opposed armed struggle at a key meeting in June 1961, fearing a crushing backlash from the South African state: 'when you throw a stone at people they are going to come back and break your windows.' M. B. Yengwa

55 T. Karis and G. M. Carter (eds.), *From Protest to Challenge, Vol. 3: Challenge and Violence 1953–1964* (Stanford, 1977), doc. 61.

56 M. Gunther, 'The National Committee of Liberation (NCL) African Resistance Movement (ARM)', *The Road to Democracy in South Africa*, 241, 246–7, and 249.

57 Karis and Carter, *From Protest to Challenge, Vol. 3*, doc. 66.

was also strongly opposed.⁵⁸ Durban-based Rowley Arenstein, then a Communist Party member, thought armed struggle to be premature and he bristled against the Johannesburg faction who he felt were responsible for driving forward the idea of armed struggle. Arenstein considered the Party would do better to work with trade unionists.⁵⁹

Discussions about the wisdom of armed struggle during 1960–1 and the potential for revolutionary insurrection were made in the context of profound uncertainty and widespread state repression. They were also conducted in a context where rival organisations and factions were involved in tactical struggles for survival and supremacy. No one could have known that, by the end of 1963, all vestiges of armed resistance would be quashed: virtually the entire MK and senior ANC leadership was captured at Rivonia in June 1963; Poqo was subdued, and the last remnants of the underground Communist Party smashed soon after.

PAC prisoners on Robben Island believed that freedom would come by the end of 1963. The MK leadership was more cautious but acted as though freedom was there to be grasped. Given what we now know about the amateurishness of the Rivonia high command, does this suggest a woeful underestimation of the strength of the state's security forces (giving rise to a cavalier attitude of 'something must be done') or else a misguided belief in the prospects of Marxist revolutionary theory ('what is to be done')? Does the decision to embark on armed resistance reflect MK's confidence that the masses would follow its lead, or amount to a recognition that in key respects the masses were not sufficiently responsive to the ANC? It is impossible to say for certain.

What can safely be asserted is that there were significant opportunity costs for the ANC in devoting itself to the armed struggle. With most of the leadership restricted or tied up in the interminable Treason Trial, political structures on the ground were fragmenting even before the banning of the ANC. The move to an externally-based armed resistance movement depleted the capacities of organisations like trades unions and the possibilities of mass mobilisation.⁶⁰ There was some receptivity within government to undertake labour reforms, notwithstanding the government crackdown on the ANC-aligned South African Council of Trades Unions. For example, an anxious Department of Labour acknowledged that industrial wages for Africans were too low and signalled a willingness to improve the functioning of factory 'works committees' after 1960 – short of recognising the principle of collective bargaining.⁶¹

The turn to armed struggle did not help activists connect with the countryside where revolt had been simmering since the late 1950s. In 1957–8, there had been rebellions against unpopular government authorised chiefs in Zeerust and Sekhukuneland, as well as in rural

58 Magubane et al., 'The turn to armed struggle', 73; SADET, *The Road to Democracy: South Africans Telling their Stories*, Vol. 1 (Johannesburg, 2008), evidence of Fred Dube, 105; Mandela, *Conversations*, 76.

59 P. S. Landau, 'The ANC, MK, and the "turn to violence" (1960–1962)', *South African Historical Journal*, 64:3 (2012), 548; Ellis, *External Mission*, 26.

60 This point was forcefully argued by D. Davis and R. Fine in 'Political strategies and the state: some historical observations', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 12:1 (1985), 25–48. Thanks to Colin Bundy for drawing my attention to this article.

61 A. Lichtenstein, 'Making apartheid work: African trade unions and the 1953 Labour (Settlement of Disputes) Act in South Africa', *The Journal of African History*, 46:2 (2005), 308–12.

Natal and Zululand where woman took prominent roles. Cato Manor in Durban exploded into violence shortly before Sharpeville in response to police launched raids on illicit liquor brewers.⁶² The most extensive, sustained, and well-organised rural revolt took place in Pondoland and neighbouring Tembuland in the Eastern Cape between 1960 and 1963. Matters came to a head in June 1960 when opponents of the Bantu Authorities system met on Ngquza Hill between Bizana and Lusikisiki. Armoured police opened fire killing at least 11 Mpondo and wounding sixty more.⁶³ A local state of emergency lasted into 1961 as hut-burnings and attacks on headmen associated with the government persisted.

Before and after Sharpeville, senior ANC theoretician and Communist Party cadre Govan Mbeki, argued that peasant struggles might in the long run prove more of a challenge to the government than urban resistance: 'a proper blending' of peasant and worker struggles should be a priority.⁶⁴ Many ANC leaders had roots in the countryside but the organisation's modernising ideology was strongly oriented to organising the urban masses and the ANC seldom offered more than rhetorical support for peasant resistance. It did little to build a presence in the countryside, largely failing to capture the powerful but inchoate strands of Africanist resistance that gravitated more naturally to the PAC or to the All-African Convention. Leading ANC figures like Govan Mbeki were thus never able to persuade their peers of the political potential represented by the hard-pressed peasantry. As late as November 1963, when elections were held in the Transkei to decide whether to endorse the territory's status as a self-governing homeland, the 'Bantustan wrecking' movement led by Victor Poto and Chief Sabata came very close to defeating the pro-government faction of Kaiser Matanzima. Yet the ANC gave only equivocal support to Matanzima's opponents.⁶⁵

Had the ANC and PAC leaderships been more receptive to the rural areas, which featured so prominently in nationalist struggles elsewhere in Africa, it is quite possible that the capacity of the state to contain mass resistance in 1960 would have been far more stretched than proved to be the case.⁶⁶ It is worth remembering that South Africa was not highly militarised in the 1950s (conscription began in 1960). It was also relatively under-policed and reliant on drafting in citizen force units during the Sharpeville crisis. The massive increase in the state security apparatus and the extension of powers of detention without trial driven through by hardline Justice Minister B. J. Vorster from 1961 was directly a response to Sharpeville. It provided the principal rationale for a determined counter-revolutionary strategy that eviscerated opposition to apartheid for a decade or more.

62 *Survey of Race Relations in South Africa 1959-60*, 49-50.

63 *Ibid.* 42.

64 Govan Mbeki, *South Africa: The Peasants' Revolt* (Harmondsworth, 1964), 130 and 131; C. Bundy, *Govan Mbeki* (Auckland Park, 2012), 92-3.

65 T. Gibbs, *Mandela's Kinsmen: Nationalist Elites and Apartheid's First Bantustan* (Suffolk and Johannesburg, 2014), 45-7.

66 This point was made by R. W. Johnson in *How Long will South Africa Survive?* (London, 1977), 19. Johnson compares Sharpeville, 1960, to the failed 1905 revolution in Russia.

A NATIONAL CONVENTION?

In assessing the possibilities that existed to continue semi-legal, if clandestine, opposition to the government, it should be remembered that the decapitation of the ANC as an internal organisation only occurred in mid-1963, following the arrests at Rivonia. Although the ANC and PAC were outlawed during this period, political activity continued, as did ferment and resistance in the countryside. It is not inconceivable that, after weathering the post-1960 crackdown and adjusting to harsher conditions, some measure of organised political opposition could have resumed through institutions like trades unions, churches, civic groups, as well as resistance and noncompliance in towns and rural areas.

One indication of the possibilities of political realignment came on 16 and 17 December 1960, when a Consultative Conference involving 36 mainly African political representatives from the ANC and the PAC, with a sprinkling from the Liberal Party and other organisations, met in Orlando. Its purpose was to construct a united front against the government. Resolutions called for ‘the immediate establishment of a non-racial democracy’, the ‘effective use of non-violent pressures against apartheid’, and ‘the urgent need for African unity’. It was decided to follow up the Consultation with an ‘all-in conference representative of African people in urban and rural areas’ to ‘demand the calling of a national convention representing all the people of South Africa wherein the fundamental rights of the people will be considered’. A Continuation Committee chaired by ex-ANC and now Liberal Party representative, Jordan Ngubane, was deputed to take the idea forward.⁶⁷

The thirteen-person Continuation Committee led by Ngubane was a diverse group wherein ANC and Liberal representatives were most prominent. But although intended to create unity and fill the vacuum created by the post-Sharpeville repression of opposition leaders, intractable political differences between the ANC, PAC, and the Liberals could not be overcome. The PAC was a reluctant participant. The Liberals partly withdrew. Both the PAC and the Liberals felt that the process was being manipulated by communists allied to the ANC. Ngubane’s replacement by Mandela as chair of the Continuation Committee fuelled suspicions that the committee was being outmanoeuvred by a secretive left-wing caucus.⁶⁸ In South Africa, Cold War fears had the unfortunate effect of unifying supporters of white supremacy while dividing the forces opposed to apartheid.

Campaigns for a national convention – evoking the historic 1909 meeting which brought the Union of South Africa into being, as well as the South African Native National Convention called in the same year to defend Africans’ constitutional rights – were a ubiquitous feature of opposition politics in the 1950s. ANC leader, Z. K. Matthews, who first floated the idea of the Freedom Charter in 1953, originally

67 Karis and Carter, *From Protest to Challenge*, Vol. 3, 354–5 and doc. 54; *Contact*, ‘Orlando conference calls for “national convention”’, 31 Dec. 1960, 3; J. B. Le Roux, ‘Umkhonto we Sizwe: its role in the ANC’s onslaught against white domination in South Africa, 1961–1988’ (unpublished DPhil thesis, University of Pretoria, 1992), 83–4.

68 Karis and Carter, *From Protest to Challenge*, Vol. 3, 355–6; R. Vigne, *Liberals Against Apartheid: A History of the Liberal Party of South Africa, 1953–68* (London, 1977), 139–42; Le Roux, ‘Umkhonto we Sizwe’, 84–90.

intended such a gathering to be a national convention and the idea continued to be supported by elder statesmen in the ANC like Luthuli.⁶⁹

The idea of a constitutional national convention was widely adumbrated by the Liberal Party, which was now moving in a more radical and racially integrated direction. In the months between October 1960 and July 1961, there were further calls for a national convention issued by groups such as the Methodist Church, the National Union of South African Students, the Civil Rights League, the Progressive Party, the Black Sash, and even the left-leaning Congress of Democrats. Dennis Brutus (who soon found himself occupying a cell adjacent to Mandela's on Robben Island) sought to mobilise the politically fissiparous Coloured community by calling for a national convention and demanding total abolition of the colour bar and full citizenship for all South Africans. The South African Coloured National Convention was duly held in the small Cape hamlet of Malmesbury so as to get round government bans. Around 300 delegates affirmed these principles and called for a bill of rights.⁷⁰

Larger still was the All-In African Conference which was eventually held in Pietermaritzburg over two days in March. Some 1,400 delegates said to represent 150 organisations attended the Pietermaritzburg meeting. Given the level of state intimidation and surveillance, this was an impressive indication of open political defiance and resilience. The mood was confident and assertive. Speeches and resolutions condemned the republican constitution of the white minority regime. The conference demanded a fully representative nonracial national convention tasked with presenting a new democratic constitution for the country. If the government refused to cooperate, a three-day national 'stay-at-home' would be called for the end of May, coinciding with the government's declaration of a republican state.⁷¹ A National Action Council was appointed, with Mandela as secretary, to coordinate anti-apartheid demonstrations.

Mandela played a central role. An adjournment in the Treason Trial proceedings, combined with a lapse in his banning orders, allowed him to make his way secretly to Pietermaritzburg where he was given star billing. According to *Contact*, the Liberal house journal, Mandela was 'the star of the show'. He made a dashing appearance on the platform wearing a three-piece suit, highly polished shoes, and sporting the revolutionary-style beard he adopted while underground.⁷² Mandela recalls: 'I was met with a joyous reaction. I had almost forgotten the intensity of the experience of addressing a crowd. In my speech I called for a National Convention in which all South Africans, black and white, Indian and Coloured, would sit down in brotherhood and create

69 In 1991, negotiations to end apartheid were held under the auspices of Codesa—the Convention for a Democratic South Africa.

70 *Survey of Race Relations in South Africa*. 1961, 23–5, 75–6; *Contact*, 13 July 1961, 4; University of Cape Town Manuscripts Department, Z.K. Matthews Papers (microfilm), BCZA B3.51, B3.54, letters to Matthews from Dennis Brutus, D. van der Ross, J.C.A. Daniels; also B3.61, 'Towards a national convention' by D. Brutus.

71 Karis and Carter, *From Protest to Challenge*, Vol. 3, 359; 'Congress threatens government. Must call convention - or else', *Contact*, 6 Apr. 1961. *Contact*'s editorial in this issue, was more circumspect, noting the 'major setback' as former members of the PAC walked out, followed by two Liberal members of the Continuation Committee.

72 E. Boehmer, *Nelson Mandela: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2008), 44; *Contact*, 6 Apr. 1961.

a constitution that mirrored the aspirations of the country as a whole.’ Directly after the conference, Mandela wrote a letter to Verwoerd, in which he ‘formally enjoined him to call a national constitutional convention’, failing which a massive three-day strike would be called. He received no acknowledgement.⁷³

If the idea of a national convention idea harked back to the 1955 Congress of the People, so too did the accusations of secret agendas and manipulation. The PAC withdrew from the Continuation Committee arguing that the ‘meeting must be crushed’ (in the words of Matthew Nkoana) because it was dedicated to outmoded ‘pre-1960 tactics of demonstrations’.⁷⁴ Liberal lawyer Ernie Wentzel thought the ANC never really intended to work for a national convention but was merely using it as cover to re-establish itself after the emergency and ‘recapture the imagination of the public’. PAC critics argued that Mandela’s dramatic appearance in Pietermaritzburg was designed to build him up as a hero and thus supplant their own leader, Sobukwe. Liberals complained that the Pietermaritzburg conference was ‘little more than a rubber-stamp for decisions already made by the Congress group’.⁷⁵

Writing in *Africa South*, Mandela made a powerful case for a national convention, praising the three-day national stayaway or strike as a landmark political moment in the struggle for a new South Africa. In a statement to *Contact*, the pugilist urged demonstrators to ‘deliver the knockout punch’ to apartheid.⁷⁶ The stayaway proved to be a major test of popular willingness to stand up against apartheid and the newly-declared republic. Over the last three weeks of May, as many as 10,000 ordinary Africans were arrested in a major crackdown with the police and army mobilised to underpin the show of force. Bans on all meetings and gatherings said to further the interests of communism were announced. Helicopters and Saracen armoured cars patrolled.⁷⁷

Notwithstanding these levels of intimidation, more than half of Johannesburg’s African workers stayed away on the first day, 29 May. In Cape Town, the stayaway was barely observed. But in Durban and Port Elizabeth, significant numbers of Africans, and even more Coloured and Indian workers, remained at home. A detailed analysis in *Contact* declared the action to have been only a qualified success. Fear, intimidation, and confusion about political objective of the strikes, all played a role in limiting participation. The preparatory groundwork for trade union action had not been done and the objectives – to halt the republic and call for a national convention – were couched too abstractly.⁷⁸ Yet, notwithstanding the lack of clear ideological focus or coordination, the achievements were considerable. Some thought the momentum was building. It therefore came as a surprise when Mandela unilaterally called the actions off after just a day. Govan Mbeki

73 Mandela, *Struggle is my Life*, 245, 246. The letter was the subject of debate between Mandela and Verwoerd’s secretary, Fred Barnard, at Mandela’s 1962 trial. Barnard said it was not responded to because it was deemed aggressive and discourteous. *Ibid.* 313–14.

74 C. J. Driver, *Patrick Duncan: South African and Pan-African* (London, 1980), 194.

75 Vigne, *Liberals against Apartheid*, 142.

76 N. Mandela, ‘Out of the strike’, *Africa South*, 5:4 (1961); *Contact*, 4 May 1961, 3; also N. Mandela, *No Easy Walk to Freedom* (London, 1965); ‘The struggle for a national convention’, 90–3.

77 Mandela, *No Easy Walk to Freedom*, 94–6.

78 *Survey of Race Relations in South Africa*, 36–9; *Contact*, 1 June 1961, 4.

was greatly affronted by what he and others thought was a premature and ill-informed decision. He later recalled that protestors in Sophiatown were deeply angered.⁷⁹

In public, Mandela called the stayaway a ‘magnificent’ refusal on the part of the masses to be intimidated by the state. Privately, he felt frustrated. In a letter to the leader of the official parliamentary opposition United Party, written just before the national stayaway, Mandela opined: ‘Stated bluntly, the alternatives appear to be these: talk it out or shoot it out.’⁸⁰ On the evening of 29 May, Mandela dramatically briefed the *Rand Daily Mail* that the days of nonviolent struggle were over and declared as much – albeit without a mandate from the ANC executive: ‘sometimes one must go public with an idea to push a recalcitrant organization in the direction you want it to go.’⁸¹

In many histories of the period the time between the Pietermaritzburg conference and the abortive stayaway are passed over very quickly. It is seen as an interregnum or messy point of transition between the emergency and the beginnings of underground resistance. But the details of this fluid period deserve closer attention. Intriguingly, the recently released draft of Mandela’s autobiography, written in secret on Robben Island in the mid-1970s, contains rather more about these events than the polished account in *Long Walk to Freedom*.⁸² For instance, the unpublished draft contains an admission that does not subsequently appear in *Long Walk to Freedom*: ‘I readily, and as it turned out, prematurely acknowledged the fact [that the strike did not meet expectations] to Benjamin Pogrund of the *Rand Daily Mail*.’⁸³ Jordan Ngubane commented sourly that in announcing an end to nonviolence, Mandela was ‘merely making public a change in attitudes that had already taken place in the underground’.⁸⁴

Ngubane’s assessment, made just months after these events was *parti pris* but it had some basis in fact and was consistent with accusations made by the PAC and fellow Liberals that (in Ngubane’s words) events were being driven by an ‘invisible hand’ that was no longer interested in unity. Taken together with Mandela’s own autobiographical reflections, it is clear that he was pursuing a dual agenda: talking the language of mass action and constitutionalism while at the same time actively preparing for armed struggle. This ambivalence is clear in an article written by Mandela in June 1961, which praises the successes of the strike and defends the principle of a national convention while questioning whether it was ‘politically correct to continue preaching peace and non-violence when dealing with a Government whose barbaric practices have brought so much suffering and misery to Africans’. For Mandela, ever the politician, nonviolence was a tactic rather than a matter of ‘principle’.⁸⁵

79 Couper, *Albert Luthuli*, 108–9.

80 Karis and Carter, *From Protest to Challenge*, Vol. 3, doc. 58.

81 Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, 258.

82 See the transcript of *Long Walk to Freedom*, 405–8, (<http://www.nelsonmandela.org/images/uploads/LWOM.pdf>) (henceforth transcript), and *Long Walk to Freedom*, 245–6.

83 Mandela, transcript, 421.

84 J. Ngubane, *An African Explains Apartheid* (London, 1963), 138, 172.

85 Mandela, transcript, 329: ‘The real issue is whether the use of force will advance or retard the struggle. If the use of force on a given occasion will harm the cause then we must avoid it by all means. But if it will advance it then it must be used whether or not the majority agrees with us.’

As Jonathan Hyslop tellingly points out in a major new collection on Mandela, the ANC and the Communist Party leadership had, by this time, come to the conclusion that there was no prospect of eliciting a positive response from Verwoerd in respect of a national convention. Their real purpose ‘was to show that every attempt had been made to bring about peaceful change before resorting to armed struggle’.⁸⁶ Had Verwoerd not survived, it is quite possible that his successor might have been more amenable to such a conversation. But even with Verwoerd still in office, it is likely that other opportunities would have arisen for the ANC and its allies to regroup. Kotane told Mandela in June 1961 that there was still a place for ‘the old methods if we are imaginative and determined enough’. Whereas Mandela and his supporters on the ANC Working Committee considered that ‘resort to violence was inevitable’ the contrary view made at that crucial all-night meeting in June 1961 when Luthuli was forced to accept the formation of an ANC armed wing was that “‘we had failed non-violence, not the other way round’”. In spite of the methods the enemy had used against us on numerous occasions there was still plenty of scope for the use of non-violence.’⁸⁷

A weaker successor to Verwoerd may not have been able to defend the government’s race policies ‘as walls of granite’ as the prime minister did in a major speech at the end of November 1960.⁸⁸ A stronger Luthuli might also have been able to forestall the militarisation of the ANC. Restricted by banning orders to Groutville, Natal, Luthuli was a long way away from the centre of political activities in Johannesburg. Yet he remained a statesman of very considerable moral authority. Luthuli addressed enthusiastic racially mixed crowds in Cape Town, Durban, and Johannesburg during 1960. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1961 – the first South African to achieve this honour. MK timed the explosion of its first devices on 16 November 1961, a highly symbolic date in the Afrikaner nationalist calendar commemorating the Voortrekkers’ 1838 victory over the Zulu army. It happened also to be the day following Luthuli’s return from Oslo.⁸⁹

With Verwoerd back in full control of his party and obstinately refusing to engage with Africans as political citizens, radicals had good reason to conclude that nonviolent resistance was no longer viable. It is insufficiently acknowledged, however, that this was both a deliberate and a heavily contested choice. It was not seen at the time as the only possible way forward and, with the benefit of historical hindsight, may not have been the wisest decision. The launch of *Umkhonto* gave the state licence for an unprecedented and unrelenting security crackdown, which the exiled ANC proved unable to counter. As a result, the scope for semi-legal aboveground resistance was distinctly limited. Nevertheless, anti-apartheid activity persisted. With the national state of emergency lifted by the end of August 1961 and many prominent detainees released and back in circulation, a degree of normality returned. The option of lying low and cautiously rebuilding political

86 J. Hyslop, ‘Mandela on war’, in Rita Barnard (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Nelson Mandela* (Cambridge, 2014), 165.

87 Mandela, transcript, 421–3, *Long Walk to Freedom*, 259; N. Mandela, *Conversations with Myself* (London, 2010).

88 *Star*, 1 Dec. 1960.

89 Couper, *Albert Luthuli*, 135.

structures amongst workers and urban and rural communities, as well as within civic and religious organisations, was not prioritised.

CONCLUSION

During the Sharpeville crisis, the state was forced to make concessions such as the suspension of the pass laws, albeit temporarily. Influential government supporters and agencies such as the Department of Labour indicated a willingness to reform or at least to suspend further entrenchment of apartheid. Measures such as the indefinite suspension of the pass-book system, coupled with retraction or delay of any further imposition of Bantu Authorities legislation, would have addressed the two biggest single issues arousing African opposition in the urban and rural areas respectively. The government could have allowed its ban on the liberation movements to expire, as promulgated, on 6 April 1961.

Justice Rumpff's finding, a month later, that the Treason Trialists were not guilty of planning the violent overthrow of the state, provided some basis for permitting the ANC to re-emerge in a semi-legal fashion, without diminishing the Congress movement's reputation as a militant anti-apartheid force. A reformist government might have made use of this to attempt to manage the situation differently, possibly by sowing further division between the ANC and PAC. This is precisely what the astute political journalist, Anthony Delius, had in mind when he implied that rivalries between the two liberation movements could be exploited. Warning that the South African government's approach was 'almost ideal for the creation of underground movements', Delius suggested that unbanning the ANC and PAC might, from the state's point of view, render them 'far more visible and controllable'.⁹⁰ In parliament, ex-United Party Justice Minister Harry Lawrence urged Verwoerd to lift the ban on Luthuli and other moderate ANC leaders so as to prevent 'extremists' taking over. Helen Suzman endorsed this view, reminding parliament that the demonstrations had been 'set in motion by the PAC with the disapproval of the ANC'.⁹¹ The *Cape Times* editorialised similarly, contrasting 'the comparatively moderate and relatively responsible ANC' with the extremism of 'Africanists'.⁹²

Introducing limited direct representation of Coloureds in parliament—a measure favoured by sections of the National Party and the parliamentary opposition—would have signalled a willingness to listen (though Coloured organisations opposed a 'new deal' for them at the expense of blacks). Here, again, it was Verwoerd's ideologically driven opposition to any concession to Coloureds that proved decisive.⁹³ The prime minister's

⁹⁰ *Cape Times*, 4 Apr. 1960.

⁹¹ *Cape Times*, 24 Mar. 1960.

⁹² *HAD*, 22 Mar. 1960, cols. 3874–5; *Cape Times*, 23 Mar. 1960.

⁹³ Plans for a National Convention of the Coloured People received considerable press coverage in early 1961. In July 1960, the political columnist of *Die Burger* indicated support for direct representation of Coloureds in parliament, a call supported by some members of SABRA. See Ballinger, *From Union to Apartheid*, 454–5; Karis and Carter, *From Protest to Challenge*, Vol. 3, 360–1; Kenney, *Architect of Apartheid*, 216 and 17. Calls for direct representation of Coloureds did not entail full equality, since they would remain on a separate voters' roll responsible for electing a specified number of MPs.

personal ideological convictions also lay behind the government's surprise announcement, in April 1961, that full political independence was envisaged for the homelands.⁹⁴ Adjustments and tactical reversals of existing government policy were widely canvassed in white political circles at the time, including by the supine opposition United Party, whose 'Five Points for Unity', announced in March 1961, was said to have 'received sympathetic attention in many quarters, even in the Nationalist Press'.⁹⁵ As the 1980s were to show, and as hard-liners in the government feared all too clearly, once embarked upon, reformist strategies are often not easy to contain.

In 1952, the ANC called off the Defiance Campaign when serious violence broke out in the Eastern Cape. The killing by police of more than 200 protestors in Duncan Village, East London, in November 1952, was hushed up by the state, while the ANC chose not to publicise this 'forgotten massacre' of militant grassroots Africanists. Defence lawyer Joe Slovo dismissed some of the East London rioters as being 'of primitive nature'.⁹⁶ At that time, the politics of restraint helped to protect the ANC from a more general crack-down and it was out of this moment that the Congress of the People took place.

Ten years later, the ANC's position had hardened significantly as a result of the government's increasing intractability and the rising tide of anticolonialism elsewhere in Africa. The balance of opinion was shifting towards militant confrontation. But if the ANC had made internal survival its priority and established semi-clandestine cells along the lines of the much talked about – but barely implemented – M-Plan, it might have been able to resist being eviscerated within the country. If ANC leaders had established self-defence units but condemned PAC/Poqo threats of indiscriminate violence (as some in fact did) it is possible that some form of dialogue could have been maintained and political space enlarged. Outdoing Poqo by launching a poorly prepared sabotage campaign was not the only path to follow.

Within South Africa, there were genuine and deep-seated demands for a nonpartisan and inclusive national convention. Externally, there were high profile mediators willing to intercede. Notwithstanding the personal animus between Verwoerd and Macmillan, following the 1960 Wind of Change speech, the British government was strongly in favour of defending the United Kingdom's substantial political and economic interests in South Africa. With threats of economic boycotts on the part of the newly-formed anti-apartheid movement a growing reality, the issue of South Africa was becoming an increasingly divisive force within British politics. There were many business people in South Africa who feared international isolation and pressed for a more flexible approach. A less headstrong and self-assured South African leader than Verwoerd may well have welcomed an accommodation with Macmillan who, until the very last moment in 1961, was seeking

94 *Survey of Race Relations 1961*, 97.

95 M. E. Fisher, 'Political Review III/61', AE862 G6, Black Sash, Historical Papers, Wits University, 13 Mar.–10 Apr. 1961. These mild reforms included: allowing Coloureds to vote and to sit in parliament, negotiations to take place with Indians about their political role, recognising urban Africans as permanently settled with pass exemptions for some, and the abandonment of job reservation.

96 O. M. Murphy, 'Race, violence, and nation: African nationalism and popular politics in South Africa's Eastern Cape, 1948–1970' (unpublished DPhil thesis, Oxford University, 2013), ch. 1; A. Mager and G. Minkley, 'Reaping the whirlwind: the East London Riots of 1952', in Bonner et al. (eds), *Apartheid's Genesis*, 231.

‘a formula’ on South African membership in the Commonwealth – and thought he had found one – that might avert South Africa’s exit.⁹⁷ Verwoerd succeeded in turning what many thought was a disaster – effective expulsion from the Commonwealth – into a personal triumph. A different leader might have welcomed the more prudent course of making concessions on apartheid in order to remain within the community of postcolonial nations.

Notwithstanding the belligerent position adopted by Eric Louw at the UN, the South African government feared international isolation. UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld, was personally engaged in attempting to discuss the problem of apartheid through 1960 and so ‘provide for appropriate safeguards of human rights’. He finally visited South Africa in January 1961 and over the course of a week met with Verwoerd on no less than six occasions as well as a range of (mostly government-approved) black representatives. The talks were reported to have been ‘constructive’.⁹⁸ The Congo crisis and Hammarskjöld’s death in an air crash in September ended a process of international diplomatic engagement that was not yet altogether exhausted.

The 1960–1 period has for too long been seen as a moment of crisis where no other alternatives were realistic or possible. It has suited both Afrikaner nationalist and liberation movement historiography to see it in this way. Historians Thomas Karis and Gwendolyn M. Carter are correct in their view that neither the ANC nor the PAC were able to command the levels of political support on the ground that would have been necessary to bring about widespread insurrection at this time. They also rightly point to the government’s failure to deal more subtly with the threat by making tactical concessions in a bid to divide the rival liberation movements further.⁹⁹ Perhaps it is time to consider whether hardliners in the ANC as well as the government overreacted after the Sharpeville crisis and, by so doing, delayed political change in South Africa.

97 S. Dubow, ‘Macmillan, Verwoerd, and the 1960 “Wind of Change” speech’, *Historical Journal*, 54:4 (2011), 1112; Ballinger, *From Union to Apartheid*, 459; National Archives, PREM 11/3535, Norman Brook to Macmillan, 14 Mar. 1961; Verwoerd to Macmillan 14 Mar. 1961.

98 C. C. Saunders, ‘Hammarskjöld’s visit to South Africa’, *African Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 11:1 (2011), 28; Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, 531; *A Survey of Race Relations*, 284.

99 Karis and Carter, *From Protest to Challenge*, Vol. 3, 340, 342–3.