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North Korea and the liberation of Southern Africa, 1960-2020

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6 WAR THE BATTLEFIELDS OF AFRICA

In 1960, the British prime minister, Harold Macmillan, gave a historic speech in the parliament of South Africa. ‘The wind of change is blowing through this continent’, Macmillan remarked on the rise of African national consciousness. ‘The great issue in this second half of the twentieth century’, according to the British leader, was ‘whether the uncommitted peoples of Asia and Africa will swing to the East or the West’. In front of the South African political class, he described this issue as ‘a struggle for the minds of men’. Macmillan was convinced that ‘what is now on trial is much more than our military strength or our diplomatic skill. It is our way of life’.⁵¹⁰

For the South African apartheid government, these winds of change were experienced as an ‘impending storm’. South Africa was ‘virtually isolated and alone’ and responded to this challenge with ‘a vast increase in military preparedness’.⁵¹¹ While most of the African continent had been liberated by the 1960s, large parts of Southern Africa were embroiled in a struggle without a clear outcome. The African liberation movements that advocated for self-governance were ‘like a pale flame that at any moment could become a devastating fire’.⁵¹² As their attempts to find legal or political solutions proved to be futile, only the gun was left.

Understanding the ebbs and flows of violence that spilled across the continent is crucial for any analysis of African liberation governments. This chapter is therefore centred around the Southern African battlefields of the second half of the twentieth century. The first section describes the shift in African political thought that caused anticolonial leaders to abandon the negotiation table and embrace the armed struggle. For a man like Kenneth Kaunda, the shift from his humanist ideas to supporting war was ‘painful’.⁵¹³ However, a number of events made African nationalists realise that fighting for freedom was inevitable – a gradual transformation in belief that was captured in a succession of political declarations.

The second section provides an overview of the different wars that occurred in Southern Africa between the 1960s and the 1990s. As South Africa became the ‘final major obstacle to Africa’s march to liberation’, a confusing mix of low-intensity guerrilla warfare ensued.⁵¹⁴ The third section highlights an existential problem for African nationalists: a lack of weapons. As Julius Nyerere said, ‘a police state cannot be fought with bows and arrows’.⁵¹⁵ However, the assistance from the Liberation Committee was inadequate in terms of meeting the expectations of African freedom fighters. The Communist Bloc therefore emerged as a major benefactor of African decolonisation.

Embracing the Armed Struggle

African liberation movements contemplated two different paths to power, summarised by Nyerere as the ‘conference’ and the ‘battlefield’. Between the 1950s and 1960s, optimistic nationalists organised political platforms, staged protests, and appealed to the world community for change.

One important tool was petitioning. Africans in, for example, Namibia and Zimbabwe brought their nationalist claims to the UN and other international bodies – sometimes through

⁵¹⁰ [NAI] PC South Africa Foreign Relations: Suzman, November 1978.

⁵¹¹ [NAI] PC South Africa Foreign Relations: Suzman, November 1978.

⁵¹² [NAI] PC History: Solana, January 1969.

⁵¹³ Chan 2021, p. 40.

⁵¹⁴ [NAI] PC Southern Africa NLM: Shamuyarira and Leonard.

⁵¹⁵ [NAI] PC Southern Africa NLM: Shamuyarira and Leonard; speech Nyerere.

Western advocates, oftentimes with great difficulty.⁵¹⁶ A former British representative to the UN Trusteeship Council spitefully remarked that petitioning had become ‘a national sport in tropic Africa’.⁵¹⁷ Nevertheless, the UN had limited capabilities to change the political landscape in Southern Africa.

Legal challenges proved to be equally ineffective. In 1960, Ethiopia and Liberia challenged South Africa’s mandate over Namibia at the International Court of Justice in The Hague (the Netherlands). SWAPO and fellow revolutionaries across the continent were hopeful that the illegal occupation of Namibia would soon be over. However, the Court ultimately rejected Ethiopia’s and Liberia’s claim and ruled that both states had no legal right or interest in the matter.⁵¹⁸ This moment was a huge blow for African decolonisation. The UN African Group expressed its ‘dismay and indignation at the incredible decision’ in a press conference. For Africans, the court ruling was evidence of the unfair and unequal world in which they were living. It demonstrated that they were stuck in a ‘white man’s world with a white man’s court’.⁵¹⁹

In the years following the end of World War II, several tragic events darkened the dreams of liberation in Southern Africa. The crushing of the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya between 1952 and 1960; the Sharpeville massacre in 1960 when South African police killed dozens of protestors; the assassination of Patrice Lumumba and the betrayal of Congolese independence in 1961 - it all boiled down to the idea that African people were not allowed to determine their own destiny.

For large parts of Southern Africa, attempts to reach a peaceful transition to independence proved to be futile. Once African revolutionaries felt that they had exhausted all of their diplomatic options, only the battlefield was left. This progression in thinking is captured in a succession of political declarations by leading African states. These documents are revealing examples of African political thought that guided the actions of liberation movements. The following paragraphs will describe the Lusaka Manifesto of 1969, the Mogadishu Declaration of 1971, and the Dar es Salaam Declaration of 1975.

The Lusaka Manifesto of 1969 confirmed the African commitment to the total liberation of the continent. It was prepared by Zambia and Tanzania and adopted by several states in East and Central Africa. Crucially, the manifesto declared that ‘we would prefer to negotiate rather than destroy, to talk rather than kill’. Nathan Shamuyarira observed that diplomacy and war were presented as two sides of the same coin. ‘Negotiating whenever and wherever possible, and fighting only when all else has failed’.⁵²⁰ It encouraged the Western world to engage with Africa.

The Lusaka Manifesto was a ‘rallying point’ for moderate and radical African states and was adopted by the Organisation of African Unity and the United Nations as an important policy document. However, several liberation movements were ‘quietly dismayed’ about this strategy as they feared that the emphasis on negotiation would lead to the abandonment of the armed struggle. ‘Their attempts to win freedom by peaceful means had been suppressed ruthlessly’, said Julius Nyerere at a meeting of the Liberation Committee. ‘The only choice left to them was surrender, or armed struggle. And everywhere surrender had been rejected’.⁵²¹

⁵¹⁶ Walker 2019.

⁵¹⁷ Burns, quoted in Pearson 2017, p. 526.

⁵¹⁸ International Court of Justice, South West Africa (Liberia v. South Africa).

⁵¹⁹ Bernstorff and Dann 2019.

⁵²⁰ [NAI] PC Southern Africa NLM: Shamuyarira and Leonard;

⁵²¹ [NAI] PC Southern Africa NLM: Shamuyarira and Leonard; speech Nyerere.

The ANC, in many ways the blueprint for liberation movements across the region, led the way in asserting the inevitability of violent resistance.⁵²² ‘The sixty years of struggle led by the ANC is sufficient proof that dialogue is not possible’, said a Zambian cabinet member in 1972. ‘We should now talk through the barrel of a gun’.⁵²³ The ANC itself believed that their propaganda gave the South African people confidence to complete the transition from information warfare to actual warfare: ‘They know it is leaflets today; but they know too it will be the bark of our guns soon’.⁵²⁴

A coalition of more radical African states and liberation movements lobbied for the abandonment of the Lusaka Manifesto. Their efforts led to the Mogadishu Declaration of 1971, a document adopted during a meeting of Eastern and Central African States. The Mogadishu Declaration stipulated that ‘there is no way left for the liberation of Southern Africa except armed struggle’. In response, the guerrilla fighting across the region became more intensified.⁵²⁵

In 1974, a military coup in Lisbon marked the end of the violent conflict between Portugal and its African colonies.⁵²⁶ The collapse of Portuguese Empire was bad news for the minority regimes of South Africa and Rhodesia. The subsequent independence of Mozambique and Angola resulted in a significant crack in the ‘security umbrella that shielded minority regimes from the pressures of African nationalism’.⁵²⁷ Again, the violence across the region intensified.

From the perspective of African nationalists, 1974 was a major success. Julius Nyerere viewed this event as a ‘clear and unmistakable result of the armed struggles’ in Angola and Mozambique. He congratulated their populations and announced that the members of the Liberation Committee can give themselves ‘a little pat on the back’.⁵²⁸ Yet, the battle for freedom was not over. Samora Machel said that ‘talks are an important factor for victory, but they are not the decisive factor. Mozambique regards the armed struggle as the decisive factor for victory’.⁵²⁹ This lesson was clearly understood in the headquarters of the liberation movements that remained oppressed.

In 1975, the Liberation Committee adopted the Dar es Salaam Declaration. Its members called for a new strategy for the liberation of Southern Africa, in particular for Namibia and Zimbabwe. It was decided that there was no need for dialogue with South Africa.⁵³⁰ Nyerere believed that the regional dynamics of the struggle were ‘completely transformed’ by the end of Portuguese colonialism. Namibia and Zimbabwe were now prioritised by the Liberation Committee. The Dar es Salaam Declaration reaffirmed the call for an intensified armed struggle.⁵³¹

The Battlefields of Africa

Generally speaking, the drive for African decolonisation was at odds with colonial powers that were based abroad. African nationalists thus opposed centres of powers in Britain, France, or other European countries. Southern Africa differed from this convention. After the fall of the Portuguese Empire, settler regimes were the last barrier to majority rule. Thus, Nyerere concluded in 1975 that ‘Africa’s confrontation in Southern Africa now is basically with South

⁵²² For a nuanced history about the ANC’s deliberations about the armed struggle, see Ellis 2011.

⁵²³ [MA] Sechaba, April 1972.

⁵²⁴ [MA] ANC London Box 15: The building of a nation, undated.

⁵²⁵ [NAI] PC Southern Africa NLM: Shamuyarira and Leonard.

⁵²⁶ Telepneva 2022, p. 2.

⁵²⁷ Khadiagala 1994, p. 21.

⁵²⁸ [NAI] PC Southern Africa NLM: Shamuyarira and Leonard; speech Nyerere.

⁵²⁹ [NAI] PC Mozambique NLM FRELIMO: speech by Machel, 15 September 1978.

⁵³⁰ [NAI] PC Southern Africa NLM: Shamuyarira and Leonard; speech Nyerere.

⁵³¹ [NAI] PC Southern Africa NLM: Shamuyarira and Leonard; speech Nyerere.

Africa'.⁵³² The influence of the apartheid regime extended far beyond the borders of South Africa. Pretoria had incorporated Namibia as a fifth province and supported the regime of Ian Smith in Zimbabwe. As such, the final phase in the liberation of Southern Africa took on a different character than in other parts of the continent.

'The forces of darkness have transformed the whole of Southern Africa into a zone of war and death', said the Secretary-General of the ANC, Alfred Nzo, in 1982. 'Daily, from Angola through to Mozambique and from Zambia to South Africa, they murder, rape and pillage. Everyday their manhating system spews out corpses that are riddled with bullets'. For Nzo and many other liberation movements, the forces of darkness were the apartheid regime in Pretoria in all its shapes and forms, described as a dangerous beast with 'merciless talons dripping with blood'.⁵³³

Even though the objective of African nationalists seemed clear – defeat South Africa, gain independence – the ensuing military state of affairs was far from simple. From the 1960s onwards, liberation movements 'fought different sorts of wars', often at the same time. They fought against settler colonialism and against each other, resulting in a various interrelated conflicts that were turbocharged by the Cold War.⁵³⁴ Despite Nzo's belief that that South Africa was engaged in a 'desperate rear-guard fight', several key military campaigns against Pretoria dragged on for years, even decades.⁵³⁵

In essence, there were four different battlefields in Southern Africa: the Zimbabwean War of Independence (1964-1980, also known as the Rhodesian Bush War); the Namibian War of Independence (1966-1990, also known as the South African Border War); the Mozambican War of Independence and subsequent Mozambican Civil War (respectively 1964-1974 and 1976-1992); and the Angolan War of Independence and subsequent Angolan Civil War (respectively 1961-1975 and 1975-2002). For historical context, each battlefield will be briefly discussed below.

The Zimbabwean War of Independence started in 1964. Originally a British colony, Zimbabwe became briefly part of the Central African Federation, together with Zambia and Malawi. A failed political experiment, the federation lasted only from 1953 to 1963.⁵³⁶ While Zambia and Malawi were granted independence soon thereafter, the white minority regime in Zimbabwe issued a Unilateral Declaration of Independence in 1965. Led by Ian Smith, the country (now known as Rhodesia) broke off its relation to Britain but withstood black majority rule. Rhodesian security forces were opposed by the guerrillas of ZANU and ZAPU in a low-intensity guerrilla conflict that also became known as the Second *Chimurenga*. The conflict finally ended in 1980, with the Lancaster House Agreement that introduced a cease-fire and elections.⁵³⁷

The Namibian War of Independence commenced in 1966 when SWAPO fighters clashed with South African Defence Force soldiers for the first time. South Africa was desperate to hold on to its colony and the ensuing conflict was long, costly, and traumatic.⁵³⁸ Also known as the 'Border War' or 'Bush War', the fighting spilled over into Zambia and Angola as the South African Defence Force – in cooperation with Rhodesian soldiers - sought to destroy SWAPO bases in exile.⁵³⁹ The war came to an end with the removal of South African and Cuban troops from Angola, with Namibian independence in 1990.⁵⁴⁰

⁵³² [NAI] PC Southern Africa NLM: Shamuyarira and Leonard; speech Nyerere.

⁵³³ [MA] ANC London Box 15: statement by Nzo, 11-13 March 1982.

⁵³⁴ Alexander et al. 2017.

⁵³⁵ [MA] ANC London Box 15: statement by Nzo, 11-13 March 1982.

⁵³⁶ Marmion 2023.

⁵³⁷ White 2015.

⁵³⁸ Wessels 2017.

⁵³⁹ Baines and Vale 2008.

⁵⁴⁰ Wallace 2011, p. 305.

The Mozambican Civil War erupted in 1976, when the insurgent group RENAMO challenged FRELIMO's rule. RENAMO opposed FRELIMO's one-party state and authoritarian politics. The insurgents were backed by Rhodesia and South Africa, who had vested interests in putting a halt to FRELIMO's support of ZANU and the ANC.⁵⁴¹ The war wrought havoc across Mozambique and ended in 1992 when 'a return to war was impossible' because of external factors, including the collapse of the Soviet Union and the impending end of apartheid.⁵⁴²

Angola's transition to independence was 'markedly different' than Mozambique, even though both states were part of the same Portuguese Empire.⁵⁴³ In 1975, a 'ferocious civil war' ensued between the MPLA, the FNLA, and UNITA, three movements that all claimed to be the legitimate power in Angola. The MPLA was backed by the Soviet Union and Cuba, while the latter two organisations received support from China, Congo, the United States, and South Africa.⁵⁴⁴ South Africa perceived the presence of thousands of Cuban troops as a security threat and therefore funnelled money and weapons to the fighters that countered the 'communists' of the MPLA.⁵⁴⁵ The Cuban intervention coincidentally also influenced the Namibian War of Independence, as the US linked the removal of Castro's forces to Namibian independence.⁵⁴⁶ In 2002 the MPLA achieved a military victory that ended the civil war.

In all four cases it is evident that war cannot be fully understood in isolation. The regional violence reached a peak in the 1980s, when South Africa was convinced that the communist world directed a 'Total Onslaught' against their minority rule. Pretoria introduced a 'Total Strategy' to withstand the pressures against apartheid.⁵⁴⁷ In addition to the aforementioned cases of subversion, South Africa deployed counterinsurgency operations in Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland. It created and funded non-state groups to destabilise neighbouring countries. Clandestine commando units and death squads were given 'free reign to infiltrate, destabilise and hunt down' any person or organisation that opposed Pretoria.⁵⁴⁸ As such, the various national uprisings in Southern Africa became closely intertwined.

Tangible Solidarity

The decision to take up arms against the apartheid military machine was not taken lightly by African anticolonial activists. Andreas Shipanga recalled that 'it was grim to have to accept the inevitability of armed struggle. Grim for myself and for many others ... we knew it would be terrible'.⁵⁴⁹ Julius Nyerere believed that 'no African people enjoy fighting for the sake of fighting'. But the people of Southern Africa yearned for freedom and it was clear that a peaceful resolution was impossible. There was 'no alternative but to take up arms'. Nyerere emphasised that Africans 'will then be prepared to kill, and to die, for their independence'.⁵⁵⁰

But even as the SWAPO leadership made the firm decision to wage the armed struggle, Shipanga realised that they were still a long way from launching a convincing military offensive. 'We had no weapons', was the bottom line of SWAPO's problem – a problem shared by virtually all liberation movements that decided to take up arms.⁵⁵¹ 'Even if we wished', announced ZANU in 1972, 'we cannot supply every adult Zimbabwean with a rifle – at least

⁵⁴¹ Jentzsch 2022, p. 9-10.

⁵⁴² Robinson 2006, p. 329.

⁵⁴³ Telepneva 2022, p. 2.

⁵⁴⁴ Guimaraes 2016.

⁵⁴⁵ Miller 2013.

⁵⁴⁶ Freeman 1989.

⁵⁴⁷ Visser 2004, p. 119.

⁵⁴⁸ Douek 2020, p. 63.

⁵⁴⁹ Armstrong 1989.

⁵⁵⁰ [NAI] PC Southern Africa NLM: Shamyarira and Leonard; speech Nyerere.

⁵⁵¹ Armstrong 1989.

for now'. The liberation movement urged their fellow compatriots to 'fight with bare hands and feet, with stones and half-bricks, and with paraffin and matches'.⁵⁵²

In short, African revolutionaries were in need of modern military hardware and professional training in order to stand a chance on the battlefield. They primarily relied on African solidarity to acquire such expertise. 'Africa has no choice but to side with the freedom struggle of Southern Africa', proclaimed Nyerere.⁵⁵³ To this end, the Liberation Committee of the Organisation of African Unity was designed to supply African revolutionaries with the means to win liberation through the barrel of a gun. But as was already mentioned in chapter 1, the Committee's aid was insufficient. Shortly after its creation in 1963, the Committee 'lost a good deal of its revolutionary ferment' when the influential leaders Ben Bella in Algeria and Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana were removed from power via coup d'états.⁵⁵⁴

Political tensions were followed by economic difficulties, and in 1966 the budget of the Liberation Committee was rejected by its members. One delegate said that 'we have no desire to empty our coffers so that a handful or second-rate politicians can travel all over the world'. This deadlock was resolved through the intervention of Julius Nyerere. *Mwalimu* Nyerere threatened to expel the Committee from Dar es Salaam if the OAU did not cough up the necessary funds.⁵⁵⁵ Nevertheless, the Liberation Committee could never meet the needs of all African guerrilla movements.

Those that were dependent on the Liberation Committee often despaired about its inability to provide sufficient material aid. In a speech delivered on behalf of multiple liberation movements, Agostinho Neto stated that 'pious resolutions, sympathetic declarations and repeated promises cannot solve the problems of war ... what we essentially need are weapons and money'. Neto reminded the outside world that 'solidarity is a duty'.⁵⁵⁶ Joshua Nkomo echoed this sentiment a few years later, when he asked the world not to send 'big bundles of resolutions, but big bundles of guns'. He coined this 'tangible solidarity'.⁵⁵⁷

Nonetheless, it proved impossible for the Frontline States and other African states to offer adequate tangible solidarity. This was not because of ill will – they were simply limited by practical reasons. Nyerere admitted that Africa had in effect 'very little power to affect the outcome' of the struggle. 'We are all poor nations. We have no effective economic power to use. Further, we do not even manufacture arms'.⁵⁵⁸ The last point was the sum and substance of the dilemma that haunted African guerrillas: relying on African solidarity was not enough to win a war. The readiness of forces outside Africa to supply weapons thus became a factor of importance.

Conclusion

The start of the armed struggle is a watershed moment in the mythologies of any liberation movement. It was the proverbial crossing of the Rubicon; moving beyond the negotiating tables of the diplomatic arena into the fields of war. In the case of Namibia, SWAPO believed that 'the first bullets fired by Namibian compatriots signalled the tide and direction of the Namibian history'. The first clash between SWAPO guerrilla fighters and the South African Defence Force on 26 August 1966, the drawing of first blood, 'marked a new era' in Namibian history. It was a symbolic point of no return, as SWAPO devoted itself to pursuing its 'political goal through the barrel of a gun'.⁵⁵⁹

⁵⁵² [NAI] PC Zimbabwe NLM ZANU: Zimbabwe News, November 1972.

⁵⁵³ [NAI] PC Tanzania Politics Nyerere: speech by Nyerere, 15 October 1970.

⁵⁵⁴ [NAI] PC History: Solana, January 1969.

⁵⁵⁵ [NAI] PC History: Solana, January 1969.

⁵⁵⁶ [NAI] PC Angola NLMA MPLA: speech by Neto, 8 September 1972.

⁵⁵⁷ [NAI] PC Zimbabwe NLM ZAPU: speech by Nkomo, March 1979.

⁵⁵⁸ [NAI] PC Tanzania Politics Nyerere: speech by Nyerere, 15 October 1970.

⁵⁵⁹ [NAI] PC Namibia NLM SWAPO: statement by Hishongwa;

In practice, the process to establish military wings, decide on strategies, and train and arm a sufficient number of fighters was slow and difficult. Support from abroad was deemed a crucial factor for success.⁵⁶⁰ In anticipation of its own armed wing, ZAPU, for example, sent over a hundred members for military training to the Soviet Union, China, Cuba, Egypt, and North Korea.⁵⁶¹ After months of training, the group reconvened in Zambia and were instructed to agree on the establishment of a formal liberation army. Dumiso Dabengwa recalled how he and his comrades engaged ‘in daily, highly charged debates’ about what strategy to pursue. It would still take years before ZAPU could execute proper military operations. Dabengwa – nicknamed the ‘Black Russian’ on account of his own exile experience in the Soviet Union – ultimately became the Chief of Intelligence of ZAPU’s armed wing.⁵⁶²

The communist support of African liberations worried the Western world. However, Dabengwa explained that ZAPU did not cooperate with countries like North Korea because they were socialist, but simply because ‘they were willing to help’.⁵⁶³ While the West refused to provide arms and training to Zimbabwean nationalists, North Korea vowed to give them ‘full support and encouragement’.⁵⁶⁴ Kim Il Sung believed that ‘it is inevitable that oppressed people should fight for their emancipation ... the oppressed people can liberate themselves only through struggle’.⁵⁶⁵ African revolutionaries refused to accept the ‘white man’s world with a white man’s court’ any longer.⁵⁶⁶

African revolutionaries were therefore primarily motivated by pragmatic reasons to accept non-Western aid. This does not detract from the fact that China and the Eastern Bloc did their utmost best to convert African freedom fighters to card-carrying communists. As the next chapter shows, African freedom fighters were not always keen on socialist literature, but they were impressed by anti-imperialist revolutions. The Korean War in particular was an example of a battle that inspired African liberation movements – not in the least because North Korea actively exported its war experience to the African continent.

⁵⁶⁰ [NAI] PC Angola NLMA MPLA: speech by Neto, December 1972.

⁵⁶¹ Temu and Tembe 2014, p. 28 [Vol. 5].

⁵⁶² Dabengwa 2017, p. 218-219.

⁵⁶³ Dabengwa 2017, p. 216.

⁵⁶⁴ *The Nationalist*, 8 January 1966. I wish to thank Brooks Marmon for sharing this file with me.

⁵⁶⁵ Kim 1985, p. 346.

⁵⁶⁶ Venzke 2019.