

A nuanced history of a liberation army

Janet Cherry, *Umkhonto we Sizwe: A Jacana Pocket History*

Jacana Media, Auckland Park, 2011

155 pp

ISBN 978-1-77009-961-6

R99.95

This pocket book by scholar-activist Janet Cherry published in the Jacana history series provides a brief introduction to the history of the ANC's armed wing, *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (MK), "arguably the last of the great liberation armies of the twentieth century" (p 10). The book does not really cover new ground in the study of MK. Rather its strength lies in the sensitive interweaving of political and strategic analyses of MK's trajectory with personal testimonies by former MK cadres (drawn from the massive oral history archive of the South African Democracy Education Trust, the records of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and autobiographical accounts). Through these sources, the author paints a nuanced story of "paradox and contradiction, successes and failures" (p 9).

Between the introduction and the concluding chapter are five chronologically arranged chapters, each dealing with a strategic phase in MK's history from its formation in 1961 to the end of the armed struggle in the early 1990s. A select list of readings and an index are also included at the end, although there are no references for the quotations in the text itself – something which academic historians may find irritating, but is also understandable given the much wider readership this book aims to reach. The narrative touches on all major events in the history of MK from its formation to its eventual demise in the early 1990s, while sketching some of the historiographical controversies which surround the topic.

As Cherry argues in chapter two, the turn to the armed struggle in the aftermath of the Sharpeville massacre and the banning of the ANC and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) in 1960 was a complex and difficult process, rather than an unavoidable outcome. It was the subject of much debate within the leadership of the ANC and between the ANC and its allies, notably the underground South African Communist Party (SACP), which partly explains why it was only at the end of 1962 that MK was publicly linked to the ANC for the first time (p 18).

The heroic sacrifice made by those MK combatants who fought (and died) in the Wankie and Sipolilo campaigns of 1967–1968 (a generation of cadres known as the Luthuli Detachment) is analysed by the author both in terms of the development of MK's strategy and tactics (as "the first engagement in 'conventional' guerrilla warfare as distinct from symbolic sabotage" (pp 41–42) which had characterised MK's formative years) and of the hardship and growing frustration of MK cadres in Kongwa camp in Tanzania after their return from military training. Their discontent was captured in the 1968 "Hani memorandum" – which is incorrectly dated in 1966, i.e. before, instead of after, the Wankie and Sipolilo campaigns. The

memorandum was partly the product of the failure of these military attempts at infiltrating South Africa via Zimbabwe (then Southern Rhodesia) and became one of the main catalysts behind the call for a consultative conference in Morogoro in 1969, which resulted in a further shift in MK's strategy from the Cuban-inspired theory of *foco* to protracted rural guerrilla warfare.

Only from the mid to late 1970s, after the collapse of the Portuguese empire in 1975, was MK able to resume operations inside South Africa, although the resurgence of "popular unrest and civil revolt within South Africa came about largely independently of the ANC's or MK's actions" (p 59). The 1976 generation injected new life into MK as many youths skipped the country and were drafted into what became known as the June 16 Detachment. Tragically, however, most of these young recruits were never deployed in combat and spent long years in the Angolan camps, where they endured extreme hardships and growing frustration. The book briefly touches on the many difficulties experienced by MK in this period – not least the sustained offensive by the apartheid regime, both directly with cross border military attacks on MK bases in the frontline states, and indirectly with the infiltration of spies within the movement. This led to "what was probably one of its worst crises in all the years of exile" (p 68). The crisis came into the open through a series of mutinies in the camps in Angola and the subsequent imprisonment, torture and death of a number of cadres by the Department of Intelligence and Security, or Mbokondo, in what became known as Quatro detention camp.

Some of the grievances which had fuelled the Angolan mutinies were addressed by the Kabwe conference in 1985. At Kabwe, the ANC's commitment to a "people's war" (a strategy originally developed in the "green book" after an influential visit to Vietnam in 1978) was also reaffirmed. Arguing against some of the revisionist scholarship which has emerged in recent years, notably the work of Anthea Jeffery, Cherry demonstrates how the policies of the ANC and MK, including that of "people's war", were characterised by high levels of restraint, rather than the indiscriminate use of violence, by using as an example the controversial landmine campaign of 1985–1987 (pp 75–84).

The growth of the mass democratic movement in South Africa, especially after the formation of the United Democratic Front (UDF) in 1983 and the beginning of the township insurrection in 1984, created new opportunities for the development of a "people's war". Although the ANC influenced these developments, it was ultimately "ordinary people, through their own actions and tactics" (for instance the *amabutho* in the Eastern Cape, pp 90–94), rather than MK cadres deployed inside the country, that put into practice the call to "render the country ungovernable" (p 87). This paradox illuminates the continued difficulty of the ANC in exile to establish permanent bases inside the country and effective communication between the internal and exiled movement and was one of the main drivers behind Operation Vula, launched in 1987.

Book Reviews / Boekresensies

The late 1980s were characterised by another paradox: while the ANC leadership called for an escalation of the armed struggle (which reached a peak in this period), they had secretly entered into negotiations with Pretoria. Hence the unbanning of the ANC, the release of political prisoners and the subsequent decision to suspend the armed struggle in August 1990 came as a surprise to many rank and file cadres. Cherry also touches upon the difficult process of integration of MK and other so called non-statutory forces with the SADF and bantustan armies and on the grave problems of “social integration, poverty and unemployment” (p 128) which former MK cadres faced as they returned to South Africa and were reabsorbed into civilian society.

In her concluding chapter, Cherry evaluates the relative success and failure of the MK and the armed struggle. First off, she notes that the human costs of the armed struggle were remarkably low. This was primarily thanks to the political leadership which the ANC provided and under which MK fell at all times, as well as partly due to the particular nature of the apartheid state. Although from a strictly military point of view the armed struggle may be viewed as a failure, from a symbolic and ideological point of view it carried enormous importance. Ultimately the overthrow of apartheid was the result of a combination of factors, of which MK was an integral part.

Throughout this very accessible and well written introductory account of the history of MK, Cherry never loses sight of the human dimension of the armed struggle, which is indispensable to understanding what continues to be a very sensitive topic.

Arianna Lissoni
University of Johannesburg