



Liliesleaf

A PLACE *of* LIBERATION

Grade 11

Apartheid South Africa 1940s to 1960s

The Move to Armed Struggle

ENGAGE



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The secluded farm of Liliesleaf was a safe house for liberation activists for a period of 18 months from 1961 to 1963. Senior members of the SACP, ANC and Congress Alliance met here regularly and in secret. Most of them were already under state surveillance, banning orders or in hiding from the police. Here they discussed their strategies for liberating all South Africans from the shackles of apartheid. They were some of the greatest leaders South Africa has ever seen. The police raid on 11 July 1963 led to the Rivonia Trial and the imprisonment of most of these leaders. This was a blow to the liberation movement – but the leaders remained strong. They continued to inspire their people and survived to give birth to a new democracy.

The purchase of Liliesleaf by the South African Communist Party in 1961 coincided with the decision of the ANC to take up an armed struggle against the apartheid government. Liliesleaf quickly evolved into the headquarters of Umkhonto we Sizwe, also known as MK or the Spear of the Nation. MK started out as an independent military organisation within the liberation movement and became the official military wing of the ANC at the Lobatse Conference in 1962.

An MK leaflet issued on 16 December 1961 explained:

“We, of Umkhonto we Sizwe, have always sought – as the liberation movement has sought – to achieve liberation without bloodshed and civil clash. We hope – even at this late hour – that our first actions will awaken everyone to the realisation of the disastrous situation to which the Nationalist policy was leading. We hope that we will bring the government and its supporters to their senses before it is too late, so that both the government and its policies can be changed before matters reach the desperate stage of civil war.

We believe our actions to be against the Nationalist preparations for civil war and military rule. In these actions we are working in the best interest of all the people of this country, Black, Brown and White, whose future happiness and well-being cannot be attained without the overthrow of the Nationalists ... The people’s patience is not endless. The time comes in the life of any nation when there remain only two choices – submit or fight. That time has now come to South Africa.”

An armed struggle was seen as a last resort. It had never been part of the core ideology of the liberation movement.

“I, who had never been a soldier, who had never fought in battle, who had never fired a gun at an enemy, had been given the task of starting an army. It would be a daunting task for a veteran general, much less a military novice. The name of this new organisation was Umkhonto we Sizwe (The Spear of the Nation) – or MK for short. The symbol of the spear was chosen because with this simple weapon Africans had resisted the incursions of whites for centuries.”

Nelson Mandela, Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela, Little, Brown and Co: Boston, 1994

“Our people knew nothing about military struggle. The last wars that we fought were fought towards the end of the 19th century. People had been deskilled in terms of understanding war. They were not even allowed to keep spears in their own houses.”

Chris Hani, SACP leader and MK Chief of Staff, Extract from Hani - A life too short by Janet Smith and Beauregard Tromp, Jonathan Ball Publishers: Johannesburg, 2009

QUESTION 1

In your opinion, what contributed to the liberation movement’s decision to embrace an armed struggle?

Think about:

- The South Africa Act of 1909

- The Natives Land Act of 1913
- The Native Urban Area Act of 1923
- The Mines and Works Amendment Act, 1926 (known as the Colour Bar Act)
- The many oppressive apartheid policies
- The Treason Trial of 1956
- The banning of the Freedom Charter (created in 1955)
- Sharpeville Massacre of 21 March 1960
- The banning of the ANC, PAC and South African Communist Party
- Government's declaration of a 'State of Emergency' in 1960
- The government's violent response to the anti-referendum protests on 29-31 May 1961

You can even think about events before the 20th century, all the way back to the arrival of the Portuguese and the Dutch. Think about land dispossession, slavery and the fragmentation of communities.

QUESTION 2

MK was born after almost five decades of peaceful protests, non-violent resistance and attempts at negotiation. South African activists had made many attempts to bring about reform by constitutional means without success. What had been tried before this moment?

Think about:

- Appeals to the British government
- Anti-pass marches (the first of which was an all women's march in Bloemfontein, 28 May 1913)
- The role of black South Africans in the First World War
- Gandhi's eight-year long non-violent resistance, or Satyagraha campaign, from 1906
- May Day strike of 1950 led by the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA)
- The civil disobedience of the Defiance Campaign of 1952 and the Amadelakufa (those who dare defy death)
- The ideals of the Congress Alliance's Freedom Charter of 1955
- Burning of passbooks

QUESTION 3

What was the symbolic significance of the date, 16 December, on which MK was formed in 1961?

QUESTION 4

Between December 1961 and July 1963, MK units undertook just over 200 operations, which were mainly homemade incendiary bomb attacks intended to damage public facilities. These acts of sabotage against the government were intended to damage the symbols of oppression, but they were not intended to hurt people.

What is the difference between sabotage and guerrilla warfare?

QUESTION 5

While living in secret at Liliesleaf, Mandela read several books on guerilla warfare. One of them was Guerilla Warfare by Ernesto 'Che' Guevara. Here is a short extract:

“At the outset there is a more or less homogeneous group, with some arms, that devotes itself almost exclusively to hiding in the wildest and most inaccessible places, making little contact with the peasants. It strikes a fortunate blow and its fame grows. A few peasants, dispossessed of their land or engaged in a struggle to conserve it, and young idealists of other classes join the nucleus; it acquires greater audacity and starts to operate in inhabited places, making

contact with the people of the zone; it repeats attacks, always fleeing after making them; suddenly it engages in combat with some column or other and destroys its vanguard. Men continue to join it; it has increased in number, but its organization remains exactly the same; its caution diminishes, and it ventures into more populous zones ...

The numbers in the guerrilla band increase as work among the peasants operates to make each one an enthusiast for the war of liberation. Finally, an inaccessible place is chosen, a settled life is initiated, and the first small industries begin to be established: a shoe factory, a cigar and cigarette factory, a clothing factory, an arms factory, bakery, hospitals, possibly a radio transmitter, a printing press, etc. The guerrilla band now has an organisation, a new structure. It is the head of a large movement with all the characteristics of a small government.”

Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara, Guerilla Warfare, 1960

The strategy of Operation Mayibuye was based on similar principles. In point form break the Che Guevara strategy down into clear stages.

If you can, read Operation Mayibuye and make comparisons. Would you have supported such a strategy in 1963 or would you have opposed it? Give reasons for your answer.

QUESTION 6

In 1962 Mandela travelled around Africa to gather support for the ANC and for MK. He discovered that most African leaders objected to the ANC’s policy of non-racialism. The meetings that took place at Liliesleaf were an example of the ANC’s commitment to non-racialism and cooperation with anyone who wanted equality for all South Africans. Other African leaders saw liberation movements as black, and did not consider Indians or whites to be allies.

In your opinion, where do you think the ANC policy of non-racialism comes from and why did it remain unchanged, despite the feedback from other African leaders?