

# Invisible Resurrection: The Recreation of a Communist Party in South Africa in the 1950's

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**Abstract:** Gwendolen Carter frequently mentioned communism in her seminal 1958 book, *The Politics of Inequality: South Africa Since 1948*. This paper will analyze South African communism in the opening decade and a half of apartheid. It will consider the characterization of communism in opposition as presented in Carter's book, in light of recently published autobiographies and biographies of communists and African nationalists who were active in the 1940s and 1950s. The 1950 Suppression of Communism Act forced the formerly legal Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) to transform itself into the underground South African Communist Party (SACP). The paper delineates the important features of organized communism underground up to its near collapse as a result of the arrests at its Rivonia headquarters in 1963. It then briefly examines its deepening collaboration with the African National Congress over the next 30 years and concludes with observations on the significance of this early apartheid era history for the SACP's position in post-apartheid South Africa.

*"The Government thus made it impossible for a Communist to be chosen a Native representative by the Cape Africans. It is less sure that its victory was more than a surface one."*<sup>1</sup>

*"Detention without trial, isolation in police cells, physical and psychological torture - [were] practices which in my experience in the 50's and 40's were never engaged in by the security services."*<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

In her 1957 assessment of efforts by the National Party government to block white communists elected to represent Africans in the lower house of South Africa's parliament, Gwendolen Carter suggested that the government's 'success' was limited. Neither she, nor apparently anyone outside communist ranks, were then aware that South African communists in 1953 had founded the South African Communist Party (SACP), a successor to the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) that had been dissolved by its central committee in June, 1950.

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Only recently, following the publication of autobiographies and memoirs of longtime communists, in tandem with biographies of deceased communist leaders, has sufficient new information come to light that permits a more detailed examination of the fashion in which the SACP came into existence and the dynamics of its clandestine activities in the 1950s. Drawing from these sources, the analysis that follows delineates the important features of organized communism in South Africa during the first years of its underground existence.<sup>3</sup> In a brief conclusion, observations are offered on the significance of this period for the SACP in the post-apartheid years since 1994.

In the decade that followed the dissolution of the CPSA, communists and other radical opponents of apartheid, most notably the African National Congress (ANC), were actively engaged in organizing challenges to the National Party government. They operated in a political environment in which the government both repressed and tolerated its radical opponents. Repression was intensified through the passage of new legislation and the utilization of existing police power and practices to control and harass its opponents. The Suppression of Communism Act of 1950 symbolized the primacy that the government gave to expanding its arsenal to counter the 'threat' of communism. The broad powers of this legislation empowered the government to prosecute and ban organizations and individuals deemed 'communist' under a loose and encompassing definition. These powers, combined with those already in the hands of the government under the Riotous Assemblies Act, and augmented by those of the Public Safety Act of 1953 and the Criminal Laws Amendment Act of 1953, allowed the government to regulate and ban organizations and individuals that acted to protest the deepening of segregation and discrimination that was apartheid. Toleration of anti-apartheid opposition by the government was unwilling and grudging, particularly as ANC-led opposition grew through the 1950's, but legal rights were generally respected and police practices continued largely as they had been in the pre-1948 period. Joe Slovo's 1985 observations about the non-brutal nature of state power in the 1950s highlight the semi-benign nature of the government's response to opposition in the years when the secret SACP was establishing itself.

#### 'SUPPRESSION OF COMMUNISM'

The SACP's predecessor, the CPSA, was a prime target of the National Party as it assumed power in 1948. In the eyes of the National Party, the CPSA was a major source of 'unrest' among the African population. Although its membership numbered only several thousand, having peaked during World War II when Great Britain and the United States were allied with the Soviet Union against Nazi Germany, its membership was drawn from all racial groups and many were prominent activists in trade unions and nationalist bodies, notably the ANC and the South African Indian Congress (SAIC). The party operated openly, recruiting support through public meetings and publications. It engaged in electoral politics, both in 'white' elections at national, provincial, and local levels and in the limited segregated spaces where the few African voters were permitted to chose white candidates to represent them.

In the two years following its 1948 electoral victory the National Party's fears of the 'communist menace' were further confirmed when two white communists successively won elections as 'Native' representatives in the African voters-only constituency of the Western Cape

-- Sam Kahn in 1948 as MP in the House of Assembly (the lower house of the national parliament) and Fred Carneson in 1949 as Member of Legislative Council (MLC) in the Cape Provincial Council. In the first months of 1950, the National Party government moved to enact legislation to make communist organizations and activity illegal.

The impending passage of the Suppression of Communism Bill in June, 1950, posed an immediate threat to the CPSA. Not only did the proposed law provide mechanisms for the ouster of the recently elected communist legislators and for the outlawing of the CPSA upon coming into force on June 26, it also empowered the government to 'name' and to ban its members from political activity and to subject them to prosecution and prison for up to ten years for membership or support of the goals of communism as defined in the statute.

#### HURRIED DISSOLUTION OF THE CPSA

Faced with the threat to its existence and to the ability of its members to engage in political and trade union activity, seventeen members of the central committee of the CPSA, including representatives from Cape Town, Johannesburg, and Durban, met on short notice in Cape Town in June as parliament was debating the bill. Legal opinion had been sought and was presented to the central committee members, outlining the implications of provisions of the bill. The lawyers believed that if the party would be in existence at the time when the legislation came into force all members who had not resigned would be liable to criminal prosecution for being a member. The implication of the legal advice was that the party should go out of existence.

Michael Harmel, known within the party for his critical theoretical writings, proposed that the party remain in existence and that new underground structures be created for it.<sup>4</sup> The central committee members were mindful that the government had lists of party membership seized in raids in 1946 in the wake of the African miners' strike. They were also aware that the party had been unsuccessful in setting up back-up 'underground' party structures in the wake of the 1946 African miners' strike. According to Brian Bunting (who was also present at the meeting), "the Central Committee felt that it could not go underground with the sort of membership it had, many of whom were totally unequipped both ideologically and practically for illegal struggle and all of whom were known to the police."<sup>5</sup> Reference was apparently also made to the experience of the German Communist Party under Nazi rule that "highlighted the difficulties involved in passing from legal to illegal work without pause."<sup>6</sup> Harmel's proposal for the immediate creation of underground party structures was rejected.

The majority of the central committee accepted the legal advice that the CPSA should dissolve itself. With only two members in opposition, the central committee voted that the CPSA would dissolve itself on the last day of parliamentary debate on the Suppression of Communism Bill.<sup>7</sup> In the interim, party assets were to be disposed of in all district offices, but the party rank and file were not immediately informed of the decision of the central committee to dissolve the CPSA.

On June 20, the last day of debate in parliament on the Suppression of Communism Bill, Sam Kahn publicly read a statement announcing the decision of the central committee to dissolve the CPSA. Party members were informed at district meetings addressed by party leaders. Three to four hundred party members from the Johannesburg district assembled to

hear Moses Kotane, general secretary of the party. His brief remarks, explaining why the central committee had decided to dissolve the CPSA, were met with stunned silence. There were no questions and no discussion. In the words of Rusty Bernstein:

Was Kotane not covering the existence of an illegal successor to the party which was already being developed? We all had questions, but not ones that could be answered in public. What we wanted to hear, what we hoped to hear could not be spoken. We knew that. There was nothing to say. Finis. We sang the Internationale without enthusiasm for the last time, and went out into the night as though from a funeral. All our years of work and dedication had disappeared in dust - without warning. Only uncertainty and doubt about the future remained.<sup>8</sup>

There are no accounts of district party meetings held in other cities, but most likely many of the rank and file members elsewhere shared the same uneasiness of Bernstein and his Johannesburg cohort.

#### FROM DISSOLUTION TO RECONSTITUTION

Many party members believed that the decision of the central committee to dissolve the CPSA was part of a broader ploy to establish new underground party structures that would operate illegally. Two small groups took initiatives to form new underground communist parties, one of which was composed of Witwatersrand University students Joe Slovo, Ruth First, and Howard Wolpe. When the government 'liquidator', appointed under the Suppression of Communism Act, requested more than fifty former CPSA members in the Johannesburg area to show reason why they should not be 'named', many who had been contacted by the 'liquidator' came together in the Johannesburg barristers' chambers to discuss a common response. A committee, comprised of Moses Kotane, Yusef Dadoo, Bram Fischer, Michael Harmel, Rusty Bernstein, and Vernon Berrange, was elected to draft a reply to the 'liquidator'. Except for Berrange, all of the committee had been members of former CPSA central or district committees. Once the reply to the 'liquidator' was drafted and sent, the committee members, viewing themselves as "an elected body with some sort of a mandate from a substantial number of former Party members, who could give substance to a claim to be legatees of [the] Party's past traditions and prestige," undertook to create a new communist party.<sup>9</sup>

Four members of the *ad hoc* committee had participated in the central committee meeting that had decided to dissolve the CPSA. Kotane, Dadoo, and Fischer had supported the decision to dissolve the CPSA, while Harmel had opposed it. Neither Bernstein nor Berrange had been members of the central committee and thus had not been directly involved in the decision to dissolve. Joe Slovo, who had also not been on the central committee, but who had been a leader of the student group at Witwatersrand University that had established a new underground communist organization, was co-opted to the *ad hoc* committee.<sup>10</sup>

In a lengthy process of secret consultations, the *ad hoc* committee contacted all members of leading CPSA committees, regardless of their position on the question of dissolution, inviting them to consider joining a new underground party organization. How Moses Kotane, the secretary general of the dissolved CPSA and one of the members of the committee, carried out the task of the committee in the Johannesburg area was characterized by his biographer as follows:

Under surveillance all the time, Kotane had to act with extreme care, but step by step, he was able to establish contact with like-minded individuals and groups in Johannesburg and discuss plans for the launching of the new Communist Party. At the beginning, having no headquarters to operate from, he and his initial contacts used to meet at dawn, in the open veld, away from the urban centres, so that, hidden in the bushes, they would themselves be screened from observation while at the same time able instantly to detect the presence of any unwanted stranger. At each meeting they would make detailed arrangements for the next meeting, fixing the exact time and spot at which each comrade was to be picked up, and the time and spot at which he or she was to be set down. If cars were used for transport, they had to be changed from time to time. It was important that no regular pattern should be established; times, places and personnel were constantly varied. All written and telephone communication was banned.<sup>11</sup>

Kotane and his group took the initiative in establishing contact with groups in Cape Town, Durban, Port Elizabeth, and elsewhere that were conducting similar consultations with former officeholders of the CPSA.<sup>12</sup> Although some prominent CPSA members declined to participate, a majority agreed to participate.<sup>13</sup> The committee decided to undertake the building of a new, secret and illegal party.

According to Rusty Bernstein the *ad hoc* committee operated under two rigid rules: to keep totally silent about the existence of the Party; and to require a unanimous committee vote before anyone was approached to join. We developed new ways of meeting surreptitiously in unlikely places such as borrowed homes and offices, moving cars, country picnic sites and even night clubs by day. We persuaded the two embryo Party groups to integrate their unattached members into the more representative body we were forming, and started systematic recruiting of activists in all provinces from those known to us from their political past. Before long, there was a thin network across the country of groups with not more than four members each, unknown to each other without any contact between them.<sup>14</sup>

In 1952 the committee decided that a formal founding conference should be held with delegates from throughout the country. A complicated procedure was devised to select delegates.<sup>15</sup>

Early in 1953 - no source gives a precise date - some twenty five delegates met in the house at the rear of the shop of an Indian merchant in a rural area of the eastern Transvaal. Rules of organization, membership, and secrecy were adopted and a short statement of aims was agreed as an interim program. The new organization was formally named the South African Communist Party, distinguishing it from its dissolved predecessor, the Communist Party of South Africa. The delegates unanimously selected Yusef Dadoo as chairman and Moses Kotane as secretary. They were authorized to select a central committee on the basis of nominations of known or 'presumed' members made by the delegates. The two delegates who received the most votes (whose names were announced) joined the chairman and the secretary in designating the remainder of the central committee (whose names were not announced), keeping in mind demands of security and adequate regional representation. It was decided that party headquarters were to be in Johannesburg.<sup>16</sup>

## FROM RECONSTITUTION TO UNDERGROUND 'SUCCESS'



In this fashion the reconstituted communist party, the SACP, commenced operations. From 1953 onward the SACP successfully operated as a clandestine party in accord with the guidelines laid down at its inaugural meeting. Apparently no one who was a member of the SACP revealed its existence and no one was prosecuted for membership in the SACP.

The SACP secretariat in Johannesburg, headed by Kotane, met frequently.<sup>17</sup> Small party groups of four or five members, unaware of other similar groups in their district (or elsewhere in the country) met regularly to discuss the current political situation, the work of their group's members in trade unions and national organizations, and party matters. Party members were obligated to advance the theoretical knowledge of Marxism within the party itself and outside it. The latter activity was carried out in small groups, consisting of one or more party members and non-party members of nationalist organizations and trade unions, or in similar study classes designed to identify recruits for the party.<sup>18</sup> District party meetings were held and, after 1953, five additional underground national conferences were held either in Johannesburg or vicinity through 1962.<sup>19</sup> Party members at all levels participated in the deliberations of policy. In the words of Slovo:

Despite the post-1953 underground conditions, we continued to practise a good measure of internal Party democracy. The rank and file had the opportunity of debating major policy statements before they were finally adopted by the Central Committee. The leadership was re-elected at least once every two years at conferences attended by delegates from every district and who outnumbered members of the Central Committee.<sup>20</sup>

Elections continued to take place under the formula agreed at the inaugural conference. Results were respected by the party leadership; only rarely was a candidate excluded who had won the necessary number of votes - and then on the grounds of security or the need to maintain adequate representation of all regions.<sup>21</sup> The membership of the SACP apparently numbered no more than several hundred, but it was still asserted, particularly by the government, that 'communists' controlled the anti-apartheid opposition.<sup>22</sup>

Accusations that communists controlled the ANC (and other organizations linked in the Congress Alliance) were a testimony both to the prominent positions that many former CPSA members held in these organizations and increasingly pro-Soviet pronouncements made by the ANC and its allies in the 1950s. Kotane and Dadoo, the top office holders in the SACP, had both been highly visible members of the CPSA. Both continued to be active in the leadership of the ANC and the SAIC, their respective national organizations. Other prominent African and Indian communists, including Marks and Bopape in the ANC and Kathrada in the SAIC, also continued in leadership positions. Many white CPSA members, after the formation of the white Congress of Democrats (COD) in 1953, took prominent positions in the COD nationally and locally. Rusty Bernstein found himself the COD representative on a national working committee to prepare for the Congress of the People. "As the only regular writer on the Committee" he was drafted to write the national call for the Congress.<sup>23</sup> He then subsequently drafted the Freedom Charter that was adopted with few changes by the Congress of the People at Kliptown in June, 1955.

Communists who had been active in trade unions of Africans, Indians, and Coloureds, including such stalwarts as Ray Simons and Raymond Mhlaba, also continued to work within the labor movement. Other communists (Ruth First, Brian Bunting, and Rusty Bernstein)

focused on journalism and became the mainstays of radical newspapers and journals such as *The Guardian* and *Fighting Talk*.<sup>24</sup> Communist lawyers, such as Bram Fischer, Joe Slovo and Vernon Berrange, maintained active practices beyond their participation in 'political' cases, while simultaneously participating in bodies such as COD. Because of their past membership in the CPSA as well as their continuing activism many communists were banned periodically, often for years, from participation in both political organizations and trade unions. Nevertheless, despite government restrictions upon their political activity, all found ways to maintain their involvement clandestinely throughout the 1950s, including the post-December, 1956 period when many party activists were among the 156 arrested and charged in the Treason Trial that dragged on in Johannesburg and Pretoria until 1961.

Although the tedium and inconvenience of the Treason Trial were heavy burdens for the communists and their allies, there is broad agreement that the consequences were highly beneficial. Those charged with treason were segregated in 'white' and 'black' prisons and in men's and women's sections of the prisons, but they came together each day in 1956 and 1957 in the common dock in the Drill Hall, a facility of the military reserve organization that had been converted into an oversized courtroom. In the unique hothouse of daily enforced proximity those charged with treason, communist and non-communist, from all population groups and from all parts of the country, found a new sense of solidarity and common purpose. In the assessment of Bernstein the government's aim of breaking the Congress Alliance was turned on its head by the process of the Treason Trial:

The leaders it was intended to cripple are more united and effective. The activists it was intended to demoralize and disperse have found new strength in unity. The inter-racial Congress front which it was intended to shatter has emerged stronger and closer. And frictions between communists and the rest which it was intended to enlarge have been resolved and laid to rest.<sup>25</sup>

The Drill Hall had given rise to an extraordinary fraternity which became the bedrock from which the modern Congress was sprung. That close fraternal spirit was the core which held together the enduring unity of the liberation movement for the next forty years, and kept it free of the factionalism and strife which destroyed so many movements in so many other countries. It was the matrix of the singleness of purpose which distinguished Congress, inside and outside the country, in prison and in exile, until the end of the apartheid era.<sup>26</sup>

Despite tensions on specific issues and campaigns within the Congress Alliance and the continuous pressure from the government, communists considered that the clandestine party was making great strides in advancing its goals.

## FROM INVISIBILITY TO VISIBILITY

The 'success' of the CPSA helped to kindle an inner-party debate whether the party should abandon its invisibility and publicly declare its existence. The debate came to a head at the

national conference of the SACP in 1959 when a resolution was proposed that the SACP make an immediate announcement of its existence and 'emerge' to campaign openly. Frequently citing Lenin, those advocating a public declaration argued that secrecy "was spreading the illusion that socialism could be achieved without an independent party of the working class".<sup>27</sup> Their opponents "were less concerned with ideology than with the practical consequences of 'emergence'." They argued that invisibility "dispelled our allies' fear of a separate, and perhaps rival, communist agenda. 'Emergence' would be, at best, a gesture; but it could disrupt the established relations of trust between communists and the rest of the mass movement, and might well induce the legal organisations to repudiate co-operation with us in order to protect themselves."<sup>28</sup> According to Bernstein, the divisions over the proposed resolution were largely along racial lines. Those in opposition were mainly blacks associated with trade unions and the national movements of the Congress Alliance. Those supporting the motion for 'emergence' were mainly whites, who were not eligible for membership in the black components of the Congress Alliance and who were concentrated in the COD. The resolution failed by a slender majority.<sup>29</sup>

Bernstein's compromise to 'defuse' the tension was a proposal that he had been considering prior to the conference - the circulation of communist educational and theoretical literature without party imprint. He suggested that the party publish a "regular journal of Marxist views on African and international affairs, without any identifying Party label." Both sides agreed, "perhaps as much as a gesture of peace as for its intrinsic merit. 'Emergence' was deferred *sine die* and the go-ahead was given for what was to become *The African Communist*."<sup>30</sup>

## SHARPEVILLE AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

The events of 1960 gave the SACP new opportunities to test its mettle. The anti-pass campaigns of early 1960, highlighted by the Sharpeville massacre on March 21 and the subsequent march of thousands of Africans into the center of Cape Town on March 30, culminated with a declaration by the government of a state of emergency. The speedily enacted Unlawful Organizations Act was used to ban the ANC (as well as the Pan Africanist Congress). Along with thousands of ANC members and other anti-apartheid activists, including members of the Liberal Party, leading communists were detained under the state of emergency. Among those detained were most of the members of the central committee. Only a few members of the SACP leadership escaped and went underground in Johannesburg. They included Yusef Dadoo, (chairman of the SACP), Moses Kotane, (secretary of the SACP), Michael Harmel, (a member of the central committee), as well as Ben Turok, (not a member of the central committee). Turok was representative of a new party generation who had been recruited directly into the SACP; he had not been a member of the CPSA.

Against the odds and to the fury of the government security forces, the small core of party members who had escaped reestablished a functioning center of party operations in Johannesburg. Dadoo went into exile after a few weeks.<sup>31</sup> Kotane, Harmel, and Turok, supported by a few trusted party couriers and sympathizers, moved through ten different 'safe' houses for the next five months. They met daily or every other day to coordinate and direct activities. A few other senior party members who had escaped the government dragnet met



with the three at irregular intervals in one of the 'safe' houses, on the street or in automobiles, but it was Kotane, Harmel, and Turok who comprised the new *ad hoc* troika directing SACP. Often donning disguises when they ventured outside of the 'safe' houses, they successfully contacted party members who had also escaped imprisonment in the Johannesburg area, but also in Cape Town, Durban, Port Elizabeth, and elsewhere. Printing depots were established in Johannesburg and in major townships around the country from where leaflets were printed and distributed.<sup>32</sup>

Midway during the state of emergency the issue of 'emergence' dramatically surfaced in a specially called meeting of the leaders not in prison. Three or four other leaders of the party had joined Kotane, Harmel, and Turok in a 'safe' house. One of the party leaders was Joe Matthews who had come from Lesotho disguised as an Indian merchant; the names of the other two or three participants are not mentioned by Turok.<sup>33</sup> Turok's account of the discussion about 'emergence', written some 42 years after the event, catches the high tension surrounding the issue:

In the midst of the discussion about the current situation, Michael Harmel raised the question of the party announcing its existence. He argued that with the banning of the ANC and the proscription of legal work, a new situation had arisen in which both the party and the ANC were in the same situation. There was therefore no formal reason for the party to maintain its former secrecy. Michael's statement was totally unexpected and a hush fell over the meeting as each of us digested it.

I saw Moses blanch and sit tight-lipped during Michael's presentation. Others shuffled their feet. After a lengthy pause, comments came and were generally cautious. People were feeling their way around the issue. Someone raised the question of the strength of the government and our own weakness, the danger of a backlash and the harm it might cause to unity within the Congress Alliance. Then Moses launched a strong attack, arguing that this was premature and unnecessary and that it would cause an enormous rift within the ANC. He thought it was wrong to make such a move while leaders were in prison and could not be consulted. Those who were not communists would feel that they had been stabbed in the back. Here were the two giants with whom I was in constant contact and whose unity was essential to survival during the emergency and they were clashing over this most fundamental of issues. I wish I could now recall the details of the debate more clearly, but I was too stunned.<sup>34</sup>

After further discussion each person in the room was asked for his view. All the others supported Harmel, "leaving Moses isolated and looking very miserable. He shuffled his feet, clasped and unclasped his hands nervously, and seemed to be pressed to the limit of his endurance. But he remained in control, accepted the decision, and we moved on to discuss implementation."<sup>35</sup>

The rump central committee, seemingly acting on Harmel's impulse, had overruled the majority of the elected central committee that had previously blocked 'emergence'. Harmel and Turok then drafted a leaflet. Kotane approved the text. It was printed using the depots that had been established by the party during the state of emergency. On July 14 the leaflets were distributed in the Johannesburg area and then elsewhere in South Africa. The party members who had been opposed to 'emergence' were surprised by the decision but accepted it as

appropriate.<sup>36</sup> The previously invisible SACP had become a visible 'illegal' body seven years after its creation.

#### OPTIMISM DESPITE INTENSIFIED REPRESSION

The state of emergency was lifted on August 31, 1960. Party members and allies in the Congress Alliance were released from detention. As Bernstein remembered it, the mood among them was "difficult to assess." Although the ANC had vanished, its activists were reconstituting their political activities in new modes. "Security, secrecy and caution had become the watchwords of survival."<sup>37</sup> The 'emergence' of the SACP was a "damp squib" according to Bernstein; it "made relations between Party and ANC simpler and less hedged about with concealments. And it dispersed some of the mutual suspicions about hidden agendas and motives which had tended to come between Party 'insiders' and non-communist ANC 'outsiders'."<sup>38</sup>

Those who had led the underground troika were under great strain. At a meeting of the troika and central committee members resident in Johannesburg it was decided to return leadership of the SACP to the central committee and not to continue with the fully underground troika leadership that had stewarded the party through the state of emergency.<sup>39</sup> In the estimation of Bunting's biographer the SACP emerged strengthened from the state of emergency - relations between communists and its non-communist allies were further cemented and party organization had been "raised to new heights."<sup>40</sup>

In the immediate post-emergency situation the situation seemed much the same as it had been prior to the emergency. South African communists now had a decade of illegality behind them. The secrecy of the SACP in its seven years of existence as an invisible clandestine body had never been breached. Its work within the Congress Alliance had borne rich fruit. While the government, after a few days of uncertainty immediately after the Sharpeville massacre, had shown its determination to use its powers of emergency to suppress its opponents, it had not apparently departed radically from the security and policy practices that had characterized it through the 1950's.

Building upon its established tactics of clandestine activity the party embarked upon an ambitious forward-looking program to escalate its challenge to apartheid. It continued to work with members of the ANC and other like-minded allies within the Congress Alliance to utilize the greatly constricted 'twilight zone' of semi-legal political space. It undertook initiatives to establish its presence outside the country in tandem with similar initiatives taken by the banned ANC. It supported the efforts of the ANC to establish an underground presence, symbolized by Nelson Mandela's travels overseas and his 'black pimpernel' existence in South Africa before his capture in August 1962. In mid-1960 it accepted that there must be a turn to organized violence against the state. With carefully chosen allies in the ANC who had also accepted that violence must be utilized, the SACP created Umkhonto we Sizwe to undertake a campaign of sabotage and then move beyond to organize for guerrilla activity. The purchase of Rivonia in a northern suburb of Johannesburg as a 'safe house' for the leadership of Umkhonto testified to the confidence of the SACP leadership that its hitherto successful modes of seemingly secure

underground operation could be extended to the direction of a sabotage campaign and planning for a more expansive armed struggle.

## THE SHOCK OF RIVONIA AND ITS AFTERMATH

In light of its previous successes in concealing so many of its activities from the security services, the SACP leadership had grounds to hope that it could continue to do so with its daring new enterprise. But it had neither fully appreciated the potential of the government's new security legislation nor the nature of the transformation of the security services. When the government responded to the December 1961 start of Umkhonto's sabotage campaign with the enactment of new 'legal' measures, including 'house arrest' and detention for lengthy periods - eventually indefinitely - party members were immediately vulnerable. Although none were acknowledged members of the public, but still clandestine, SACP, most were highly visible activists known to the security services. The security services of the 1960's, in contrast to those of the 1950's, were shown to be a technologically sophisticated force willing to utilize psychological and physical torture upon detainees held under the newly enacted statutes. The crowning blow to the edifice built so painstakingly by the SACP was the Rivonia raid of July 11, 1963, in which the security forces captured key SACP and ANC leaders of Umkhonto we Sizwe along with a treasure trove of incriminating documents.

Uncompromisingly employing its new 'legal' powers, the enhanced capabilities of the security services, intimidation of activists, and torture of detainees, the government brutally destroyed the internal organization of the SACP in the three years following the Rivonia raid. Its leaders were arrested, tried, and imprisoned or went into exile. The middle and lower levels of the party within the country were also destroyed.

Writing in exile in 1976 Slovo soberly analyzed the main weaknesses of the party and its allies that led to the debacle:

First, the movement's own security screen which had seemed adequate in the previous period, proved inadequate after the regime had refashioned its own instruments to meet the new challenge. The immunity of the earlier period had bred a mood of carelessness and bravado which was, in the end, to prove costly. The majority of leaders and rank-and-filers taking part in illegal activity were well known to the authorities from the period of public campaigning, and very few of them 'went underground' in the sense of changing their identities and operating under a protective security screen.<sup>41</sup>

Slovo pinpointed the Rivonia underground headquarters as a point of vulnerability. The "organizational nerve centre of the struggle had come to be centred around this one headquarters; and there the lines of demarcation between the political and military organizations became impermissibly blurred."<sup>42</sup> In the wake of the raid upon Rivonia the full weight of the new practices of the security services fell upon the detained members of the movement. "Many resisted bravely but the majority who were subjected to standing torture, sleep deprivation and similar methods proved unable to resist." In Slovo's view the "basic rule of conspiratorial work that the destructive effect be contained within the smallest possible limits" was broken with the consequence that "successful interrogation under torture of many of

those detained set up a chain reaction which made it easier for the security forces to immobilize almost every level of the movement's apparatus."<sup>43</sup>

## RESURRECTION AND POST-1990 LEGALITY

The mid-1960's decimation of the SACP was not followed by another relatively quick resurrection like the one that followed the dissolution of the CPSA in 1950. In contrast the second resurrection was a decades long process, initially spurred and coordinated by the exile apparatus of the SACP. Although the party's existence was not hidden as it was throughout the 1950's, most of its activities were clandestine, by necessity underground in South Africa and for political and security reasons only selectively visible in the locations where it operated in exile in Europe and Africa. The details of the fashion in which the SACP regrouped, both in exile and within South Africa, still are to be fully explicated, but the overarching features of its second resurrection are well known.

A major feature of the thirty years from 1960 to 1990 was a deepening collaboration with the ANC, the full nature of which will continue to be a subject for further research, discussion and reassessment. Building upon links forged in the 1950s (and even prior to 1950), the SACP as an organization worked closely with the similarly banned ANC - underground (including prisons) in South Africa and outside the country in the organization of armed struggle (centered in Umkhonto we Sizwe), and in anti-apartheid activities throughout the world. In keeping with party policies, SACP members joined the ANC (whose membership after 1969 was opened to non-Africans) and ANC members were selectively recruited to the SACP. The close ties between the two political organizations were symbolized by appearances of ANC leaders at reported SACP gatherings and by SACP spokesmen in ANC meetings and publications. Following the organization of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) in 1985, representing tens of thousands of workers within the country, the ANC, COSATU, and the SACP came together in 1988 in Harare in a formal tripartite alliance, dedicated to the destruction of the apartheid state. Only when the party was unbanned in South Africa in 1990 did the SACP emerge for the first time as a 'legal' party, following the precedent of its predecessor, the CPSA.

In the transition period from 1990 to 1994, while the National Party still remained in formal control of government, the SACP suffered residual suspicion and hostility from the government as it sought to establish itself as an independent and 'legal' political party, allied with the ANC and COSATU. With the advent of full democracy in 1994 the situation of the SACP was irrevocably altered.

In the first democratic election under the 1994 constitution, the SACP chose not to run as a separate party, but to give full support to the ANC. Many party members were nominated as ANC parliamentary candidates and as such were elected to parliament. Prominent communists subsequently became ministers in the ANC-led government, subject to the leadership and directives of the ANC, the senior partner in the Tripartite Alliance with COSATU and the SACP. Within the Tripartite Alliance the SACP has periodically criticized ANC policies and the failure of ANC leadership to accept its views, but it has continued to reaffirm its adherence to membership in the Alliance.

Simultaneously, the SACP maintains its existence as a separate political party that "strives to be the leading political force of the South African working class whose interests it promotes in the struggle to advance, deepen and defend the national democratic revolution and to achieve socialism." Its constitution proclaims that it is "guided by those principles of Marxism-Leninism whose universal validity has been proven by historical experience." The document also states that "the ultimate aim of the SACP is the building of a communist society in which all forms of exploitation of person by person will have ended and in which all the products of human endeavour will be distributed according to need. The attainment of such a society will require an interim socialist formation in which reward will be measured by contribution." Membership in the SACP is open to "all South Africans over the age of 16 who accept the programme and policies of the SACP, undertake to carry out its decisions and to be active in a SACP structure and pay whatever dues are decided on".<sup>44</sup>

#### 'LEGAL' COMMUNISM: FROM 1921 TO 2007

The 'legal' SACP of 2007 is the direct lineal descendent of the also 'legal' CPSA of 1921-1950, but its status, particularly since 1994, bears only limited resemblance that of its predecessor. In 1950, on the eve of its dissolution, the CPSA was a small party, unallied with any other political organization, persecuted by the National Party government, and under attack by prominent members of the ANC, the leading political body of the African majority. In the first decade after its dissolution, operating in the face of sustained government persecution, the party not only resurrected itself organizationally, but more importantly its members became leading and accepted activists within the ANC and its allied anti-apartheid organizations. By 1960, when the SACP revealed its existence, it seemed to believe that it had found the means to operate successfully in clandestine fashion under the nose of the National Party government. Rivonia and its aftermath revealed that the SACP had profoundly misestimated both its own powers and the determination of the government.

When the ANC also was driven underground in 1960 and persecuted as ruthlessly as were the communists, both organizations as they had existed in the 1950s were destroyed and many of their leaders were imprisoned or escaped into exile. Building upon the network of personal and organization links developed in the years of 'hidden communism', the SACP over more than four decades has not only resurrected itself again, but also consolidated its complex intertwined relationship with the ANC in which the SACP (with its membership of tens of thousands) remains the 'junior' partner to the governing ANC (with its membership of hundreds of thousands). The persistence to date of the alliance of the two organizations into the 21st century testifies both to the strength of the bonds formed in adversity during the decades of the common struggle against apartheid and to the differing, yet convergent, interests of both parties in maintaining historically rooted connections.

#### Notes:

1. Carter, 70.
2. Joe Slovo, "Apartheid", (Part II), *Frontline*, PBS Television, 1985. Ten years later, in his autobiography, Slovo wrote: "In my experience of numerous political trials I rarely



cross-examined a Special Branch man who lied on fundamental matters. Assaults on political prisoners were extremely rare. The right of access to lawyers immediately on arrest was still in existence and, in any case, the law obliged the police to produce a prisoner and formally charge him in a court of law within 48 hours of his detention. The right to home privacy was still entrenched and no search could take place without a magisterial warrant. I recall an occasion when Head Constable Dirker, who had come to search Michael Harmel's house, was asked whether he had a warrant. He sheepishly replied that, being in a hurry, he had taken the wrong file and Michael's warrant was still in his office..This kind of bumbling ineptitude was soon to end. Already by the middle and late 1950s the new crop of security officials had been sent to foreign institutions which specialized in teaching techniques of mental and physical torture and the most scientific way to break the human spirit. They went to the United States, which had begun to accumulate field experience in Vietnam, to fascist Portugal and to Algeria, where the French were still trying to resist the popular onslaught." Slovo, 1995: 86.

3. The following autobiographies, memoirs, or biographies have been consulted: Rusty Bernstein, *Memory Against Forgetting* (London, Viking, 1999); Brian Bunting, *Moses Kotane: South African Revolutionary* (Cape Town, Mayibuye Books-UWC, 1998); Stephen Clingman, *Bram Fischer: Afrikaner Revolutionary* (Cape Town/Bellville/Amherst, David Philip/Mayibuye Books/University of Massachusetts Press, 1998); Ahmed Kathrada, *Ahmed Kathrada: Memoirs* (Cape Town, Zebra Press, 2004); Ismail Meer, *A Fortunate Man* (Cape Town, Zebra Press, 2002); Martin Meredith, *Fischer's Choice: A Life of Bram Fischer* (Johannesburg and Cape Town, Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2002); Thembeke Mufamadi, *Raymond Mhlaba's Personal Memoirs: Reminiscing from Rwanda and Uganda* (Pretoria and Robben Island, Human Sciences Research Council and Robben Island Museum, 2001); Ray Alexander Simons, *All My Life and All My Strength* (Johannesburg,: STE Publishers 2004); Joe Slovo, *Slovo: The Unfinished Autobiography* (Randburg, Ravan Press, 1995); Ben Turok, *Nothing But the Truth: Behind the ANC's Struggle Politics*, (Johannesburg and Cape Town, Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2003). With the exception of the biography of Moses Kotane by Brian Bunting all books were first published in 1995 or afterward. The Bunting book cited here was published in South Africa for the first time in 1998 with a brief introduction by Brian Bunting; it appeared earlier in two editions published by Inkululeko Publications in London, the publishing arm of the SACP.
4. Bernstein, 124.
5. Bunting, 178.
6. Simons, 196.
7. W.H. Andrews and Michael Harmel voted against the motion to dissolve.
8. Bernstein, 122.
9. Bernstein, 127.
10. Slovo, 1995: 84.
11. Bunting, 197.
12. According to Bunting, 197-98, "In Cape Town they met sometimes in houses, sometimes on the slopes of Table Mountain or in the thickets of the Cape Flats." Raymond Mhlaba, district secretary of the CPSA in Port Elizabeth at the time of

- the party's dissolution, has recalled his participation in the reconstitution of the party in his memoirs. Mufamadi, 93.
13. Bernstein, 127-128, notes that Harry Snitcher, Jack Simons, and Ike Horvitch in Cape Town and Issy Wolfson, Danie Du Plessis, and Edwin Mofutsanyana from the Johannesburg district declined to join a new underground party. At the request of Kotane, Brian Bunting met with Jack and Ray Simons. Ray Simons, 276, described the meeting as follows: "Brian Bunting came to ask Jack and I whether we would rejoin the Party. Jack walked out of the meeting, but Brian persisted: 'What about you?', he asked, and I answered, 'I have always been a Communist and I'll always remain a Communist'." According to Bernstein, 128, Jack Simons (who joined the SACP only later when he was in exile in Zambia): "considered that all our political purposes could be fully achieved through the legal national and trade union movements, without the need for an independent Party."
  14. Bernstein, 129.
  15. "Every group would propose one of its own members as a putative delegate, and then add the names of others it *guessed* might be members. The committee would trim the list of nominations to eliminate wrong guesses, and provide a final list, balanced to reflect the racial, gender and geographic character of the membership. Not quite Westminster style democracy, but as close as we dared to go." Bernstein, 130.
  16. The account of the founding conference of the SACP is drawn from Bernstein, 130-31. The procedure for the selection of the Central Committee is drawn from Slovo, 1995: 108, and is an amplification of the procedure described by Bernstein, 131.
  17. Bram Fischer's biographer states that the secretariat met "several times each week". Meredith, 42.
  18. Turok, 91-92, offers a glimpse into his work with Marxist study groups. Kathrada, 108, more tersely states in his memoirs that his small party unit of three or four persons "engaged in political education among ourselves and looked for potential recruits."
  19. Slovo, 1995: 84, states: "between 1952 and 1962 the Party had six underground conferences". It seems clear that the date 1952 refers to the inaugural SACP conference that all other sources cite as having taken place sometime in 1953. Slovo is most likely citing 1952 as the year in which the bulk of the preparatory work for the inaugural conference took place.
  20. Slovo, 1995: 108.
  21. Slovo, 1995: 108.
  22. Turok, 45, writes in his autobiography: "the party was very small, possibly numbering less than a hundred members throughout the country". Bram Fischer's biographer states a similar figure: "fewer than 100 members were at the core of Communist Party activity, most of them living in the Transvaal." Meredith, 42.
  23. Bernstein, 149. Bernstein, 141-56, describes at length his role in drafting both the call for the Congress of the People and the Freedom Charter in his memoirs.
  24. In his memoirs Bernstein, 140, describes how *Fighting Talk* (FT), originating as the publication of the Springbok Legion during World War II, was transformed into an independent radical journal, primarily edited by Ruth First, oriented toward the

Congress Alliance. "After the cutting of the umbilical cord to the Legion, people took *Fighting Talk* to be a limb of the COD - which it was not. It was wholly independent, Congress aligned, but answerable only to its own Board." He wrote further, 141, that "Gradually we established *FT*, not as the Congress voice but as the thinking Congressite's guide to the political scene." Also independent, and also aligned with the Congress Alliance, was the theoretical journal, *Liberation*, in which communists and non-communist nationalists and radicals published analyses and viewpoints. Michael Harmel was a major figure in the operation of *Liberation*.

25. Bernstein, 180.
26. Bernstein, 181.
27. Bernstein, 132-33.
28. Bernstein, 133.
29. Bernstein, 133.
30. The first issue of *The African Communist*, appeared in October 1959, under the editorship of Michael Harmel, informing its readers that it was a quarterly publication ".started by a group of Marxist Leninists in Africa". Party members in the Johannesburg area prepared the typewritten master on a wax stencil and printed around one thousand copies that were distributed. Immediately it was evident that demand exceeded supply, both inside of South Africa and elsewhere on the continent and beyond. Through a group of South Africa student supporters of the party in London, an appeal for assistance was made to the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). The British party made "a grand fraternal gesture - arrangements for the printing and dispatch of future issues from Britain under the control of the South African group". Editorial control remained the responsibility of the SACP in South Africa, but a CPGB member agreed to act as nominal publisher to comply with British law. Subsequently, the operation outgrew the resources available in London. The ruling communist party of the German Democratic Republic undertook publishing responsibilities with copies being sent in bulk to London for distribution. The arrangements continued until the collapse of the German Democratic Republic in the early 1990s. See Bernstein, 133-34, from which this account of the start of *The African Communist* and its subsequent development is drawn. The publication of the first three issues of *The African Communist* is also discussed in Bunting, 258-60.
31. According to Bunting, 262, "the Party centre decided in consultation with the S.A. Indian Congress that Dr. Dadoo should be sent overseas to assist with the organization of solidarity work and consolidate the external apparatus of the Party."
32. The above account of the operation of the *ad hoc* SACP leadership core during the 1960 state of emergency is drawn from two sources: Bunting, 260-62, and Turok, 103-18. The Bunting account, written in the 1970's, is brief and focused upon the achievements of the core. It does not mention Turok. The Turok account, written in 2002-2003, long after the deaths of Kotane and Harmel in the 1970s, is the lone account written by a participant. Its focus is more upon how the core operated and includes Turok's very personal assessments of Kotane and Harmel, as well as assessments of Mhlaba and Fischer whom he also worked with during this period.

33. Turok, 116.
34. Turok, 116-117.
35. Turok, 117. Bunting, 258, Kotane's biographer, makes no mention in his account of the meeting at which it was decided to 'emerge' the party. But he does elaborate the nature of Kotane's opposition to 'emergence', emphasizing that Kotane ultimately accepted that it should not be done "until the Party's full weight could be thrown behind a unanimous decision".
36. See, for example, Bernstein, 218-19.
37. Bernstein, 217.
38. Bernstein, 219.
39. Turok, 119.
40. Bunting, 263.
41. Slovo, 1976: 191.
42. Slovo, 1976: 191.
43. Slovo, 1976:192.
44. The quotations are drawn from the Constitution of the South African Communist Party, as amended at the 11<sup>th</sup> SACP Congress, July 24-28, 2002, as cited on the website of the South African Communist Party:  
[http://www.sacp.org.za/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=129&Itemid=67](http://www.sacp.org.za/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=129&Itemid=67)

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