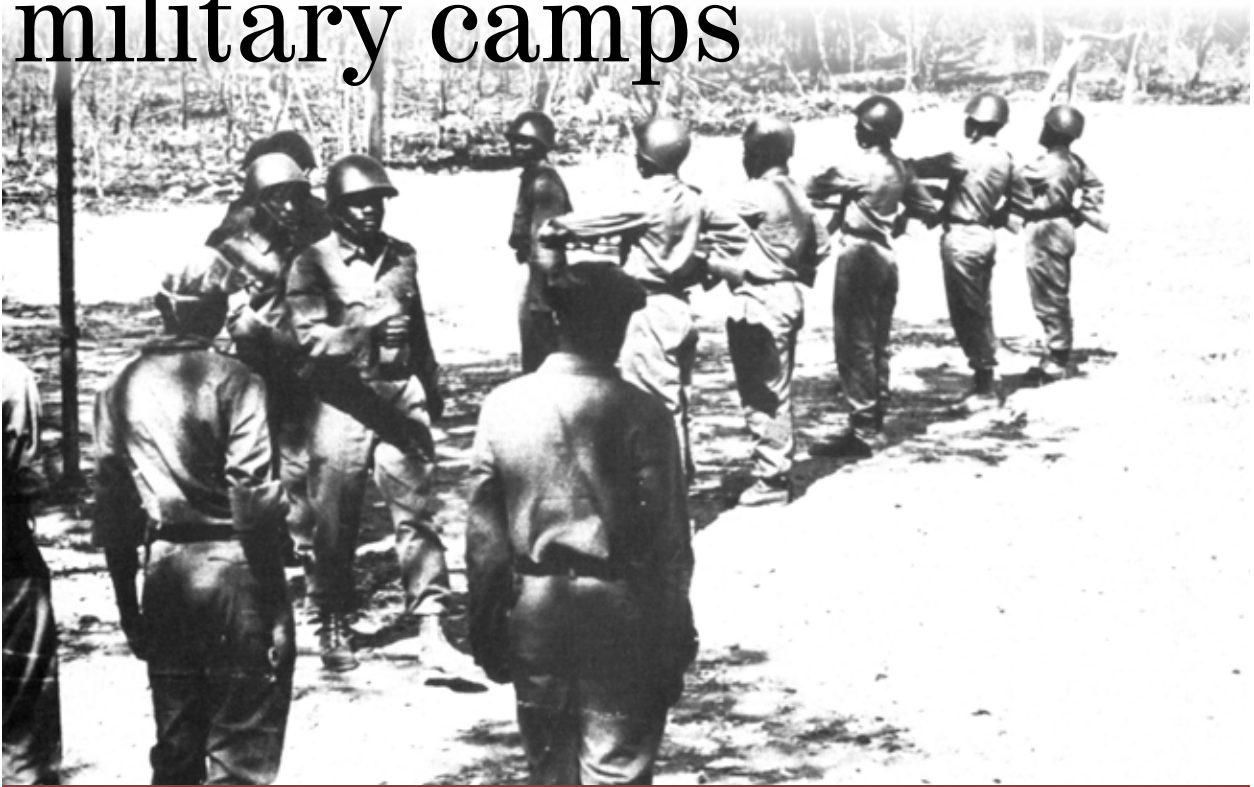


Oliver Tambo and the challenges of the ANC's military camps



Oliver Tambo was able to maintain the admiration and respect required of a leader whose central task was to sustain the unity of purpose of the liberation movement and to pursue the struggle, relentlessly, both at home and internationally.

By Gregory Houston

There is a perception among many in the liberation movement that the late President-General of the African National Congress (ANC), Oliver Reginald 'OR' Tambo, has not been given sufficient recognition for the role he played in the liberation struggle. They credit Tambo above all else with the role he played in holding the movement together under

the extremely difficult conditions of 30 years of exile. In large part, many people see his leadership style as being the main factor behind the relative success he had in maintaining cohesion within the movement.

One of the most important ways to examine the leadership style of an individual is to look at the relationship with the rank-and-file members of the

movement. It is for this reason that I chose to explore Tambo's relationship with the ordinary members of the ANC's military wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) in the military camps abroad. The focus is on three distinct situations or episodes: the MK camp at Kongwa in Tanzania; the 'Hani Memorandum'; and the 1983/84 mutinies in the MK camps in Angola.

Tanzania

The starting point is the period immediately before the turn to armed struggle in the early 1960s. Oliver Tambo, then Deputy President of the African National Congress, was sent out of the country in the wake of the Sharpeville massacre in March 1960 to establish contacts for the ANC abroad and to promote international support for the ANC's cause. However, the banning of the liberation movements in April of that year, the wave of repression that followed, the life sentences meted out to several prominent leaders of the ANC, and the wave of arrests after the Rivonia trial decimated the leadership of the movement inside the country. In 1965, a decision was taken to transfer leadership of the movement to Oliver Tambo and others in exile. Thus, by the middle of the 1960s the tasks of the exiled leadership had been dramatically expanded to include, among other things, providing training to young recruits of the ANC's military wing, and waging the liberation struggle.

During the early 1960s, large numbers of young men and a smaller number of women were forced into exile. Once they took this decision, they had to be taken to the ANC offices in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, where they were met by the ANC leadership in exile. It is this first meeting with the leadership that provides one significant insight into OR's style of leadership. Chris Hani recalls such an episode in the following terms:

We were received by him. We were addressed by him. We were inspired by him. Sort of quite convincing style of OR. He comes to see us whenever he had time and to discuss with us, and to listen to us. To listen to our own experiences; what we thought were insignificant experiences. We never thought they were important. But Tambo would come and listen to those experiences¹.

New recruits arriving in Dar es Salaam at the time were given the opportunity to join the military wing or opt for further education. Most chose to join MK. Hundreds of cadres were sent from Dar es Salaam to Morocco, Egypt, the Soviet Union, China and

Czechoslovakia. Tambo would address each group that was on its way for training. On their return OR would once again meet with them. Chris recalls that:

For Tambo, our well-being was always important. Not well-being in terms of getting our food every day. But Tambo wanted us to feel an important part of the organisation. We were ordinary cadres. We were not important names. But Tambo paid this attention to us regularly. Visiting us, asking us about our experiences in the Soviet Union, about our courses, and also briefing us on what was happening during our absence in the country: the Rivonia arrests, the conviction of our leaders, the need for us to go back to

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help rebuild the organisation².

Simon Senna recalls that when his group returned from training in the Soviet Union, Tambo cried when he met them. ‘Seeing the type of army of the future South Africa which he was part of building, he cried. He was so happy and excited and pleased³.

In 1965, the ANC established its main military camp in Kongwa, Tanzania. By the end of the year the number of cadres based at the camp had grown to 500. There were a number of difficulties cadres faced with the establishment of the camp: shortages of food, clothes, medicines, doctors, and proper accommodation. The ANC had very limited resources, and very little support was forthcoming from other countries. Kongwa was a dry, hot and dusty place plagued with disease. It was near a small village, and the camp had to be prepared for the arrival of the large number of cadres who had been training at Odessa⁴. The only building was an

abandoned dilapidated railway station. The MK group that was charged with developing the camp started from scratch, collecting supplies, organising services, and sleeping in tents for a few years. They dug trenches and chopped down trees, and eventually developed a huge vegetable garden after laying water pipes to obtain water from a source about 10 kilometres from the camp⁵.

Initially, morale was high in the camp, and the highly trained and well equipped cadres were eager to take on the apartheid security forces. However, some cadres who lived at the camp equated life at Kongwa to imprisonment. They draw attention to the difficulties the camp leadership had in obtaining food for the cadres, and the fact that the only clothes they had were combat clothes. There were very few women in the camp, as well as in the nearby village. Most of the women they came into contact with were prostitutes⁶.

The most serious problem the ANC faced in the camps at the time, however, was that ‘people wanted to go home, and they just did not want to sit in Kongwa’. There was also a perception that the leadership was not doing enough to find a way home for the cadres – that they were busy ‘living it up’ in Dar es Salaam⁷. At one point, after their hopes had been dashed several times, a group of cadres from Natal stole a military truck from the camp and drove to the ANC headquarters in Morogoro to discuss their grievances with the leadership. The group was arrested by Tanzanian soldiers, and some ANC leaders wanted them to be punished as deserters. But OR was among those who opposed sanctioning them in any way. He was one of the leaders who regularly visited the camps, and he understood the frustrations they were facing because he listened to them.

At the outset of the Wankie Campaign, OR demonstrated another key characteristic of his style of leadership: to undergo some of the experiences of the rank and file members of the movement. He joined the MK cadres who had been selected for the mission just prior to their departure, and slept with them in the

bush near the crossing point. According to Chris Hani:

We spent a few days on the banks of the Zambezi River, about two kilometres from the river and Tambo stayed with us, slept there with us, in the open, not even in tents. We were just sleeping in the bush. And this convinced us again of the type of leader that Tambo was. A practical leader, an exemplary leader, and one who was prepared to share the hardness of this very difficult and demanding task with his soldiers⁸.

Justice Mpanza recalls that they used a rope to get to the bank of the Zambezi River. He adds that: 'the person who gave us a lot of encouragement was Tambo. Tambo was the first person to cross using the rope, and he was in front of Modise. He went down the terrain and waited for us below – to lead us to our boat.' Tambo and Modise remained on the Zambian side of the river until all the cadres had crossed safely⁹.

The Hani Memorandum

However, it was in the wake of the Wankie and Sipolilo campaigns that the leadership was to face one of its most serious threats. This arose as a consequence of the so-called 'Hani Memorandum', in which seven MK cadres criticised the leadership. Among the key charges was that the ANC leadership had become so comfortable in exile that it was not doing anything to conduct the struggle. The cadres had also complained that the ANC and MK leadership was not doing enough to escalate the struggle at home, which appeared to be a personal attack on Tambo. A Military Tribunal suspended the seven from the ANC on the 25th of March 1969. The majority of members of the tribunal which considered punishment of the seven signatories were in favour of the death penalty, but it was Mzwai Piliso, and subsequently OR, who opposed this and instead recommended their expulsion. They were subsequently given amnesty and re-instated at the insistence of OR and other leaders.

The Hani Memorandum and the events immediately following created a rift between Joe Modise, MK commander-in-chief, and Chris Hani. Luli Callinicos notes that by 1972 the

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tensions between supporters of the two had still not been resolved. Hani's supporters were mainly from the Cape, and appeared to be unwilling to accept the authority of Modise¹⁰.

On the other hand, the so-called 'Transvaal group', supporters of Joe Modise, were angry that Hani and others had been re-instated and that Chris had been promoted to the political commissariat. They saw the latter arising from pressure put on the leadership by cadres from the Cape, and in a meeting with Tambo and the Revolutionary Council in mid-1969 accused Tambo of also practising tribalism by promoting Chris. One commentator states that: 'During this meeting, Tambo demonstrated his talent as a listener and his ability to take criticism aimed at himself'¹¹.

Although Chris Hani and other cadres who had been promoted volunteered to step down from their position, there were a number of serious acts of ill-discipline carried out by MK cadres based in Lusaka at the time. In July 1969, the Zambian government insisted that the ANC remove its MK cadres to Tanzania, which was soon

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changed to confining them to a bush camp to the east of Lusaka¹². MK cadre Isaac Makopo recalls that:

For a start then, everybody was ordered out of town and back to the Bush, a few miles out of Lusaka, on your way to Malawi. Then OR Tambo says: "I'm going to operate from here, going to be with the people in the camp, in the tents, in the Bush." The area was actually a game reserve. He would go to Lusaka only when he needed to – for example, on some diplomatic mission to meet some government officials¹³.

In this respect, Tambo felt that he had to experience camp life to better appreciate and understand the issues the cadres were facing. This was something he was to do again and again.

The 1983/84 Mutinies in Angola

Another serious challenge to the ANC as a whole emanating from the military camps occurred in 1983 and 1984 in Angola. The influx of thousands of recruits during and immediately after the Soweto uprising also saw an alarming infiltration of apartheid state agents. After joining MK, they were distributed to ANC camps that were established in Angola from late 1976 onwards. Such agents were suspected of poisoning 500 cadres at the Novo Catengue camp in Angola in September 1977. Two years later, in 1979, the South African Air Force attacked the camp, and it was suspected that state agents in the camp had provided the enemy with information about its location¹⁴. The ANC's Security Department eventually uncovered about 20 agents, some holding senior positions in various departments of the ANC and entrusted with sensitive information. Agents in the military camps were instructed to stir up discontent by drawing attention to the harsh elements of life in the camps and the failure of the ANC to deploy many of its trained cadres to infiltrate South Africa¹⁵.

The first mutiny occurred in 1983, when a group of cadres demanded to be sent back home to engage with the enemy. When permission to do so was not forthcoming, they refused to be disarmed and fired shots into the air. The mutiny was resolved peacefully. However, this was followed

by a growing number of incidents of indiscipline, such as pilfering or sabotaging of supplies, smoking dagga, rape and murder in the camps and neighbouring villages¹⁶.

Meanwhile, the ANC had agreed to a request by the Angolan authorities to provide assistance in its war with the UNITA rebels. Cadres from MK were deployed, and participated in mine-defusing, laying ambushes and patrolling duties. Subsequently, MK was called upon to participate in attacks on the UNITA stronghold¹⁷. Groups of MK cadres were subsequently dispersed among FAPLA (armed wing of MPLA) units in the area. The Angolans subsequently made a request for more MK cadres to be deployed against UNITA, and an additional 104 cadres were sent to the area. Discipline soon broke down in the camp set up by these cadres, and at the camp of Mustafa where other MK cadres were based. This led to the recall of about 60 cadres, who were sent to Viana camp in Luanda. This group was followed by another 40 who returned to Viana without permission. Both groups refused to surrender their arms when they arrived at the camp, as was customary, and order rapidly declined in the camp¹⁸.

In February 1984, a committee was sent to Viana by MK's Military Headquarters to resolve the problems. Chris Hani was a member of this committee, and he went into the camp unarmed to speak to the mutineers. He persuaded them to lay down their arms and to attend a meeting to discuss their problems¹⁹. The cadres elected a 'Committee of Ten' to hold discussions with the military committee. However, on the day scheduled for a meeting between the two committees a FAPLA unit entered the camp with the intention of disarming the MK cadres. A confrontation followed, and three people were killed. The members of the Committee of Ten and a number of other cadres were arrested²⁰.

Another mutiny broke out at Pango camp, where the mutineers used machine guns and heavy weapons. The camp commanders and several other cadres were killed²¹. An MK unit led by Timothy Mokoena attacked the camp and took it over. Order was restored,

and the mutineers were arrested and sent to Camp 32²². Chris Hani and Gertrude Shope were subsequently dispatched by OR to Camp 32 where some of the cadres who had been arrested for mutiny were incarcerated. They found conditions in the camp to be terrible, and immediately demanded that changes be instituted²³.

In part, while very little blame was placed directly on Tambo for these events, his cautious way of dealing with matters was regarded by some as part of the problem. One cadre characterised OR's decision-making process as follows: 'It doesn't matter how contentious a question is, we are not going to take a decision by vote.

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We must reach a consensus. That became our tradition. That was the character of our movement under the leadership of that man, uNdima²⁴. But it was Tambo who took the initiative and led the process to institute changes that would make life easier for MK cadres in many respects.

Conclusion

Liberation movements in exile experience a host of problems, which,

if not managed properly, have the potential to result in implosion. This places a number of demands on the leadership of the organisation, particularly in moments where there is dissatisfaction with the leadership itself among the rank-and-file members of the organisation. From the outset, the ANC in exile was inadequately prepared for the task of accommodating and providing training to the influx of guerrillas in the early 1960s. Nor were the conditions suitable for it to wage a guerrilla war, based as it was thousands of kilometres from the South African border. However, both in his early contacts with new recruits, and with trained guerrillas in the camps thereafter, Oliver Tambo was able to maintain the admiration and respect required of a leader whose central task was to sustain the unity of purpose of the liberation movement and to pursue the struggle, relentlessly, both at home and internationally. ■

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