

Debating the Church Street Bombing

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11/15/12
HIST3377

The Church Street bombing was one of the more memorable attacks of many against the apartheid state that was carried out by UmKhonto we Sizwe (MK), the armed wing of the African National Congress. Both MK members involved in the Church Street bombing applied for amnesty and testified in front of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. There was a lot of opposition to the MK members' amnesty applications, which is one of the many reasons why it is considered one of the ANC's more memorable attacks against the white minority government. The Church Street bombing was a significant event with a large amount of opposition because the target selection was believed to contradict ANC policy, the bombing was seen to be racially motivated, and the operation was seen to have lacked an acceptable political objective. Regardless, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission agreed to grant amnesty to both Aboobaker Ismail and Johannes Mnisi because after they found that these allegations lacked evidence to support them.

The bombing took place on May 20th, 1983 on Church Street West, Pretoria. The African National Congress, which was committed to overthrowing the white minority government, planned the attack. The attack was carried out by UMkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the armed wing of the ANC. The explosion occurred outside of the Nedbank Square building on Church Street at 4:30 p.m., the height of rush hour, when most people would be leaving the building from work for the day. The bomb was placed in a stolen vehicle outside of the building that housed the South African Air Force (SAAF) Headquarters. Aboobaker Ismail and Johannes Mnisi, both part of the Special Operations Unit, undertook this attack and had MK cadres Freddie Shongwe and Ezekial Maseko to physically carry out the operation. Both

Shongwe and Maseko sacrificed their lives for this operation and were killed in the process of the bombing. The intent was to target said building, and they wanted it to be a highly visible attack that could not be ignored or covered up by the government. The armed wing on the ANC, UMkhonto we Sizwe, wanted to send a clear message that they were fighting back. The consequences of the bombing were the deaths of 19 people, of which 17 were men and 2 were women. Of the 17 men killed in this bombing, 8 of the men were black and 9 were white. 197 people were also injured in the attack. The impression that people had gotten was that most of the victims were civilians. However, some were air force personnel, and a lot of the victims killed happened to be black. Although killing civilians was not the intent of the ANC, they agreed that the deaths of some civilians was worth it in the grand scheme of things because they felt that the attack needed to happen in order to send a message.

The MK carried out all military strategies and attacks planned and discussed with the ANC. The purpose of the MK was not to cause violence unless necessary. Rather, the purpose of the MK was to fight against the apartheid state and their wrongdoings. In a pamphlet that was issued by UmKhonto we Sizwe in December of 1961, they stated that they “hope that we will bring the Government and its supporters to their senses before it is too late, so that both Government and its policies can be changed before matters reach the desperate stage of Civil War” (Legassick, 2002). This quote from the pamphlet proves the point that they only resorted to violence because they felt that they had no other option and were not being heard. UmKhonto we Sizwe’s main purpose was to fight the apartheid state, and they would do whatever they had to in order to do so. The MK was not free to carry out any attacks desired. Each operation had to be discussed with and approved by the

ANC. The intentions of the operations carried out by the MK always had the political motivation upheld by the ANC. As Janet Cherry put it, the MK was controlled with a “sophisticated and relatively democratic collective political leadership” (Cherry, 2011).

The Church Street bombing was undertaken by Aboobaker Ismail, former commander of UMKhonto we Sizwe’s unit for Special Operations, and Johannes Mnisi. In 1974, while still a student, Aboobaker Ismail was ruthlessly beaten during his detention after being detained by the school’s security police because of his involvement in the Human Rights Committee on campus. This occurrence caused Ismail to want to be more politically active and therefore he underwent military training at the German Democratic Republic, which the ANC office in London had helped set up for him. He became a military instructor at Funda Camp near Luanda, where he was involved in the specialized training of certain cadres who would later form the newly established Special Operations Unit in 1979. Once established, Ismail joined the Special Operations command, and later was appointed commander of Special Operations until 1987. As commander of the Special Operations Unit, Aboobaker Ismail was personally involved in the planning of operations with specific targets, as well as many other aspects. At this time he was also the commander of the Dolphin Unit, which was an internal unit that operated strictly within the country and carried out operations under the orders of the ANC and MK. Johannes Mnisi joined the African National Congress in Mozambique during 1979, around the same time that Aboobaker Ismail had become part of the Special Operations command. Similar to Ismail, he also received military training in Angola and became a member of Special Operations during 1980.

Aboobaker Ismail and Johannes Mnisi worked together on many aspects of the planning process for the Church Street operation. They worked together in the initial testing of the detonating device used for the bomb that was used in the stolen vehicle on the day of the attack. Mnisi convinced Ismail to have Freddie Shongwe and Ezekial Maseko, both MK cadres, to carry out the attack since they knew Pretoria well. Together, Ismail and Mnisi trained Freddie Shongwe with knowledge of how to utilize the detonating device for the bomb being used in the attack.

Both Aboobaker Ismail and Johannes Mnisi applied for amnesty and testified in front of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission – a court-like selected body established to help cope with the human rights violations that occurred during the period of apartheid – in May of 1998. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission has a selected body of people on what is known as the Amnesty Committee. This Committee makes the ultimate decision of whether or not to grant applicants amnesty. The decision of whether or not to grant amnesty to applicants is based on whether their applications are in agreement with the requirements of the Act. They both justified their actions by stating that they had a political motivation in mind for carrying out the operation, which was to overthrow the white minority government for their wrongdoings and the bombing was necessary to make it clear that they were taking a stand since all other attacks were ignored and covered up by the government. A highly visible attack was necessary in order for them to get the attention of the government and civilians in Pretoria. They also stated that they undertook the actions as part of a bigger political organization, the ANC, and all actions carried out by them came from demands from a higher level within the organization. They did not want to kill innocent civilians, but believed that the only way to stand up for what they believed

was right was to cause a commotion big enough to get them the attention that they desired to share their views. In Aboobaker's application for amnesty, he refers to the Church Street bombing as a "just cause" and that although civilians were killed he considered it a "regrettable but necessary thing that happened" (Truth and Reconciliation Commission Amnesty Hearing, 1998). He also stated that this whole struggle was between the ANC and the apartheid state, and believed that there would not have to be operations such as the Church Street bombing if there not been an apartheid state in the first place. When asked to prove that there was a political objective for this operation, Aboobaker Ismail explained that although civilians were killed in the process, that the objective was political because the objective was to target the South African Air Force Headquarters, which meant targeting military personnel. In response to their reasoning for killing civilians, he stated that the intention was not to target civilians, but that the policies created by the ANC "were, and our President has stated, that we cannot and I am paraphrasing here, for the sake of saving a few lives be prevented from striking at apartheid, at state power" (Truth and Reconciliation Commission Amnesty Hearing, 1998).

In Johannes Mnisi's testimony, he openly admits of his involvement in the Church Street bombing, explaining that he tried to get two MK cadres to carry out the operation and also tested the detonating device that was to be used in Pretoria in the attack. Mnisi justified his involvement by explaining that it his job as a member of Special Operations to take orders from people. In his testimony in front of the TRC, Mnisi explained that as an MK and Special Operations member, he had to take orders from two people, and that each time there is an operation to be carried out he would be called upon to help plan out and organize said operation. Mnisi explained that it was "how we operated, that's the procedure

we followed, you can't just do your own way" (Truth and Reconciliation Commission Amnesty Hearing, 1998).

Many people opposed the granting of amnesty to both MK members involved. There were many arguments that critics had for why both Aboobaker Ismail and Johannes Mnisi should not have been granted amnesty. Critics opposing the TRC's decision argued that both Mnisi and Ismail did not give full disclosure in their applications of all relevant facts having to do with the operation and that the target selection, being military personnel, was against the policy of the ANC. Critics also argued that the purpose of the bombing was racially motivated. Critics felt that the bombing was first and foremost an act of terrorism, and believed the political objective that both Mnisi and Ismail claimed to have had for carrying out the attack was disproportionate to the fact that it was a violent act of terror. However, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission disagreed with critics and their arguments against both Mnisi and Ismail. After careful examination and evaluation of both Ismail and Mnisi's applications and testimonies, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission agreed to grant both Aboobaker Ismail and Johannes Mnisi amnesty for their involvement in the Church Street bombing operation. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission based their decisions off of Section 20 of the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, which states that "the act, omission or offence in respect of which amnesty is sought must be an act associated with a political objective" and also included that "the applicant must make a full disclosure of all relevant facts regarding such act, omission or offence" (Truth and Reconciliation Amnesty Committee, 2000). The TRC believed that Mnisi and Ismail fully disclosed all relevant facts regarding the operation because their applications were extremely detailed, and the TRC found that when something was unclear, both Mnisi and

Ismail willingly and honestly answered their questions in order to shed light on ambiguous wording within their applications. The TRC also found that the target selection for the Church Street bombing was overwhelmingly consistent with the ANC policy. It had been clearly stated prior to the actual carrying out of the operation that the purpose of the attack was for it to be aimed at military personnel within the South African Air Force Headquarters. It had always been part of MK's policy to target military personnel, and Oliver Tambo, the president of the ANC, gave his approval to proceed with the attack. If the target selection were divergent from ANC policy, the president of the ANC would have never given his approval to execute the attack. The ANC also acknowledged that they were responsible for the attack soon after the bombing occurred, which they would not have done if it was against their policy to target military personnel within SAAF Headquarters.

The TRC seemed to have felt strongly that the bombing did not appear to be racially motivated at all. Their reasoning for why they felt the bombing was not racially motivated was because the civilians that were victims of the bombing were both black and white. For instance, it was reported that eight black men and nine white men had died in the Church Street bombing. The bombing also occurred on Church Street in Pretoria, which was a public street known for having a lot of traffic all throughout the day, especially during rush hour, when the attack was carried out. Therefore, the TRC came to the consensus that there was no way that the operation could be considered racially motivated, especially since the possibility of civilians being killed was discussed prior to the attack, showing that the MK members were aware that civilians of both races had the potential to be harmed.

Despite many arguments for opposition of granting Aboobaker Ismail and Johannes Mnisi amnesty for their involvement in the Church Street bombing, the Truth and

Reconciliation Commission ultimately decided to grant them amnesty. The arguments made by people who felt opposed to amnesty being granted were not strong enough in the eyes of the TRC. The TRC felt this way because each argument that was used by people who opposed amnesty was easily arguable by the TRC with evidence against said arguments. Although many people felt that the applicants lacked full disclosure, had selected a target against ANC policy, and had racially motivated intentions for the bombing, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission found evidence that aided them in making the final decision to disagree with critics and grant both Mnisi and Ismail amnesty for their involvement.

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