

“Comrade Mzwai”

This paper is devoted to the Mzwandile Piliso, a prominent (although controversial) member of the ANC leadership in exile. It is based on the ANC and Soviet archive documents, discussions with Piliso’s South African and Soviet comrades-in-arms and, especially, on the author’s memory of meetings with “Comrade Mzwai” during the period of 25 years.

Mzwandile Piliso... His name is known from Cape Horn to Cairo. For Africans he has become a symbol of the fighter for freedom of the Black Continent”¹, wrote a Soviet journalist in an article devoted to the member of the National Executive Committee of the African National Congress. His lack of knowledge in geography is obvious, and his knowledge of African politics was hardly adequate. To say that Piliso’s name was known everywhere and that he “has become a symbol” was a definite exaggeration, but he became really well known among those in Africa and beyond who were involved in support of the liberation movement in South Africa. Indeed, by that time Mzwandile Piliso has become a face of the ANC on the international arena.

The journalist met “Comrade Mzwai”, how Piliso was often called, in Alma-Ata (now Almaty), during an international conference to commemorate the centenary of Lenin's birth. This was just one of the conferences Piliso attended at that period on behalf of the ANC. By the way this presentation at the conference was noted by the reactionary forces even in a far away Australia. The so called The Australian League of Rights in its magazine drew attention to a paragraph in Piliso’s speech: “With Lenin's ideas as a guide, the oppressed exploited people of South Africa are fighting for their liberation. Our main task is to abolish the fascist tyranny and establish a revolutionary democracy... Without the support we receive from the Socialist countries, particularly the Soviet Union...our struggle would have been inconceivable. The world national liberation movement will achieve complete victory only on the road illuminated by Lenin's ideas.”²

It all began ten years earlier. A week after Shaperville massacres Oliver Tambo, then ANC Deputy President, illegally left South Africa and came to the UK. Reporting to the first National

¹ *Ogonyok*, Moscow, 18 April 1970, p.25.

² Australian League of Rights. *On Target*. Vol. 5, no 47, 9 December 1969.

Conference of the ANC after its unbanning, in Durban in July 1991, Oliver Tambo said that the ANC leadership took a decision to send him abroad even earlier, in 1959 “to rally international support for the isolation of the apartheid state” and also “to create a reliable rear base for our struggle.”³ Tambo recalled the aspirations and hardships of the first period of his exile: “Those were hopeful and exciting days. They were also particularly frugal ones when we often did not know where the next meal was coming from.”⁴

Among South Africans living there he met Mzwandile Piliso, who as Tambo, came from Transkei in the Eastern Cape. Piliso graduated as a pharmacist in Edinburgh was working in Britain to earn enough money to open his own pharmacy in his native area. However Oliver Tambo briefed him in the developments at home and persuaded to join the external mission of the ANC as a full-timer.⁵

Piliso’s “conversion” from a full-time pharmacist to a full-time activist of the liberation movement took very short time. When in June 1960 ANC became a co-founder of the South African United Front, Piliso was in the midst of this process. The SAUF consisted of the ANC, the Panaficanist Congress (PAC), the South African Indian Congress (SAIC), and the South West African National Union (SWANU) and was formed with the active encouragement of Kwame Nkrumah and some other African leaders.

At the meeting, held in Addis Ababa on 19 June 1960, it was decided to open offices for the Front in Accra, Cairo and London.⁶ The Front spelt out its aims as:

- (i) The overthrow of white domination and destruction of the myth of white supremacy.
- (ii) The substitution of a democratic state based on universal adult suffrage.
- (iii) To canvass independent African states and other states for individual and collective action against South Africa.
- (iv) Raise funds and unconditional release of all political prisoners.⁷

The next meeting (although attended by just seven persons, it was called “conference”) took

³ ANC National Conference July 1991, Report. Johannesburg. (s.a.e.l.), p.2.

⁴ Ibid. p.3.

⁵ This part of Piliso’s story is based on the author’s conversation with him over 40 years ago.

⁶ Mayibuye Centre Historical Papers, ANC London Collection, Minutes of the South Africa United Front Conference held in London from August 25th to September 4th 1961, p.11.

⁷ Mayibuye Centre Historical Papers, ANC London Collection, Dr Y. Dadoo (1960-1972) Papers, Minutes of a meeting held 19 June 1960.

place in London on 30 June 1960 and Piliso together with Tambo represented there the ANC.⁸ Soon Piliso left for Cairo where initially he manned the SAUF office together with a PAC representative⁹.

“Much was achieved in the early stage of the United Front’s existence,” wrote Yusuf Dadoo, who represented the SAIC in the Front. “We succeeded in winning wide international support for our cause ... largely through our efforts, South Africa had to leave the Commonwealth.” According to Dadoo, though, “behind the back of the United Front the PAC representatives worked for privileged contacts with governments and public organisations abroad.”¹⁰ Sharp contradictions between the ANC and PAC around the March 1961 Pietermaritzburg conference and especially the May 1961 strike destroyed the basis for unity in South Africa and by the end of 1961 the Front was practically defunct. Its dissolution was officially announced on 13 March 1962 in London.¹¹ So, the ANC established its own office in Cairo with Piliso as its head.

The role of Nasser’s Egypt in support of the liberation struggle cannot be exaggerated. At that stage, on a threshold of the 1960s, especially before the independence of Tanganyika, Cairo and Accra were two rallying points for freedom fighters, even if in each of them they encountered some problems. In Ghana, for example, the authorities imposed “control on the money at the disposal of the Front,” advanced earlier to the office from London, and required that a “government official be co-signatory.”¹² In Cairo the government also did its best to control the movements mostly through the African Association, but the Egyptian capital has one advantage: it hosted also the Afro-Asian Peoples’ Solidarity Secretariat (later – Organisation, AAPSO). Soon Piliso became the Secretariat’s member.

In particular, the Afro-Asian Solidarity Committees of both the USSR and China had their representatives at this body and Piliso immediately got in contact with them. As Piliso told me several years later, initially he had more cordial relations with the Chinese representative (Chinese revolution was very popular among the African liberation movements), but the relationship soured when the ANC and SACP failed to side with China in 1963 in the growing Sino-Soviet dispute. When he visited China on his way to Japan for the commemoration of

⁸ Mayibuye Centre Historical Papers, ANC London Collection, Dr Y. Dadoo (1960-1972), Minutes of a SAUF conference 30 June 1960.

⁹ The author arrived in Egypt in April 1960, but his mission then was far from the affairs of the South African liberation movement, and I met Piliso nine years later.

¹⁰ Spearhead. Dar es Salaam. April 1962, pp. 21-22.

¹¹ Ibid. p.21.

¹² Mayibuye Centre Historical Papers, ANC London Collection, Minutes of the South Africa United Front Conference, p.7.

Hiroshima victims on 6 August 1963, he was given a friendly reception. But on the way back, just a few weeks later, he was all but ignored.¹³

Piliso was involved in establishing contacts with other socialist countries as well. In 1961, still representing the South African United Front of South Africa, visited the German Democratic Republic and held talks with the Solidarity Committee, the German-African Society and trade unions. Then later that year a Solidarity Committee delegation from GDR met with Piliso again in Cairo. The contacts became regular when in 1964 the GDR Solidarity Committee opened a liaison office with AAPSO in Cairo.¹⁴

In the 1960s Piliso often visited the USSR; in particular I remember a picture of him and Daniel Chipenda, then a rising star of the MPLA and later the leader of the anti-Neto “*Revolta do Leste* (Eastern Revolt)” in 1973-1974 at the wreath laying ceremony in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, during the Soviet Afro-Asian Solidarity Conference.

It was Piliso who, judging by the archive materials, for the first time secured direct material assistance, as limited as it was, to the ANC from Moscow¹⁵. Among the CPSU documents, stored in the Russian State Archive of Modern History I found a transcript of the Central Committee Secretariat’s decision of March 1962 “on rendering assistance to the representatives of the African National Congress” who took part in the Afro-Asian Writers Conference in Cairo. It approved the Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee proposal to provide them with 100 Roubles in foreign currency (equivalent to \$111).¹⁶

The names of the “ANC representatives” did not feature in the transcript, but later my student Maxim Sivogorov, while doing research in Soviet-ANC relations in the 1960s in another archive, the State Archive of the Russian Federation, found the letter (“*zapiska*”) of the

¹³ Discussion with M. Piliso, Moscow, 20 July 1973.

¹⁴ Schleicher, H.-G./ Schleicher, I. Die DDR im suedlichen Afrika: Solidaritaet und Kalter Krieg (=Arbeiten aus dem Institut fuer Afrika-Kunde;97), Hamburg: Institut fuer Afrika-Kunde, 1997, p 243.

¹⁵ However, indirect financial assistance to the ANC was provided much earlier. Yusuf Dadoo had indicated to Soviet officials on one of his visits to Moscow in 1960 that the SACP was providing assistance to the ANC Emergency Committee during the state of emergency. No doubt, a substantial part of the allocation to the Party in 1960 and rapidly increasing allocations in the years to follow (US\$50 000 in 1961 and to US\$112 445 in 1962) were spent on the needs of the ANC and MK.(Russian State Archive of Modern History, collection 89, inventory 38, file 4/3-5, Head of the CPSU CC International Department B.N. Ponomarev’s report on application of the International Trade Union Fund for Assistance to Left Workers’ Organisations, 1 November 1961; Ibid. file 5/5-6, Head of the CPSU CC International Department B.N. Ponomarev’s report on application of the International Trade Union Fund for Assistance to Left Workers’ Organisations, 3 January 1963.

¹⁶ Russian State Archive of Modern History, Decisions of the Secretariat, N 17, item 37g, 10 March 1962.

Solidarity Committee to the CPSU Central Committee¹⁷. Dmitry Dolidze, then the Solidarity Committee secretary-general informed that Piliso had requested modest help of 50 pounds for the ANC delegation and named the delegates as Oliver Tambo, Nelson Mandella (sic) and Robert Resh (sic). He added that, “taking into account that these persons are known progressive people and due to their positive attitude to us deserve necessary support”, asked for permission to provide them with foreign currency “from the limited fund of the Committee”.¹⁸ Permission was granted in the form of the CC Secretariat’s decision ‘on rendering assistance to the representatives of the African National Congress’.¹⁹

Piliso maintained close relations with the rotating Soviet Solidarity Committee representatives in Cairo, especially with Dr Latyp Maksudov, who, by the way, was present at inauguration of the OAU in Addis Ababa in May 1963. Maksudov himself was an outstanding figure, so active that some people confused his background and responsibilities. Mozambican former Minister of Intelligence Jacinto Veloso, who stayed in Cairo after his defection from the Portuguese Air Force, writes in his memoirs: “Maksudov was certainly a representative of the USSR secret services for “work” with liberation movements”.²⁰ This is wrong, before his appointment to AAPSO Maksudov was head of the department in the Central Asian University in Tashkent, later he was Ambassador.

However other “secret services”, first and foremost of the racist regime did “work” with ANC. A Pretoria agent, Gerard Ludi, who “penetrated” Moscow in 1962 through the structures of the world peace movement, boasting in his book, wrote about meeting Piliso, although referred to him as “Paliso”.²¹ More successful were actions of Pretoria’s (or their Western allies’) spies in Egypt. Many years later an “Umkhonto we Sizwe” (MK) fighter, who came to Moscow for medical treatment after serving a long sentence on Robben Island, told me that during interrogation in South Africa he had been shown a picture of himself and his friends taken in Heliopolis, a Cairo suburb.

¹⁷ State Archive of the Russian Federation: collection 9540gs, inventory 2s, file 47, p. 20. D. Dolidze, Executive Secretary of the Soviet Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee to the CC of the CPSU, 28 February 1962. This example also shows that in attempts to mobilise support for the ANC Mandela and his colleagues used every opportunity, after all nobody of them was a writer.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Russian State Archive of Modern History. Decisions of the Secretariat, no. 17/37g, 10 March 1962.

²⁰ Veloso J. *Memórias em Voo Pasante*, Maputo, 2006, p. 51.

²¹ Ludi G. *Operation Q-018*, Nasionale Boekhandel, Cape Town, 1966, p.101. The quality of Ludi’s information is well seen from the following fact: he alleged that the Freedom Charter was “sent to the Moscow Africa Institute for approval” (Quoted in: Ellis S. and Sechaba T. *Comrades against Apartheid: the ANC and the South African Communist Party in exile*. J. Currey, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, Indianapolis, 1992, p.27) while the CPSU Central Committee’s decision to establish the Africa Institute was taken in June 1959, exactly four years after the Charter was adopted by the Congress of the People in Kliptown.

Piliso was involved not only in arranging training of MK fighters in Egypt, but in their transportation in Algeria as well. Piliso described to me how he had helped to organise their route: from Dar es Salaam to Nairobi they went by plane; from Nairobi to Juba by hired taxis on poor roads; from Juba to Khartoum by ship down the Nile; from Khartoum to Cairo by train; and from Cairo to Algiers again by plane.

Piliso was replaced in Cairo by Ambrose Makiwane and moved to Dar es Salaam to head the ANC office there as the Chief Representative. However in 1969, after Makiwane had problems with the core of the ANC leadership, he returned to Cairo.

While serving in Tanzania, Piliso wrote to the Tanzanian Representative at the end of 1965: “...those of you who have passed here [apparently Morogoro] must know that we live on one meal a day eating bread and tea morning and evening”.²²

He was in the midst of the developments leading to the ANC Consultative Conference held in Morogoro in late April 1969. In particular he was appointed a member of the tribunal created to judge Chris Hani and his co-signatories of the Memorandum which severely criticised the ANC leadership, that it in its turn regarded the document as a violation of military discipline, even a betrayal. The majority of this body favoured applying the most severe punishment; however the firm objection from Piliso, averted what would have been a tragedy.²³

At the Morogoro conference Piliso was elected a member of the ANC National Executive Committee. He was co-opted to it several years earlier, but it should be underlined that the NEC was reduced in Morogoro from 20 to just eight persons²⁴, and the fact that “Comrade Mzwai” was one of them proves his role in the movement’s leadership at that period. He became also a member of the Revolutionary Council²⁵, a body created at Morogoro with a specific mission of developing structures inside South Africa and waging armed struggle²⁶.

²² University of Fort Hare. African National Congress, Morogoro Box 4, Mzwai writing to Tanzania Representative 1 November 1965.

²³ Discussion with C. Hani, Moscow, 27 April 1992. However, at my last meeting with Joe Modise on 12 June 1999 in Dar es Salaam, he confirmed the suspension of Hani and his co-signatories, but denied that they had been charged by the tribunal.

²⁴ Further submissions and responses by the African National Congress to questions raised by the Commission for Truth and Reconciliation. 12 May 1997. Appendix one. ANC structures and personnel, 1960 – 1994.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ When RC was reorganized into Political-Military Council in 1983, Piliso became its member as well.

Piliso was the first member of the ANC leadership whom I met. It happened in June 1969, soon after I joined the staff of the Soviet Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee, having left the military service.²⁷

He was one of the several prominent leaders of liberation movements, such as Peter Nanyemba of SWAPO, Jason Moyo of ZAPU and Mariano Matsinha of FRELIMO who came to Moscow in transit to Berlin, when they attended an international peace conference, and back. Then he came again to take part in the conference in Alma-Ata, mentioned above.

Apart from Moscow I accompanied Piliso to Kiev, the capital of Ukraine and later to Alma-Ata. The ANC leadership involved Moscow in overcoming problems detected in MK during the joint ZAPU-ANC operations in Zimbabwe in 1967-1968. Thus, to improve medical services a group of cadres were sent to a medical school in Kiev for special training. When Piliso and I came to the school, its principal praised the students, but informed us about a problem they encountered. The presence of MK members in the USSR was secret, but secrets were not easy to keep: the attempt to disguise the ANC students at that school as Zambians failed, as authentic Zambian students could not understand why their supposed compatriots could not speak their vernacular languages.

1969 was an extremely difficult year for the ANC. The months before and after the Morogoro conference became known as “the era of the Lusaka Manifesto”. That document, approved behind the back of the ANC and other liberation movements by the conference of the Eastern and Central African states in Lusaka in April 1969 confirmed that the liberation of Southern Africa was their aim, but stated their readiness to normalise relations with colonial and racist regimes and promised to urge the liberation movements “to desist from their armed struggle” provided those regimes recognised “the principle of human equality” and the right to self-determination.²⁸

Soon after that the ANC, as Oliver Tambo reported at the Kabwe conference in 1985, “had to evacuate [most of] our army [from Tanzania] to the Soviet Union at very short notice”.²⁹ Having agreed to receive MK members for “refresher courses”, the Soviets were worried about their

²⁷ Earlier I met rank-and-file members in Moscow, among them Joseph Nhlanhla, future Minister of Intelligence Services, and Max Sisulu, a future speaker of the South African National Assembly. Both of them were completing in 1969 their Master’s degrees in Economics.

²⁸ Quoted in *African Communist*, no. 40 (1969), p. 8.

²⁹ Mayibuye Centre Historical Papers, ANC Lusaka Collection, African National Congress National Consultative Conference, President’s Statement, p.19.

future. It was, in particular, the theme of the discussion in Alma-Ata between Piliso and Professor Rostislav Ulyanovskiy, Deputy Head of the CPSU International Department, I attended.

Fortunately the situation in African countries was often changing, with one or another country coming forward to support the ANC. At that time it was Sudan with the new government formed after the military coup in May 1969. Hardly accidental at the meeting in Alma-Ata Ulyanovskiy raised with Piliso a question of using the Sudanese territory as a base from which MK units would move south, even if support from other governments en route would be wanting.³⁰

Before long Piliso and I developed rather warm relations of mutual trust and respect. Piliso had never been a “conscious abstainer”, he liked a good drink, and I was young enough to be able to match him, even if not always. During our “sessions” he was very candid with me while speaking about his life story and the evolving situation.

He shared with me problems he faced sometimes in his relations with his comrades. His weak point was the fact that he was not active in the ANC structures in South Africa. In his words those structures hardly existed in his native Transkei before he left for the UK, but he was active in other fields, such as rugby clubs³¹.

Another subject painful to him was his relations with the South African Communist Party. Perhaps it should be explained that we never have asked South African friends whether they were members of the SACP or not. “Nobody organized me to be a communist”, he would say, “and nobody can chop me off the Party”.³²

More than once he told me in Moscow “I belong to this place”, meaning, of course, not the USSR *per se*, but the world anti-imperialist movement.

In a very gloomy situation of early 1970s Piliso made a correct decision, he asked the ANC top leadership to send him to the Soviet Union for military training. No doubt, it helped him a lot several years later when the MK was, so to say, resurrected; however, at that time his newly

³⁰ Discussion of R. Ulyanovskiy, Deputy Head of the International Department, CPSU Central Committee, with M. Piliso, Alma-Ata, 2 October 1969.

³¹ He played rugby in Birmingham later as well.

³² I heard that in early 1970s Piliso was suspended from the SACP, but in the late 1980s he was in its ranks again.

acquired skills were of no use and Piliso was allowed to take a long leave to join his family in the UK, Burnley.

That was a real occasion to him to spend some months with his family. Usually he could see his wife Joyce and children just once or twice a year, having sacrificed his family life for the cause of struggle.

At that period Piliso felt bitter with regard of differences in the ANC which resulted in emergence of the group known as “the Gang of Eight”. In any case, just as other members of the National Executive Committee, he voted for their expulsion from the ANC.

It all changed after the 1974 Portuguese revolution and the independence of Mozambique and Angola. The late 1970s was probably the most productive and important period in his life. Having been appointed the head of the newly-formed Department of (Military) Training and Personnel, from 1976 to 1980 he was directly responsible for the creation of the ANC military network³³ in Angola, which became the movement’s main rear base. (For the first time a fully formal Regional Command was formed there only in 1980). A dozen of training and transit camps were established in Angola, which was regarded a military zone because of the war in the country, some just for several months, but others for many years.³⁴

It was not easy for him to deal with young South Africans who were eager to get trained and go home to fight. James Nqculu, a MK veteran writes in his book of memoirs: “Whenever we had general meetings in the Engineering camp comrade Mzwai Piliso, who was always in our midst, would be repeatedly asked when we were going for training. We would tell him in very undiplomatic terms that we had not come for anything else but to fight. He would repeatedly tell us to be patient and inform us about the need to make the necessary arrangements, especially logistical, to ensure that the training programmes ran smoothly.”³⁵

Training of ANC cadres in Angola was not limited solely to military skills. Piliso and Andrew Masondo, ANC National Commissar, took care for supplying camps with various books, mostly

³³ Further submissions and responses. Appendix Two. MK Camps and commanders.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ James Nqculu. The honour to serve: Recollections of an Umkhonto Soldier, (draft), p. 280

of political and historical nature, requested from socialist countries and western anti-apartheid organisations.³⁶

Piliso was responsible for arranging MK training abroad as well. His earlier contacts, no doubt, helped him to get the GDR to establish military training school at Teterow in Mecklenburg, where about a thousand of ANC cadres were taught.³⁷

In 1981 Piliso received a new and even more important assignment: he was made head of Directorate of Intelligence and Security, known in the ANC as NAT.³⁸ However his departure from Angola deprived the region from “one senior person who spent all his time in Angola”. Nqculu believes that “the decision to deploy him to Lusaka was a mistake. Mzwai had a gift of reading any situation and anticipating danger. Once he sensed a problem he would call the entire detachment and brief it on the issues and thereby avert a crisis. He was our main link with the headquarters in Lusaka, and his deployment to Lusaka created a gap that later proved to be dangerous for the leadership. In addition, after Mzwai left no one could give an acceptable explanation of the shortages that were arising in the camps and resolve other problems of the cadres. Mzwai also played a central role in motivating the cadres...

Mzwai Piliso was one leader who literally lived together with the soldiers through the formative years of the detachments that followed the Luthuli Detachment. He patiently dealt with our impatience to go home and “deal with the boers”. He explained that ours was no racial war, but a struggle for democracy for all. We called him Tata (daddy [more exactly, father]), in acknowledgement of his fatherly demeanour and actions. Everybody in the camps or residences in Luanda looked forward to his addresses whenever he visited. He was never unavailable to give a talk.”³⁹

When hundreds (and then thousands) of young South African started leaving for exile after the Soweto uprising, ANC had no special security machinery in place; and screening of them was carried out by the Department of Training and Personnel. This was not adequate and in 1977 Directorate of Intelligence and Security was virtually recreated. (Though there were still some

³⁶ Further submissions and responses. Appendix Two. MK Camps and commanders.

³⁷ Hans-Georg Schleicher. GDR Solidarity. The German Democratic Republic and the South African Liberation Struggle, p.1131. In: The Road to Democracy in Southern Africa. Volume 3. International Solidarity. Part 2. Pretoria: South Africa Democracy Education Trust, 2008.

³⁸ Further submissions and responses. Appendix Two. MK Camps and commanders.

³⁹ James Nqculu. The honour to serve, p. 280

small and weak comparable structures in the ANC, they transferred to the new body neither documentation nor personnel). For several years NAT was headed by Sipho (Simon) Makana and initially operated from Angola, where the Revolutionary Council was stationed, but soon moved to Lusaka.⁴⁰

The directorate faced a very difficult job. It is worth reminding that South African Minister of Police boasted in 1976 that “of every ten who cross the border to join the ANC, five are mine.”⁴¹ In fact during the first two years of its existence 932 new recruits were interviewed, 26 confessed to being enemy agents, and a further 35 were still under interrogation.⁴² The spies were ordered to find out the location of ANC houses and camps in the forward areas, their daily routine, the identity of the people who lived there, and the system of protection and defence. Special attention was given to finding out the names and location of the leadership.⁴³

However a number of regime’s agents continued operating within the ranks of the ANC; and a network of infiltrators was uprooted in 1981. They carried out various subversive and dangerous acts, such as the attempted mass poisoning of cadres, supplying intelligence which led to the bombardment of one of MK camps in Angola, sabotage of equipment, attempts to encourage indiscipline. Moreover some agents supplied Pretoria’s security services with information which led directly to the assassinations of leaders and the arrest, torture, and imprisonment of ANC cadres.⁴⁴

These events demonstrated the need for a stronger security mechanism and resulted in replacement of Makana, a very honest and hard working, but perhaps too “gentle”, by Piliso, a much tougher person.

Piliso’s activities in that period went beyond “pure” security and intelligence matters. For example, in January 1983, a delegation, led by Mzwandile Piliso, held talks in Harare which resulted in Zimbabweans’ promise to give some assistance to ANC, in particular, to facilitate the movement of the ANC cadres into South Africa. Together with Joe Modise and Chris Hani he discussed on 31 May 1983 in Maputo the situation in the ANC camp in Nampula, in the north of the country in an attempt to ensure the further stay of MK cadres there.

⁴⁰ Report of NAT. May 1979, p.1-3.

⁴¹ Quoted in: The Weekly Mail and Guardian, Johannesburg, October 8 to 14 1993.

⁴² Report of NAT. May 1979, p.7.

⁴³ Ibid. p.12.

⁴⁴ Further submissions and responses.

Piliso was involved in the initial “talks about talks” on the political settlement in South Africa. It was he who made public the ANC leadership’s contacts in Lusaka in August 1984 with Professor Hendrik van der Merwe of the University of Cape Town, who was close to some important figures in the National Party: “Van der Merwe said that as a Quaker he was ‘concerned about the state of violence in South Africa’”.⁴⁵ Underlining the fact that this meeting did not constitute the beginning of negotiations, Piliso nevertheless said, ‘the ANC is not saying there never will be any talks’.⁴⁶

At the same time in his new capacity Piliso faced a lot of problems. In the opinion of the ANC leadership the racist regime attempted to “jam” NAT’s screening procedures by throwing large numbers of infiltrators into the field, often ill-prepared for the missions assigned to them. It appears the regime hoped the ANC's structures would be overwhelmed by this influx, which would “create conditions under which the more professional infiltrators they deployed might slip through the net”.⁴⁷

It should be underlined that by and large the ANC and its NAT were lenient (perhaps, too lenient) towards confessed infiltrators, nearly 40% of them were never imprisoned, but more dangerous ones and those who had committed serious crimes “had to be isolated”. The place of isolation was as a rule Camp 32 (later called the Morris Seabelo Rehabilitation Centre after the former head of ANC security in Angola, killed in Lesotho in 1985) was established in 1979.

In the last two decades much has been said about the incidence of malpractice committed by ANC security personnel, especially in Camp 32. As an organisation, the ANC accepted collective responsibility for this, but, I believe, a proper assessment of ANC security’s actions can be made only if and when the archives of Pretoria’s security services are opened (that is, provided the secrets have not been destroyed).

The report on the NAT, submitted by the ANC to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission says: “Given the very limited resources accorded to this Department, the trying physical conditions under which it worked, the nature of missions with which enemy agents had been tasked by their masters, and the lack of training of cadres in certain duties (such as prison

⁴⁵ Quoted in ANC Weekly News Briefing, no. 2 (1985), p 3.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

services), it was probably almost inevitable - but by no means excusable - that regrettable incidents occurred”.⁴⁸

I believe that this formula – “almost inevitable – but by no means excusable” adequately reflects the situation which evolved when Piliso was heading NAT. However I also agree with the assessment that because of its achievements in disrupting enemy attempts to destroy the ANC this very body was targeted for sustained attack by apartheid regime's structures and that the perception has been deliberately created that it “became a monstrous and lawless force which terrorised ANC members in exile, and killed large numbers of detainees or “dissidents.”⁴⁹

There are attempts from various quarters to put blame for NAT personnel’s accesses on SACP and socialist countries. True, according to the report of the ANC Department of Intelligence and Security in the late 1970s “certain cadres were selected and sent for specialised training in Security and Intelligence work in various countries, mainly the Soviet Union and the German Democratic Republic”. But it underlined that “This training emphasised that the use of force was counter-productive, and stressed the use of the intellect”.⁵⁰ Another ANC document stated: “The suggestion that any cadre of the ANC was trained specifically in torture is rejected with contempt.”⁵¹

Ronnie Kasrils confirms it in his memoirs: ‘Whatever might be thought about interrogation methods in communist countries, I found that Soviet and East German training emphasised the need to depend on brain work and not beating to arrive at the truth.’⁵²

In the “Piliso’s time” ANC security personnel were trained mostly in the GDR. If any blame is to be laid at the feet of their instructors, it is perhaps that they were not sufficiently insistent that ANC cadres should never use methods typical for the South African regime and (unfortunately) for security services of some independent African countries as well.

Steven Ellis and his co-author, who shamelessly used a pen name “Sechaba” (People), admit that “the rank and file of Umkhonto we Sizwe, including the mutineers [of 1984 in Angola], generally commended the Party”, but claim they did not know that the ANC security department

⁴⁸ Operations Report: The Department of Intelligence and Security of the African National Congress.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Operations Report: The Department of Intelligence and Security.

⁵¹ Further submissions and responses.

⁵² R. Kasrils, *Armed and Dangerous: From Undercover Struggle to Freedom*, Johannesburg and Cape Town: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2004, p. 193.

“was a Party fiefdom”.⁵³ On the contrary, the archive documents prove that the SACP (and the USSR for that matter) were determined to prevent abuses. On 29 November 1982, immediately following Moses Mabhida’s return from Moscow, the SACP Central Committee Secretariat discussed at its meeting in Maputo “the question of the method of interrogation in the MK”.⁵⁴ The timing of this decision was not accidental. Information (or at least rumours) of unacceptable methods of interrogation in the ANC had reached Moscow, and we raised the matter with him. Both then and later we used to remind the SACP and ANC leaders and activists of the tragedies caused by a spy mania in the USSR, particularly in the late 1930s. The next meeting of the SACP Secretariat decided: “The question of interrogation in our camps to be further looked into”.⁵⁵ The matter was considered important enough to be referred to the Communist Party Politbureau, which resolved: “Luanda delegation to discuss this question further with selected comrades.”⁵⁶

The NAT’s actions were a hot issue at the ANC National Conference in Kabwe, Zambia, in 1985. The decisions to create juridical structures were taken and “Mzwai Piliso fully accepted” them, even if, according to the ANC submission, “given the degree of pressure he was under on various fronts, he was distinctly unenthusiastic about dealing with the complex and time-consuming logistics involved in flying staff of the [newly-created] Office of Justice into Angola to interview all prisoners and review their cases”.⁵⁷

It was not accidental again that the ANC top leadership decided to make drastic changes in its security structures during their visit to Moscow in November 1986. I happened to be present, when after the meeting with the Soviet military Oliver Tambo discussed the matter with Joe Slovo.

During the visit of the ANC delegation headed by Tambo an important meeting with the Soviet security officials took place. Initially the ANC was to be represented by Joe Modise and Chris Hani, but at the last moment the ANC President decided to lead the discussion. In particular, he requested new personnel to be trained in the USSR in the security field, no doubt to rid the NAT of the blunders and abuses of the past.

⁵³ Ellis S. and Sechaba T., *Comrades against Apartheid*, p. 202.

⁵⁴ Mayibuye Centre Historical Papers, Yusuf Dadoo Collection, Secretariat activities since its formation, p. 3.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* p. 4.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Further submissions and responses.

Soon after Tambo's visit to Moscow, the National Executive Committee finally decided to reorganise the ANC Security Service: "The present Directorate of NAT will be dissolved, effective as from the date the Presidential Committee formally announce it."⁵⁸ That announcement was to be made on 20 February 1987.⁵⁹ The top officials of the Department were informed that they would all (with the exception of Sizakele Sigxashe, who headed the Central Intelligence Evaluation Sector) be transferred to other missions. In particular, Piliso became the Head of the Department of Manpower Development.

An interim Directorate was set up under Alfred Nzo, and in July 1987 the new permanent Directorate of the Department was appointed by the NEC. Joe Nhlanhla became the Director and Jacob Zuma his Deputy.⁶⁰

When after the beginning of political negotiations the group of remaining 32 person, detained by the NAT were released and allowed to return to South Africa, several of them "immediately rejoined their handlers" and fronted for "Returned Exiles Co-ordinating Committee", managed by Pretoria's Special Branch.⁶¹

"Comrade Mzwai" became a subject of both fair critique and unscrupulous allegations. The ANC commission of inquiry, headed by Zola Skweyiya, stated in its report that Piliso "candidly" admitted that "he had personally participated in beating a suspect in 1981 on the basis that a plot to kill members of the leadership had been discovered and he wanted information "at any cost." In the ANC submission to the TRC this was regarded as "setting an example" which "would have affected the behaviour of other members of the security department".⁶² The same submission underlined that when "an ailing Mzwai Piliso had to testify to both the Skweyiya and Motsuenayne Commissions in 1993", "he publicly admitted that he had to take responsibility for allowing certain abuses to continue".⁶³

In truth he was ready to "carry a can", defending the ANC by all means, whether from subversive activities of enemy agents in 1980s or from slanderous attacks by self-appointed "defenders of human rights" after 1990.

⁵⁸ Mayibuye Centre Historical Papers, ANC Lusaka Collection, Final Version, Decision and Recommendations of the NEC Meeting, 11 to 15 February 1987, p. 8.

⁵⁹ Ibid. p.14.

⁶⁰ Operations Report: The Department of Intelligence and Security.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Further submissions and responses.

⁶³ Ibid.

The so-called Truth and Reconciliation Commission, some members of which did not hesitate to serve as members of the racist parliament and other bodies of Pretoria's regime, asked the ANC "how the ANC justifies the fact that Mzwai Piliso and Andrew Masondo⁶⁴ retained senior posts in the post-1994 administration".⁶⁵ In reply the ANC stated that they "were seriously censured by the leadership of the ANC... These officials both performed well and with loyalty to the ANC in their new postings." It underlined that "these officials not acted with personal vindictiveness; they had acted within the broader context of weaknesses and problems afflicting the ANC as a whole... To hound loyal anti-apartheid fighters who made mistakes in the course of struggle would be to perpetrate a gross injustice."⁶⁶

Indeed, Piliso never ever complained about being demoted. He was active on his new post as well, be it a visit to Cuba or discussing academic training of young South Africans in the USSR.

I met Piliso again, several years later, in Cape Town, after he had been elected a member of National Assembly in 1994. He was the same "Comrade Mzwai", still strong, although his personal problems accumulated. He developed diabetes, but what worried him more is the fact that apart from the parliamentary village, he had no place to live: his old family house was occupied by one of his relatives...

Soon Piliso resigned from parliament and went to his native Eastern Cape. In 1996, at the age of 72, he succumbed to his illness. His (and ANC's) foes write with malevolence glee that of the movement's national leadership only Thabo Mbeki and Joe Modise were present at his funeral⁶⁷. This is wrong, because others, in particular Ronnie Kasrils and Joe Nhlanhla were there as well. However, perhaps some people wanted to distance themselves from the person who honestly accepted personal responsibility for errors committed under his command.

Anyhow later I was glad to find out that a proper tribute was paid to him: the main campus of the South African Intelligence Academy in Mafikeng wears his name, and at its launch in 2003

⁶⁴ Masondo became Lieutenant-General of the South African National Defence Force.

⁶⁵ Further submissions and responses.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Gareth van Onselen, DA director of research and communications. Who was the butcher? fasternews.com — 11/13/2005. http://www.ever-fasternews.com/index.php?php_action=read_article&article_id=121.

Jacob Zuma, then Deputy President spoke about “fond memories” of Mzwandile Piliso. To me, as a historian, one phrase in Zuma’s speech seems especially important: “It is very unfortunate that many of the veterans of the struggle, of which Mzwandile Piliso was one, passed away without putting the wealth of their experiences on paper for the benefit of future generations”⁶⁸. I believe we should do our best to honestly tell next generations about them.

⁶⁸ <http://www.polity.org.za/article/j-zuma-launch-of-sa-national-academy-for-intelligence-28022003-2003-02-28>