

## **The Bethal Treason Trials**

The [Pan Africanist Congress](#) (PAC) was one of the largest organizations that fought apartheid vigorously. The policies set forth by the apartheid state protected white supremacy in both politics and socioeconomics. The PAC consistently had members exiled, detained, or even executed under the conditions of the state's policies. In the Bethal Treason Trials of December 1977, [Zephaniah Mothopeng](#), the President of the PAC, and seventeen other PAC members were detained under the conditions of the [Terrorism Act of 1967](#). Mothopeng would go on to survive the Bethal Treason Trials, unlike the [four Pan Africanist Congress members](#), Naboath Ntshuntsha, Samuel Malinga, Aaron Khoza, and Sipho Bonaventura Malaza, who were killed during detention and trial in 1977. [Robert Sobukwe](#), the leader of the PAC leading into the Bethal Treason trials, died after falling ill in 1977 shortly after the trials commenced. The government sought to keep the trials out of Johannesburg and detained the PAC men in Bethal, a desolate, rural area of South Africa.

The Bethal Trials were initiated by a series of arrests a year after the [Soweto Uprisings of 1976](#). Apartheid officials arrested and detained Africanist freedom fighters under the policies of the [Terrorism Act](#) of 1967, in which unannounced arrests and searches by the regime were allowed if public safety was deemed to be at stake. These officials believed that the Soweto uprisings were not spontaneous nor the machinations of school youth and that pre-emptive plans had been discussed by members of the PAC, among them Zephaniah Mothopeng.

The apartheid state sought to remove Mothopeng and seventeen others, who would later be coined as the Bethal 18 due to international attention to the trial, from the center of resistance. They were taken to Bethal under the notion that Bethal would be a safe and discreet location to

hold these trials with minimal public attention. To a degree, officials found success in this strategy; for example, John Burns of the *New York Times* reports in 1976, stating:

*“Bethal, 125 miles east of Johannesburg, in the dusty maize-and-cattle country of the Eastern Transvaal, is an unusual venue for a major political trial. ... However, the town has several features that recommend it for a trial: a quiet courthouse, a large new jail and several other prisons nearby, to accommodate the several dozen blacks detained as state witnesses” (Sibeko, p.5).*

The strategy of suppression only worked during the period of time in which the trials were taking place. For example, [David Sibeko](#), a member of the PAC and a leader for its foreign operations, argues in his book dedicated towards exposing apartheid tactics of suppression that, *“Clearly Vorster’s and Kruger’s objective in suppressing news on the trial, including the news of the severe torture suffered by accused during their detention without trial, has partly been achieved. For instance, the June 8 New York Times report was the first, and at the time of writing the only coverage the Times has given the case since it opened on January 9”* (Sibeko, p.6).

Theoretically, if the trial were to be held in Johannesburg, the outcome of both public reaction and the exposure of being in the epicenter of anti-apartheid organizations could have been completely the opposite of the outcome achieved from having the trials in Bethal. Examples of the brutality that took place would have been exposed to the public on a much larger volume. Johnson Nyathi, the fourteenth accused of the eighteen in the trial, was one of the few survivors of the “suicide” reports created by the South African Police. He was thrown out of a window to stage his murder as a suicide (Sibeko, p.10). This tactic was used to cover up police murders, but could also be used as a tactic to extract confessions from witnesses. This method of attempting to force, or silence, the truth from detainees did not only pertain to the ones being tried. Mrs. Urbaniah Mothopeng and her daughter, Sheila, were both detained by the apartheid state, even though they were not directly related to trial in any criminal way, in order to gather information

on Zephaniah Mothopeng. Urbaniah was held in solitary confinement from December 1976 to April 1978. Sheila was also held in similar conditions for three months during 1977 (Sibeko, p.15). These examples could have been extended to the public in a much larger volume as the trials took place if it were to be in a more public setting. Mothopeng's most famous line from the trial, just after Mothopeng and other Pan African Congress members turned their backs to Judge Curlewis, could have been a cornerstone mission statement for the years to follow if Bethal gained public exposure. Mothopeng was asked why they were showing contempt in court along with the warning from Judge Curlewis that he would not allow political statements; Mothopeng's response was, "*This is no court at all, I do not recognize its right to try me*" (Sibeko, pp.7-8). The pleas for all detainees would be 'not guilty' entered on their behalf. The United Nations Centre against Apartheid post-trial report on the Bethal Trial claims:

*"After 13 February 1978 the trial was held in camera at the State's request and a series of anonymous State witnesses are reported to have given evidence on PAC's alleged military training programmes, plans for 'revolution' starting with a children's uprising, and 'new Marxist policy'" (United Nations Centre Against Apartheid, pp.25-26).*

Though the fame of the trial reached its deserved publicity in the following years, the governments immediate strategy to quell information on the details and detainees of the trial was a success within the given circumstances. In the same report previously mentioned, John Burns reinforces his argument behind the selection of Bethal as the location for the trial, articulating, "Also, the town is a two-and-a-half drive on narrow roads from Johannesburg, the center of anti-government agitation and headquarters of the liberal newspapers that normally would give heavy coverage to the hearing" (Sibeko, p.6) Though the miraculous survival of Nyathi and the deaths of four other detainees were honorable to the cause, the true significance derived from the

outcome following the trial was aligned behind the ability of the apartheid regime to quell the public reaction and also their success in placing the trials in a discreet location.

The Bethal Treason Trial, as well as many other cases that involve police brutality and death in detention, offers little information on the exact details of the atrocities the victims endured; but the fact that there is little to no information following the deaths of four and the detention of eighteen important anti-apartheid activists suggests the implications of foul play. The United Nations Centre against Apartheid reports, “*Summonses have been issued against the minister of Police by 15 of the accused alleging torture by the security police*” (United Nations Centre Against Apartheid, p.26).

Zephaniah Mothopeng, born 10 September, 1913, had been involved in anti-apartheid activism on a political level since 1943. Previously, he had been involved in the new generation of young leaders, the [African National Congress \(ANC\) Youth League](#); this league induced the ANC away from passive resistance towards a more militaristic, confrontational form of resistance. Passive resistance refers towards the tactics used by activists in which anti-apartheid leaders never broke the boundaries of the law when resisting. The Youth League truly cemented Mothopeng’s importance in anti-apartheid politics, as he worked with other major activists such as Oliver Tambo and Nelson Mandela. His political involvement remained in the ANC until 1959, where he broke away and participated in the initial organization of the new Pan Africanist Congress (Hirson, pp.88-90).

Mothopeng, in one of his only personal accounts recorded into a document just before being imprisoned in 1979, states, “*As the doors of prison lock us in, this time our spirits are very high because we realize that victory is in sight and freedom is on our threshold. We are fully aware that the oppressors are confronted with formidable onslaughts from every angle*” (Hirson,

p.90). The document was recovered from jail as he was sentenced to fifteen years on 26 June 1979 (Hirson, p.87). The sacrifice Mothopeng endured had been fully incorporated into his personal ideology towards the fight for freedom. The importance of the details behind what he endured contributed to the global reactions that proved to be a major driving force that supported anti-apartheid activists. David Sibeko, Director for Foreign Affairs of the PAC, in a report for the United Nations Centre against Apartheid states:

*“The extremes to which the South African fascist regime has gone in building the Bethal Terrorism Act trial against Zeph Mothopeng and the other 17 PAC suspects challenges the international community to launch an even more vigorous and inspired campaign for the release of all political prisoners, detainees, and people under house arrest” (Sibeko, par.5).*

Many foreign organisations began to implement their campaigns against the mistreatment of Mothopeng and the death of four others. One of the main objectives of these new organizations was to place pressure on the Western governments to place sanctions on the Apartheid state. The opposition even reached the extent in which a [United Nations Centre against Apartheid](#) was formed in 1979 and created *Treatment of Political Prisoners and Detainees in South Africa*, a document revealing accounts of mistreatment. Organisations such as these proved the worthiness behind the efforts of exiled leaders vehemently pursuing their foreign exposure agenda. The ideology relied upon the evidence of a withering South African economy in tandem with increasing foreign pressure from entities the South African foreign economy and their political standing relied upon. Not only this, but events such as the Bethal Treason Trial induced the tensions within the country as well. A report from the United Nations Centre against Apartheid in April of 1979 notes, “The trial of Mr. Zephania Mothopeng and 17 others accused under the Terrorism Act and with furthering the aims of the Pan Africanist Congress opened in January 1978 in the small Transvaal town of Bethal, ‘a location apparently chosen to reduce the public

impact of the proceedings” (United Nations Centre against Apartheid, p.25). The report also notes in the year of 1977 alone:

*“A total of 144 persons were convicted under the security laws and during the first four months of 1978 a further 19 people were arrested. The African National Congress, in its written statement to the Working Group, commented that these figures reflect only major trials and ‘do not include the hundreds of militants arrested and charged under other laws’” (United Nations Centre against Apartheid, p.25).*

These suggest a growing concern of the apartheid state to obscure the pressures they faced.

Following the trials, foreign social organizations, such as the Africa Fund, started to draft information pamphlets and propaganda to place pressure upon South Africa’s apartheid leadership as well as their own domestic politicians. In September 1987, the African Fund published an information pamphlet describing the conditions in which detainees, such as Mothopeng, endured. The pamphlet directly mentions Mothopeng, stating, “...*there are hundreds of long term political prisoners, such as Nelson Mandela and Zephania Mothopeng, who have been tried and convicted. **ALL OF THEM PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE WHO DARED TO OPPOSE APARTHEID***” (African Activist Archive, p.1). Based out of the United States, organizations like the African Fund prove the true thesis of Mothopeng’s ideology: In order for an activist to be revolutionary, the bystander must be enticed towards the narrative that brings the unjust oppression into question. If pamphlets such as these were never to be published, the relevance behind Mothopeng and the Bethal Treason Trials would have never had broken the barrier of public attention.

As mentioned earlier, the state’s means to fight the increasing volume of public attention were constantly becoming more difficult. The inability to work with the increasingly intensifying activist majority would prove to only make their position, both internally and externally, more insurmountable. Despite the tensions, leaders from South African based anti-apartheid

organizations would use their rivals' experiences as examples to further extend their narrative.

[Oliver Tambo](#), in his address to President Ali Hassan Mwinyi of the United Republic of Tanzania in Arusha on 2 December 1988, directly uses Mothopeng in his address asking for the support of Tanzania's politicians. In this statement, Tambo presents the economic benefits for Tanzania if apartheid is lifted as well as his general perception of the current position of the public regarding the apartheid government. Tambo mentions Mothopeng, articulating an argument stating the apartheid state is already in a position of desperation:

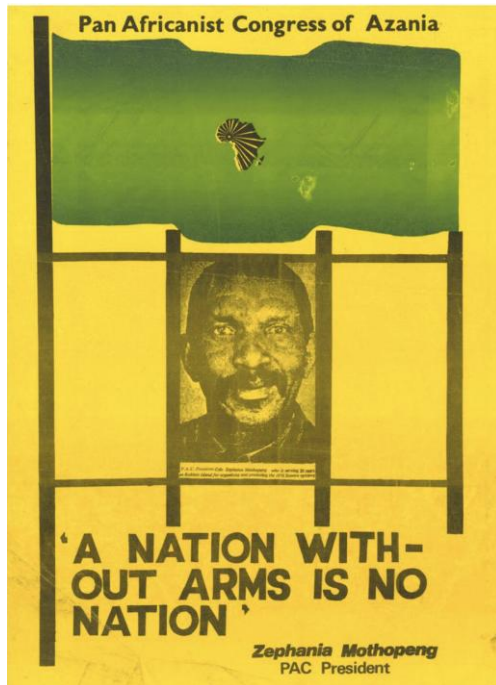
*“Facing mounting international and domestic pressure to release Nelson Mandela and all political prisoners, the apartheid regime is manoeuvring desperately. It has presented the recent release of Harry Gwala of the ANC and Zeph Mothopeng, President of the PAC, as a humanitarian act. This is nothing more than rank and disgusting opportunism. Harry Gwala and Zeph Mothopeng are both advanced in age and have been seriously ill for many years. No belated release can cover up the inhumanity of their incarceration” (Statement by Oliver Tambo, 1988).*

Rhetoric such as the claims of Tambo from this excerpt in 1988 shows the progress both organizations had made in the ultimate realization, reflecting on cases such as the Bethal Treason Trials, that these trials could be used as examples despite the parties' differences and inability to work together. Beforehand, ANC leaders such as Duma Nokwe claimed the leadership of the PAC as lying, deceitful organization. Nokwe states:

*“Their disruptive activities have always been a boon to the South African racists, the only section which has had the occasion to feel highly satisfied. These then are the main reasons why the Pan Africanist Congress was formed. It is not necessary to emphasize that the so-called leadership of the P.A.C. by loudly proclaiming their opposition to the A.N.C. added grist to the oppressors mill” (Nokwe, p.5).*

Mothopeng, and other activists from both parties, acted under the same means yet separate agendas to eventually quell these sorts of claims and rivalries. The significance of these progressions would be the clearance of distractions in order for both organizations to unite and

advance their own propaganda without the burden of petty politics; although, both organizations would proceed to strengthen their stake in the eye of public opinion with their own individual means.



This poster, published by the Pan African Congress of Anzania, demonstrates how the Bethal Treason trials came to be a rally cry for the movement against apartheid. The photo of Mothopeng is used to further entice the population to rally against apartheid. The significance behind posters such as this was the exposure of the poster to the public.

The Bethal Treason Trials made Mothopeng an international figure and thereafter he was consistently used as a prime example for organizations to make arguments against the erroneous treatment. The relevance of the inhumanity that occurred will always be significant only to the extent of the following macro-socioeconomic reactions both internally and externally.

Mothopeng accepts this form of resistance, as in his personal reflection from before the arrests in 1977 and his trial in 1979, he exclaims:

*"We approach prison with full certainty that freedom is at hand. In this we are*



*supported by the knowledge that thousands and thousands of the black people in the country are working hard and are willing to sacrifice everything to achieve it. We will soon be walking out of bondage into free Azania...*" (Hirson, p.91).

One cannot forget that four other brave activists died while Mothopeng was a survivor. Though Mothopeng's fame contributed to the global reaction of the Bethal Treason Trials, the deaths during trial and detention brought the Bethal Treason trial to the eyes of the globe.

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