

Jessica Bundage
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Magoo's Bar Bombing

Abstract

Magoo's Bar Bombing was an example of the increased militancy that had been undertaken by the anti-apartheid resistance in response to the government's unrelenting brutality. This new militant stance was embodied by the ANC's armed wing, *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (MK).

Key Words

Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), African National Congress (ANC), South African Communist Party (SACP), South African Indian Congress (SAIC), Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Joe Slovo, Dingane, Nationalist Party, Black Consciousness Movement, Soweto student uprising, Robert McBride, South African Defence Party, Thabo Mbeki, Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)

Introduction

"There was horrendous noise and flash of lights. There was chaos with flesh and blood dripping from the walls. I remember seeing a head and smelling burnt flesh...It was a massive blood bath" ("Magoo's Bar," 1996). These are the words from the testimony of one of the survivors of Magoo's bar bombing, one episode in a series of bombings that would turn South Africa upside down in its decades-long war over apartheid. The Magoo's bar bombing was part of a campaign of increased militancy on behalf of [*Umkhonto we Sizwe* \(MK\)](#) ([*Spear of the Nation*](#)), the armed wing of the [*African National Congress* \(ANC\)](#), who viewed the armed struggle as one of the last remaining options left to help create a more egalitarian and non-racial South African society. The bombing was another milepost in the armed struggle that the ANC had adopted via its armed wing, MK.

Background

The escalated militancy grew out of the ANC's frustration with the increasing repressiveness of apartheid. Members of the anti-apartheid resistance saw that the discriminatory apartheid regime was not going to capitulate any time soon. Therefore, some began to look towards the idea of taking up a more militant stance beginning in the sixties, a decade that witnessed a wave of increased resistance among oppressed South Africans against the status quo. Many in the anti-apartheid movement realised that their decades-old campaign of passive resistance was no longer effective against a racist government that responded to non-violent resistance campaigns with increased violence and repression. As a result of these factors, those who had begun to embrace a more militant form of resistance would go on to create MK.

Members of the ANC, [South African Communist Party \(SACP\)](#) and the [South African Indian Congress \(SAIC\)](#) established MK in response to the growing debate between these organisations and other organisations within the anti-apartheid movement as to whether or not it should take up an armed struggle, as passive resistance had done little and was leading to disillusionment among its members. Finally in 1961, the executive of the ANC gave the authorisation for the formation of a guerilla organisation. High ranking anti-apartheid figures, [Nelson Mandela](#), [Walter Sisulu](#) and [Joe Slovo](#) were foremost among the Congress Alliance who created *Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK)* (Spear of the Nation) in 1961. They formed the High Command of MK (Mandela, 1994). Another branch of leadership filtered down to Regional Command that was charged with deciding which local targets should be sabotaged (Meli, 1988). The newly founded organisation aimed to strike government buildings and other strategic targets with the intent of sabotage while avoiding human casualties. Members from both the ANC and the SACP formed the early membership. However, the organisation would remain autonomous

from both parties so as to not offend the members of the ANC who were opposed to non-violence or to attract attention from apartheid officials (Ellis and Sechaba, 1992). However, MK was the military wing of the ANC and the two organisations shared the same mission, seen in this early official statement released by MK: *“Umkhonto we Sizwe is a new independent body, formed by Africans...MK fully supports the national liberation movement”* (Meli, 1988:146). Furthermore, MK did not want to be perceived as a puppet organisation of the SACP, as some in South Africa already presumed the ANC to be. Yet MK did have connections to the SACP, as the Party would provide it with connections and training abroad and locally. Additionally, the early MK benefitted from the strategic brilliance of Joe Slovo, a devoted member and General Secretary of the SACP who served as MK’s key strategist (Ellis and Sechaba, 1992).

The official debut of MK did not go off as planned. The leadership had decided upon the date 16 December 1961 as the day to officially debut itself by setting off explosives in various cities. This date was significant because it was celebrated among Afrikaners as the anniversary when their ancestors defeated the Zulu king [Dingane](#) in battle. (Ellis and Sechaba, 1992). Ironically Blacks would also come to view this date as a symbol for their struggle against apartheid as enforced by the [Nationalist Party Government](#), as the ANC would go on to use this date for several other campaigns (Meli, 1992). However, the Durban command wing of MK prematurely set off its explosives a day before other planned explosions in Johannesburg and Port Elizabeth on the chosen day (Ellis and Sechaba, 1992). Yet in the midst of the early chaos, MK’s High Command issued the organisation’s official manifesto in a leaflet that was distributed throughout South Africa on 16 December 1961 in which it declared:

The people’s patience is not endless. The time comes in the life of any nation when there remain only two choices: submit or fight. That time has now come to South Africa. We shall not submit and we have no choice but to hit back by all means within our power in defence of our people, our future and our freedom...The Government policy of force, repression and violence will no longer be met with non-violent resistance alone! (Meli, 1992: 145)

Although MK maintained a nascent membership as an underground organisation of individuals devoted to the launching of a more militant struggle, the problem still remained as to how to further expand the membership, as the adoption of an armed struggle would not be accepted by organisations of the wider anti-apartheid resistance until the mid-eighties. This would begin to change as the sixties progressed and the state became increasingly more brutal in its response to non-violent protests. A more assertive and confrontational resistance would gain even more of a stronghold going into the seventies with the establishment of the [Black Consciousness Movement](#) fuelled by Black youth. The Black youth would lead a new wave of mass mobilisation that included sit-ins, boycotts and demonstrations. With this increase in mass protest, came an even more doubled down effort from the government to crush rebellion (Glaser, 2001).

Likewise the ANC and MK would only grow in membership in response to this crackdown. One incident that would serve as a catalyst of this trend would occur in 1976 with the [Soweto student uprising](#). The uprising was triggered by a new government law that coerced schools to teach half of the subject in Afrikaans. Students immediately moved to protest this action, with one of these demonstrations taking place on 16 June 1976 when 20,000 students came together in the Orlando stadium to peacefully protest the law. However, the police responded with brute force by opening fire and killing and injuring hundreds of students. Immediately following this, thousands of angry and embittered students left South Africa for Swaziland and Mozambique to join the ANC and MK (Meli, 1988). During this time, over 3,000 young militants joined MK (Barrell, 1990). Yet despite this dramatic increase in growth, MK still lacked experience and much needed organisation as many of these new young guerilla recruits were poorly trained. As a result of this, many new members would often be apprehended or would go on to become a

victim of their own attacks, as was the case of Solomon Mahlangu, the MK's first guerilla martyr (Gerhart & Karis, 1997). However, as South Africa entered the eighties, the tide of MK would again change.

Like the seventies, the eighties also witnessed a new wave and change of tone in anti-apartheid resistance. This was due to multiple factors: leadership, the presence of an urban social base for mass action, economic hardships including unemployment, inflation and flat wages and finally the relentless repressiveness and violence of the state in its crackdown on the resistance movement. This crackdown would likewise result in even more widespread violence on behalf of the ANC and MK (Glaser, 2001). Furthermore, the eighties also saw the declaration of a people's war that would influence a wave of township uprisings beginning in 1984. This would provide a new opportunity for MK when the ANC officially adopted the people's war in 1985 (Cherry, 2011). This new tone was reflected in a leaflet released by the ANC in 1985 in which they urged members to "Take the struggle to the white areas: make the whole of South Africa ungovernable." This included creating underground units and combat groups for the purpose of sabotage in the workplace and systematic attacks against the army and the police which also included raids on their facilities in order to secure arms for the underground units (ANC, 1985). Another element of armed resistance was targeting security facilities and businesses patronised by security personnel. One particular city that experienced this new campaign was the port city of Durban, Natal (now kwaZulu-Natal). In 1986, bombings occurred so regularly, that it was nicknamed "bomb city" (Mokae). One of these bombing was Magoo's Bar.



Figure 1 Robert McBride (center), 1983, Durban, KwaZulu/Natal
http://www.africamediaonline.com/search/preview/95_226

The Bombing

The planning and implementation of the bombing was undertaken by [Robert John McBride](#). McBride was born on 6 July 1963 in the Coloured township of Wentworth. The apartheid Government classified South Africans as Coloureds as people who have both European heritage and heritage from the various Khoisan and Bantu-speaking groups of southern Africa or other heritage. Both of his parents were teachers and his father was an active participant in the anti-apartheid resistance. However, it was his mother that would have the most influence on McBride's politics. The biggest factor would occur years later as McBride was becoming more political. The incident that would serve as the catalyst during this period was his intent to bomb a Mobil oil refinery near the area that he lived. MK also attempted to sabotage this refinery but failed, resulting in a gun fight between MK cadres and the police that happened less than 500 metres from McBride's house. Some of these MK members did not survive causing McBride's mother to commend these men as martyrs. This would be the turning point for a young McBride and would eventually lead him to join MK after being recruited by his friend, Gordon Webster, who also served as a significant political influence on McBride (Mokae; TRC, 1999). Upon joining MK, McBride trained in Botswana. Soon after this, McBride replaced Webster as the unit commander of the ANC special operations unit under Aboobaker Ismail, head of MK's Special Operations in exile (TRC Final Report, 1999; "McBride Apologises," 1999). Together these two men planned and implemented a series

of bombings in and around Durban during the years 1981-1986. These bombings included the bombing of electrical sub-stations that were also aimed at causing economic sabotage. One of these bombings also killed a police officer (“McBride Apologizes,”1999; Amnesty Hearing: Day 6, 1999).

The initial planning for the bombing of Magoo’s Bar was deciding on the date of 16 June 1986 to commemorate the ten year anniversary of the [Soweto uprising](#), as well as the 14 June 1985 raiding of Botswana’s capital city, Gaborone, by the [South African Defence Force \(SADF\)](#) on suspected ANC guerillas and refugees, in which twelve people were killed, including a six year old (Mokae). An initial target that Ismail and McBride discussed was the Natal Command military base on the Durban beachfront. They decided against this because the security there was too strong, thus Ismail instructed McBride to seek out other targets (“Magoo’s Bomb,” 1999). The original target that McBride eventually decided upon was the “Why Not” Bar which was believed to be frequented by off-duty security personnel according to surveillance. Fellow MK cadres smuggled in the explosives from Botswana for the making of the 60 kilogram bomb and instructed McBride in building the bomb (“McBride Apologises,” 1999).

The bombing was carried out by McBride, Greta Apelgren (who later changed her name to Zahrah Narkedien after converting to Islam) and Matthew Le Cordier (TRC Final Report, 1999). The three travelled to the site in two cars. McBride drove the bomb in a blue Ford Cortina he had bought under a false name. Apelgren and Le Cordier drove in a separate car and were unaware of the attack specifics but had been charged with driving ahead to see if any roadblocks had been mounted by the police and to secure a parking space. After parking the car, McBride crossed the street and joined Apelgren and Le Cordier in their car to watch the explosion. After the bomb was set off, the three drove away. But the bomb exploded on Magoo’s Bar and not the nearby

intended Why Not Bar (TRC Final Report, 1999). The bomb killed three individuals: Angelique Pattenden, Julie van der Linde and Marchelle Garrard and injured seventy three people (Amnesty Hearing: Day 6, 1999; “Magoo’s Bomb,” 1999). In later testimony to the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission \(TRC\)](#), the three MK cadres would go on to state that they were not emotionally affected by the bombing or the enormity of what they had done until the morning after (*Long Night’s Journey into Day*).

Aftermath of the bombing

Soon after, McBride and Apelgren were arrested at his uncle’s house in Nigel in July. LeCordier was later arrested at his home. After being detained in Nigel, McBride was soon transported to C.R. Swart Square in Durban, where he was brutally tortured by the personnel there. Realising that he had few options, McBride then confessed to some of the acts he committed as an MK cadre, but was careful not to out any of his fellow MK comrades. The trial took place at the beginning of 1987 in Pietermaritzburg's Supreme Court. Both McBride and Apelgren were charged with twenty-four counts of criminal activity, three of which were murder. McBride went on to state that he did not receive orders from the ANC to carry out the bombing in order to take heat off the organisation which was being heavily scrutinised by the White media. Additionally, he felt that he was on his own as the ANC had not release a statement repudiating or confirming the bombing. McBride’s defence council included David Gordon and [Thabo Mbeki](#) (Mokae). Le Cordier turned witness for the state. The court acquitted Apelgren, who later claimed that she had been tortured by police after being arrested. McBride, however, received three death penalties for the deaths of the three victims, as well as eighty-two years in prison for the additional charges against him (TRC Final Report, 1999; Mokae). He was later released in 1992

as a consequence of negotiations between the ANC and the National Party (Amnesty Hearing: Day 6, 1999).

Amnesty Hearing

In 1999, McBride, Ismail and nine other former MK members applied for amnesty with the TRC.

At the amnesty hearing, members from both sides testified, including members of the victims' families and those who were injured and survived the attack, such as the bar manager, Helen Kearney. Kearney bitterly stated that McBride "feels no remorse and has no conscience"

("Magoo's Bomb," 1999; "Magoo's Bar," 1996). On the other side, Ismail stated that civilians were never intended but should not stand in the way of the struggle to achieve a non-racial and egalitarian South Africa, a consensus that had previously been decided upon in the ANC's Kabwe conference in June 1985 (Amnesty Hearing: Day 2, 1998; "Magoo's Bomb," 1999).

McBride testified: "Magoo's was never an intended target and everybody has pretended I acted on my own like a madman... We were to kill enemy personnel. That's it" (TRC Final Report, 1999). He went on to state: "Other than reconciliation, I have nothing to gain from applying for amnesty" (Amnesty Hearing: Day 6, 1999). The ANC stated that McBride was a political prisoner, as the bombing was part of its larger effort to take the struggle out of the black townships and into the white areas (TRC Final Report, 1999). McBride was eventually granted amnesty and was regarded as a hero upon his release by members of the anti-apartheid movement. However, some white right-wing conservatives threatened revenge (*Long Night's Journey Into Day*). McBride stated he regretted his actions that resulted in fatalities, but at the same time stated that the injustice of apartheid was the reason behind his participation in the bombing and that he wanted an apology from Whites for the years of oppression he was forced to endure. Meanwhile, Marchelle Gerrard's sister, Sharon Welgemoed was still embittered about

her loss and McBride's release and seeming lack of remorse. She stated that her family never even supported apartheid in the first place (*Long Night's Journey into Day*). These sentiments are just one example of the bitterness that continues to permeate South African society.

Conclusion

Magoo's bar bombing served as a microcosm of the rising militancy among the resistance, in which the main organisation that symbolized this stance was MK. By embracing a policy of increased militancy, the anti-apartheid resistance was acknowledging the fact that its longstanding tradition of passive resistance would no longer work in the face of the state's relentless brutality. Although this campaign of escalated militancy was slow to take form, eventually devoted members of the anti-apartheid movement who were fed up with the state's brutality would go on to embrace it wholeheartedly. While this militancy was a major factor in ending apartheid it did not do so without leaving behind a trail of bloodshed and loss.

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