CHAPTER 2
THE POLITICAL CONTEXT AND
THE TRANSITION TO WAR
Anti-Colonial Struggles

Fighting for the right of self-determination:
The Boer republics and the South African war

The armed struggles waged by the Boer republics and the African National Congress (ANC) in their quests to preserve or attain their political independence were vastly different in terms of time and context. The Boer trekkers (later mythologised as the ‘Voortrekkers’) left the Cape to establish their various republics for a mixture of motives. Conventionally their departure from the Cape has been portrayed as being culturally driven – an inpressible desire to rid themselves of the pervasive political, cultural and linguistic hegemony of the newly established British presence in the Cape Colony.

In reality, the motives for the departure of the Voortrekkers were complex and related as much to the incremental abolition of slavery in the colony from 1807 onwards and the growing social stratification within the settler population, as they did to their real desire to establish a degree of political and cultural autonomy for themselves. Neither were the Boers as homogenous a community as has often been portrayed in the ‘official’ Afrikaner histories of the nineteenth century. This was most vividly reflected in the establishment of the republics themselves (some, such as the republics of Stellaland, Goosen, Lydenburg and Natalia, being of short-lived duration) and the political and personal differences within the successful Boer republics (the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR) and the Orange Free State (OFS)).

Once established, however, the Boer republics sought to maintain their independence through the conquest of local African polities, the forging of a series of tactical alliances with African kingdoms in the hinterland or through endeavours to seek a political accommodation with the more powerful military presences on the borders of their newly established republics (the Zulu Kingdom and the British colonial presence in the Cape and Natal for example).1

The incremental slide into the Boer War2 at the end of the nineteenth century was neither inevitable nor was it necessarily desired by all Boer and British players. The British Colonial Secretary, Joseph Chamberlain, initially sought
to avert war with the Boer republics in general (unlike the more militant approach preferred by both Rhodes and Milner) and the ZAR in particular (the latter because of its newly discovered wealth). In preference Chamberlain advocated a federation of South African provinces within which the Boer republics could even maintain a semblance of republican status – subject to their acknowledgement of the overarching suzerainty of the British Empire in the region.3

Neither were the British driven by the more grandiose motives of other imperial powers. They did not seek to assimilate the Boers in the same sense that the French sought to acculturise their colonial subjects. Their motives were largely economic, they preferred to exercise political control in collaboration with the indigenous white elites, and they sought to replace the rustic and somewhat shambling ZAR state with an administration that was more conducive to the demands of a modern mining industry. They were also concerned with controlling the high levels of corruption, venality and nepotism that characterised both bureaucratic and business practice within the ZAR – a task which Jan Smuts as the State Attorney had sought to confront within the police in particular.4

The Boer republics, for their part, and despite the provocation of the Jameson Raid, sought a political accommodation with the British and conceded valuable political space – particularly around the question of the Uitlander franchise. It was ultimately President Kruger’s refusal to accede to Britain’s demand for suzerainty that precipitated the ZAR’s ultimatum on 9 October 1899 that initiated the war. Bound by a mutual defence treaty, and highly reluctant to enter the war, the OFS joined forces with the ZAR and entered the war on 11 October 1899.

The Boer War was an anti-colonial struggle predicated on the right of the Boer republics, as modern states and legal sovereign entities, to manage their political affairs independently and according to their own constitutional and political requirements. It was similar to the anti-colonial struggles waged against the white settlers, both Boer and British, by the Basotho, Zulu, Bapedi and Batswana polities – although the latter did not possess the formal veneer of state sovereignty as codified in various legal and juridical arrangements.5

Yet the Boer War was an anti-colonial struggle of a profoundly contradictory type. For while the struggle of the Boers was a fight to affirm the birthright and right to self-determination of the embryonic Afrikaner ‘nation’, it was a war fought by a people who had, in varying degrees, sought to deprive other nations of their own right to self-determination. Indeed, this struggle for self-determination was not unique at the time and occurred within the context of the Mfecane, the massive demographic dislocations caused to the various black African polities within South Africa as a result of a host of political, economic, and environmental factors. Other African kingdoms in the nineteenth century were also seeking, through a combination of strategies remarkably similar to those of the Boers, to assert and maintain their own political independence.

The national content of the anti-colonial struggle of the Boer War was, thus, exceedingly narrow and was itself a national identity that was predicated on the exclusion of all black South Africans and most non-Boer white South Africans (most notably the British and the Portuguese) from its orbit. Although certainly less hegemonic and somewhat more benign (in a quasi-feudal sense) than the colonial practices of the British themselves, the Boer War was indeed an anti-colonial struggle of a special type that was significantly different in both political context and inclusivity from that of the ANC and MK in the twentieth century.

From passive resistance to armed struggle: Towards a non-racial and democratic South Africa

Although the end of the Boer War was to be characterised by considerable bitterness and resentment from the Boer side, it was, ten years later, to provide the basis for a rapprochement between Boer and Britons. In an exercise of supreme pragmatism, Boer and British leaders established the Union of South Africa, whereby both ethnic groups agreed to govern South Africa to their mutual interest and advantage. Most Africans, coloureds and Indians were excluded from this political arrangement (apart from a small number who were eligible for the qualified franchise in the Cape Province) and it was against this backdrop that the first rumblings of mass-based urban resistance to racial segregation and political exclusion occurred.

Although a number of political groupings claiming to represent disenfranchised South Africans were to emerge in the early twentieth century, the ANC, the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA, later to be known as the South African Communist Party) and the independent trade union movement were to be the most influential and effective among black South Africans.6 The first five decades of political resistance against Smut’s initial policy of segregation and, after 1948, the National Party’s (NP) policy of apartheid, however, were to be characterised by their non-violent nature (although many of the political campaigns in the 1940s and the 1950s were to become manifestly militant in nature).
The early ANC, founded in 1912, represented an amalgam of social and political interests (its founding members were largely drawn from religious quarters, professional classes and traditional leaders), non-violent strategies (passive resistance, strikes and deputations to the South African government and the colonial authorities) and a moderate political ethos (mainly a combination of liberal-democratic ideals, Christian values, the principles of ubuntu and the influence of satyagraha on its moral values and political strategies).

The growing institutionalisation of both segregation and apartheid (the passing of the 1913 and 1936 Land Acts, the removal of African and coloured votes from the voters’ roll, the banning of the Communist Party, and the approval of a battery of repressive legislation by the incoming NP in the post-1948 period) witnessed the emergence of a more militant tradition in South African resistance politics in general and the ANC in particular. Greatly influenced by the experiences of hundreds of thousands of South Africans in World War II (where soldiers had been exposed to the ideals of democracy and socialism), the emergence of a militant Youth League within the ANC from the late 1940s onwards, the successful organisation of the 1944 bus strike and the 1946 mineworkers strike, and the growing grassroots collaboration between the ANC, the Communist Party and supportive democratic organisations such as the South African Indian Congress (SAIC), the strategies of the ANC were to shift in terms of scope and content in the 1950s.

Although the ANC continued to eschew violence in the conduct of its mass action campaigns, the initiation of the Defiance Campaign in 1952 was significant in two respects. First, the scope of the protests on a national level outrivalled anything that the ANC had proved capable of organising since its inception in 1912. Planned in conjunction with the SAIC (by this stage, a seasoned practitioner of satyagraha), the Defiance Campaign sought to mobilise as wide a spectrum of national opinion as possible against the NP’s incremental institution of unjust apartheid laws. Protests occurred across the breadth of the country, covering all major urban areas and extending deep into the rural heartlands of the Northern Cape, the Orange Free State, the Eastern Transvaal and Natal. What was significant about the campaign was the extent to which it proved capable of interacting with and organising support from other non-congress quarters: the Torch Commando and elements within the white parliamentary opposition, for example.

Second, the Defiance Campaign was significant in that it provided a compelling example of how the principles of non-racialism could be applied in practice. White, coloured and Indian South Africans were not only arrested for defying the plethora of discriminatory national laws and municipal by-laws, they also played a central role in the organisation of the campaign itself. It was this emerging tradition of non-racialism that was to find its expression in the creation of new resistance organisations such as the Congress of Democrats and the Coloured People’s Organisation in 1952/53. These organisations were to form themselves into the ‘Congress Alliance’ in 1954 and, in 1955, were to convene a Congress of the People, on which occasion the Freedom Charter, the lodestar of the ANC, was adopted.

The politics of the 1950s were to provide a critical crucible within which the later political-military strategy of the ANC was to be forged. This was reflected in the guiding principles of the ANC, the Freedom Charter:

The people shall govern. Every man and women shall have the right to vote and to stand for election to all bodies which make laws. All national groups shall have equal rights. The people shall share in the country’s wealth. The land shall be shared among those who work it. All shall have equal rights before the law. All shall enjoy equal human rights. There shall be work and security. The doors of learning and culture shall be opened. There shall be houses, security and comfort. There shall be peace and friendship.

The final decision to embark on an armed struggle by the ANC was not reached easily by the Congress Alliance, nor was it a strategy that necessarily enjoyed the support of all sectors of the alliance itself. It was the perceived limitations of previous peaceful protest, the Sharpeville massacre of 1960, the intransigence displayed by the regime in declaring the white republic in 1961 and the banning of the ANC and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) in the same year that led to the formation of MK.

Opinions were divided on the moral and practical viability of initiating an armed struggle against the South African state and, for these reasons, the birth of MK was initially not specifically linked to the ANC (in its founding speeches it proclaimed itself a people’s army at the disposal of the South African masses). On the evening of 16 December 1961, a series of explosions rocked all major centres in South Africa. Although little structural damage was caused (the explosives were of a rudimentary nature, and no one was injured or killed) these explosions marked the birth of MK. The motivation for creating MK was boldly stated in the various MK manifestos distributed at the time:

The time comes in the life of any nation when there remain only two choices: submit or fight. That time has 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 ... 

Although this was not a formal declaration of war, and despite the restrained
nature of the initial operations characterising the initiation of the armed
struggle, the launch of MK marked the initiation of a de facto war between
the ANC alliance, MK and the South African government.

Notes

1 Although the Khoi were not to offer the same level and intensity of resistance
to colonial occupation that characterised the later Frontier Wars in the Eastern
Cape and the Anglo-Zulu wars in Natal, they did engage the Dutch colonists on
at least three significant occasions. These were the Hottentot Wars of 1657 and
1673 and the ongoing ten-year guerrilla campaign fought by Chief Gonnema
before he was driven into the mountains by the Dutch. All wars ended,
ultimately, in defeat.

2 A variety of terms have been used to describe the Boer War, ranging from the
simple shorthand reference of the ‘Boer War’ to ‘The Anglo-Boer War’, ‘The
South African War’ and, more recently during the centenary commemorations
‘The Anglo-Boer, South African War’. This monograph acknowledges the
context within which these redefinitions have been phrased and sees the war as
being of a much wider significance and impact than simply a conflict between
the Boer and British ‘races’, but prefers to use the term ‘Boer War’ for simplicity
and focus.


4 See R Mostyn Cleaver’s book The war letters of an English burgher, Protea Book
House, Pretoria, 2000, for an excellent overview of his and Jan Smuts’ attempts
to tackle the pervasive corruption within the ZAR administration in general and
the ZAR police in particular (the latter being particularly pronounced in relation
to the liquor trade).

5 See J Guy’s book The destruction of the Zulu kingdom, Ravan Press,
Johannesburg, 1982, for an excellent account of this period.

6 A number of political groupings of different political leanings and social
composition emerged during this period including the ANC, the South African
Communist Party, the Non-European Unity Movement, the Industrial and
Commercial Workers Union. The last of the traditional military uprisings against
colonial rule was the Bambatha Rebellion in 1906 – an insurrection suppressed
by both British and South African police and military personnel at the time. The
earliest mass-based resistance of a non-military nature was Gandhi’s passive

7 The policy of nonviolent resistance initiated in India by Mahatma Gandhi as a
means of pressing for political reform.

8 Quoted in E Roux’s Time longer than rope: The black man’s struggle for freedom
399.

9 Umkhonto we Sizwe 30th Anniversary Souvenir Magazine, Shell House, Bree
Street, Johannesburg, 1991.