CHAPTER 3

THE MILITARY STRATEGY AND DOCTRINE OF THE BOER REPUBLICS AND UMKHONTO WE SIZWE

Two Types of People's War

Ourselves to know:
The Boer armies and the guerrilla phase of the Boer War[1]

Modern strategy is a product of the increasing sophistication of war in its diverse organisational, operational, tactical, technological and doctrinal aspects. The formulation of military strategy and the discipline of strategic studies in the twentieth century has, as a result, benefited enormously from the intellectual and academic developments of the last five decades in particular. One must therefore avoid being over-prescriptive in an assessment of the strategies adopted by armies in previous centuries and, in this case, the Boer armies in particular.[2]

While the ANC benefited from the intellectual, political and military currents of twentieth-century strategic thinking, the Boers tended to predicate their strategies, when such strategies were formally stated, on cultural assumptions, previous military practice, common sense and sheer intuition. It is difficult to discern in the first phase of the Boer War, and indeed in the preparations for the war itself, the existence of any detailed and integrated politico-military strategy akin to those national security strategies so common to modern states.

The assumption upon which Boer political-military strategy rested was their intention to deter any would-be aggression against the republics primarily through defensive means. This strategy was not necessarily codified in any specific form, but was more a cultural assumption, based on the history of the Boer republics themselves and the nature of the institutions entrusted with the task of ensuring the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Boer republics. Indeed the outbreak of the Boer War witnessed a degree of dissonance and disagreement within the political leadership of the republics and the command echelons of the armed forces over the desired military strategy for the Boer war effort.

From the beginning of the conflict, more junior Boer generals such as General Christiaan de Wet and some of the younger officers such as Jan Smuts

favoured the adoption of a light, highly mobile approach to waging war using the tradition of the 'flying commandos' developed by the Boers in their previous military conflicts. They also advocated the strategy of taking the war deep into Britain's Cape and Natal colonies and striving, if possible, to seize the coastal ports – thereby preventing Britain from replenishing its forces from within these colonies.

These sentiments were not to be shared by the commandant-general of the ZAR, Piet Joubert, who advocated a more defensive approach to the war, best illustrated by the positional tactics adopted in the sieges of Ladysmith, Mafeking and Kimberley. This strategy was shared, in varying degrees, and for a number of political and other considerations, by the older Boer generals and was to result in the adoption, in the first phase of the Boer War, of a defensive strategy that was to greatly squander Boer opportunities, resources, manpower and morale and to allow the British to supplement their forces and launch a vigorous counter-offensive against the Boer forces.

Much of this strategic myopia had to do with the personality of Commandant-General Joubert himself. A man of minor military accomplishments, he was not really taken seriously by the younger or more capable Boer officers and, by all accounts, not even by the rank-and-file themselves. Even his entourage of staff officers was disparagingly referred to as the 'royal family' because of their family connections with the commandant-general, an indication of the nepotism that was prominent within the pre-Boer War military culture.[3] His statement on why the Boers should not take Ladysmith and press on towards the coast once the Brits were routed (an indication of strategic ineptitude now immortalised in the annals of military short-sightedness) was "When God holds out a finger, don't take the whole hand."[4]

Despite the initial success of Boer defensive actions at Elandslaagte, Dundee, Modderspruit, Colenso, Stormberg, Modder Rivier, Magersfontein and the few offensive actions at Ladysmith, Spioenkop and the deep interdictions into the Cape Colony, the British forces were to rapidly regroup and deliver telling blows against the Boer armies. Smuts' words are cogent:

> But however good the Boers were as raw fighting material, their organization was too loose and ineffective, and their officers too inexperienced and in many glaring cases incompetent, to make a resort to offensive tactics possible. The really capable organizers and leaders in the Boer armies were only slowly coming to the front and many of them had started from the very lowest grades in the organization and were only slowly, and then in spite of gross prejudice and conservative stupidity, moving to more responsible positions ... One of the cardinal mistakes of the Boer plan of campaign was the concentration of all possible forces from all possible parts in defensive positions to stop or delay the advance of the main force of the enemy.[5]

The fall of Pretoria was to signal a low point in Boer morale as Smuts so tellingly observed:

> They had found the Commandant-General and the Big War Councils powerless to punish high officers who had committed the most criminal blunders and who continued in their commands only to commit more fatal blunders still. They had lost faith in their organization, they had lost faith in most of their officers, and – what was ugliest – they had lost faith in themselves.[6]

Yet, ironically, it was the failure of this period that was to inspire the Boer fighters to resort to a mode of fighting with which they were most accustomed and which was to deliver devastating blows against the British for the forthcoming two years. The second phase of the Boer War, the guerrilla phase, after the fall of Johannesburg and Pretoria, was to unlock much greater creative military potential within the Boer military campaigns. Although much of this is still inadequately documented – a lack of record that also plagues attempts to reconstruct MK's more recent historical record – the period from December 1900 to May 1902 saw the Boer forces successfully waging a vigorous guerrilla campaign against the British forces which, despite their ultimate defeat, witnessed a creative utilisation of tactics, terrain and leadership.[7]

Disenthralled of the concepts of positional warfare and the quasi-conventional tactics that had plagued their earlier defensive strategy, imbued with a spirit of determination, and free of the inept leadership that had hampered the earlier part of the war, the remaining Boer commandos increasingly adopted an offensive strategy towards the prosecution of the war. Greater emphasis was placed on self-sufficiency in the field and mobility. Despite the continued retention of wagons in the columns – much to the chagrin of General de Wet – De la Rey, De Wet, Botha and Smuts were to hone the art of manoeuvre to a fine operational art during this period:

> To oppose successfully such bodies of men as our burghers had to meet during the war demanded rapidity of action more than anything else. We had to become quick at fighting, quick at reconnoitring, quick, if it became necessary, at flying![8]

Commandos were increasingly deployed in their own areas. Flying commandos were used to great effect (particularly in the Orange Free State). In some cases the commandos were made larger (thereby expediting the removal of ineffectual generals from the ranks of the combatants) and a generation of younger generals moved to the fore during this period.[9]

Commandos became less concerned with occupying ground and permanently seizing positions than with harassing the enemy, over-extending their logistical and communication lines and diverting their forces away from the main theatres of operation and the affected civilian populations in both the OFS and the ZAR (this being the intention behind the invasions into the Cape Colony and Natal during the second period of the war). One of the cardinal principles of war followed by the Boers was to fall back once faced by overwhelming force:

> There is one law of nature ... one iron law which the Boers never forgot ... the answer to overwhelming force is greater mobility.[10]

Although the Boers possessed the weapons with which to fight the war, indeed the 7 mm Mauser used by the Boers was most probably a more effective weapon than the 7.7 mm British Lee-Metfords and Lee Enfields, their ammunition rapidly dwindled once the guerrilla campaign began. The Boers compensated for this by capturing large quantities of British rifles and ammunition to such an extent that the British rifles gradually replaced the Mauser as the Boer weapon of combat.[11]

Food increasingly became a problem as the guerrilla phase of the war continued – a situation exacerbated by Kitchener's 'scorched earth' policy and the institution of the concentration camps. The Boers who invaded the Cape Colony had relatively easy access to provisions from the local Dutch, while the Boer Army[12] tightened its hold on the countryside.

Formal doctrine, those codified texts that determine the way in which the military conducts its activities, was not particularly well developed in the Boer military culture. The manner in which the Boers fought relied more on their own environmental skills (their understanding of the terrain, their outstanding musketry abilities and their equestrian prowess) and their past military experience than it did on anything 'learned' in a formal military environment. Indeed this is by no means an unusual phenomenon and any study of the behaviour of modern armies reveals that:

> Ultimately, an army's behaviour in battle will almost certainly be more of a reflection of its character or culture than of the contents of its doctrine manuals. And if that culture – or mind set, if you will – is formed more by experience than by books, then those who would attempt to modify an army's behaviour need to think beyond doctrine manuals.[13]

The doctrines of the Boer armies, however, were not entirely laissez-faire and implicit. Shortly after their formation in 1881, the *Transvaal Staats Artillerie* (TSA) made a concerted effort to develop their own doctrines. These were based largely on the artillery doctrine of both the Netherlands, where a number of TSA officers had received their training, and Germany (the bulk of the initial officers in the TSA were of Dutch, German and Austro-Hungarian origin).[14]

Prior to the commencement of the Boer War, artillery officers were able to indigenise much of this training through their involvement in various campaigns against African kingdoms in the ZAR. Two important lessons were learned in this process, which were to be put to great effect in the Boer War and which directly contributed to a revision of British artillery doctrine afterwards. The first was to disperse artillery batteries rather than cluster them in larger batteries – thereby maximising the range of firepower at one's disposal. The second was to conceal artillery batteries and only open fire once it was absolutely essential to do so.

The various Boer generals endeavoured throughout the guerrilla phase of the Boer War to maintain a semblance of political and military unity in the application of their guerrilla strategies. Regular contact was maintained with the government-in-exile in the Eastern Transvaal and any decisions on the initiation of new campaigns were first vetted with this political leadership. Yet lack of resources, an under-developed politico-military strategy and the dispersed nature of Boer forces led to contradictions, strategic gaps and inconsistencies in the application of this strategy. A senior Russian officer deployed with the Boer forces during the last phase of guerrilla operations was to express incredulity:

> It is hard to believe that with the communications line being as long as 170 *verstas* [an obsolete Russian unit of measurement; a *versta* was equal to roughly 1 kilometre] and the population being undoubtedly hostile to the British marching through the country, the telegraph links with the rear have not been disturbed a single time. Such enemy actions enable the British to spend very few forces for the protection of the rear.[15]

Yet, what the Boers did not realise at the time was that their guerrilla experience was to provide a major impetus for the development of military

strategy and doctrine in the twentieth century. Their use of mobility and manoeuvre was to impress generations of military officers and to concretely influence the development of doctrines for mobile and manoeuvre warfare in the armed forces of Europe (most notably the UK and Germany), for recognisance and special forces regiments,[16] and for the conduct of guerrilla campaigns throughout the world.

Despite the deprivations to which the Boer forces were subjected during the guerrilla phase, the military capacity of their forces to harass, contain and inflict serious defeats on a vastly superior and better resourced military force was impressive. At the beginning of the Boer War the Boers possessed some 54,000 soldiers (both regular artillery personnel and volunteer commandos), 1,400 uniformed police and a few thousand international volunteers (2,000–2,500 personnel). By the end of the war, the Boer forces had been reduced to some 20,000 personnel, whereas British forces deployed in the country exceeded 400,000![17]

The conclusion of the Boer War represented a pyrrhic victory for the British Empire in South Africa. The costs of the war itself were appalling: the British lost almost 8,000 men and 20,000 were wounded; the Boers lost 4,000 men and an unknown number were wounded. In addition, 116,000 black South Africans were kept in concentration camps, of whom 16,000 or more perished, while 115,000 Boers had been kept in concentration camps, of whom 27,027 perished.[18]

From passive resistance to insurrection: The development of MK strategy and doctrine from 1961 to 1994

Opinions within the Congress Alliance were divided on the moral and practical viability of initiating an armed struggle against the South African state. The inherent religiosity of the Congress Alliance and its fundamentally humanist nature saw great reluctance by many ANC members to embrace a strategy that was starkly different from previous alliance strategies and that raised as many moral dilemmas as armed struggle.

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.[19] Despite these reservations, however, it was clear that the mood of many black South Africans was inclining in the direction of violent struggle, particularly as the severity of state repression increased.

Militarily, these operations were characterised by their simplicity. Homemade explosives were used, and much of the expertise was provided by World War II veterans who now found themselves within the ranks of MK (the late Jack Hodgson playing a prominent role). Anticipating coercive measures from the state, MK despatched a number of senior commanders abroad to facilitate the establishment of an external infrastructure and secure advanced training for MK combatants. Mandela himself was to feature prominently in these efforts and was himself to receive military training in Algeria and Ethiopia between 1961 and 1962.

The initial phase of armed struggle was characterised by an emphasis on sabotage. The High Command of MK, under the leadership of Nelson Mandela, did not believe that sabotage in itself would bring the government to 'its senses' and maintained that even 'at this late hour' the prospects of peaceful settlement should not be ruled out. The political rationale for this approach was exemplified by the last serving MK chief of staff, the late Chris Hani, when he stated:

> At its inception the High Command decided on selective sabotage as the form armed resistance would take. All efforts were made to avoid the loss of human life. We clearly stated that the aim of the campaign was to bring the government to its senses before it was too late and save our country from going down the path of war which would leave scars very difficult to heal and further polarize South African society.[20]

Sabotage operations continued sporadically for more than a year after the inception of MK. Included among the targets were pass offices, power pylons and police stations. Most MK personnel lacked, at the beginning, specialised training in covert operations and many of these operations were, understandably, characterised by a certain degree of amateurishness. A number of MK saboteurs and would-be saboteurs were captured and imprisoned as a result.

The state was initially caught off-guard by the sabotage campaign and hastily responded on a number of levels, passing a number of laws aimed at containing and crushing the resistance. The General Law Amendment Act (also known as the Sabotage Act) provided for indefinite detention without trial. The Unlawful Organizations Act provided for banning of specified organisations if the Minister of Justice deemed fit.[21] The ANC had anticipated these developments and in 1961 despatched Oliver Reginald Tambo (later to become the president of the ANC after Mandela's arrest and imprisonment)

to establish a mission in exile with the twofold purpose of mobilising international support for the struggle and securing military training facilities for MK abroad.

Several key cultural, political and institutional features characterised the birth of the new guerrilla army, many of which were to exert a profound influence on the reprofessionalisation of the armed forces and the stabilisation of civil-military relations in the post-1994 period. These features were all, in essence, a reflection of the political culture and normative predisposition of the Congress Alliance itself. First, the activities of MK were situated solidly within the tradition of subservience to the political and civil authority of the ANC. This was reflected on a number of political and practical levels. MK remained the instrument of the liberation movement and was driven by its political programmes (this was to assume a more concrete expression with the formal linking of MK to the ANC at the Lobatse conference in 1963). Political policy and strategy would determine MK's military strategy and the armed struggle was not an end in itself, but would strive to complement the mass political struggle.

Second, a strong element of moral restraint characterised MK's initial campaigns. This restraint was the product of the influence of two factors: the strong ethos within the Congress Alliance; and the realisation that the population had to be politically and psychologically prepared to support an armed struggle. Third, a distinguishing feature of MK was its non-racial ideology as reflected in the multi-racial and multi-ethnic nature of its echelons, hierarchy and its rank-and-file membership. Unlike any previous armed formation in South African history, MK was representative of South Africa's diverse population in both its institutional make-up and its culture and traditions.

Somewhat predictably, the sabotage campaign did not 'bring government to its senses' and waves of arrests saw many prominent ANC members being arrested, prosecuted and jailed. Rather than seek dialogue, the state began to professionalise both its intelligence operations and its counter-insurgency strategies in the light of these developments. A Directorate of Military Intelligence was established in 1960 and its officers were sent for advanced training in France, Germany, the UK and the USA.[22] Some were to receive 'on-the-job' training in the conduct and pursuit of counter-insurgency campaigns (General Magnus Malan being attached the French Army in Algeria for this purpose).[23] Republican Intelligence (civilian intelligence) was formed in 1961, with its primary mission being the containment and crushing of the activities of both MK and the ANC. Specialised training in interrogation

and counter-intelligence techniques was provided to Republican Intelligence via the offices of France, Germany, the UK and the USA.

Recognising the necessity of moving to more sophisticated levels of guerrilla struggle, and acknowledging the need to devise a more complex guerrilla strategy, the ANC instructed a number of its senior members to study revolutionary warfare and theories of guerrilla struggle in more detail. Indeed, the intellectual environment within which the refinement of MK strategy occurred was infinitely more favourable than that which had faced the Boer armies at the time of their decision to launch the guerrilla phase of the Boer War.

Revolutionary struggles that integrated both mass political mobilisation and guerrilla strategies had been successfully waged in the Soviet Union (1917), the People's Republic of China (1949), and a number of socialist countries in Eastern Europe. Partisan resistance throughout Europe during World War II had left a rich legacy of underground work and guerrilla *modus operandi*. The campaigns that were being waged across the globe (Vietnam, Cuba and various Latin American countries) could draw from these experiences.

In developing their strategy of guerrilla warfare, the founders of MK had access to many texts from which they could gain insight. The writings of Lenin, Trotsky, Giap, Mao, Che Guevara, and the Boer War generals were among the first texts to be used.[24] MK commanders travelled abroad to the USSR, the GDR (German Democratic Republic) and China to acquire the necessary strategic, doctrinal and technical expertise with which to wage guerrilla warfare. The result of this process of strategic introspection was twofold.

First, it was to lead to the development of a sophisticated political-military strategy that sought to situate the military context of the struggle within the overall political objectives of national liberation. Unlike the Anglo-Saxon approach to doctrinal development – which sees a relatively clear-cut division between strategy and doctrine (and equates doctrine with the operational and technical aspects of war-fighting) – this approach was more consistent with the Soviet strategic and doctrinal tradition. This tradition did not stress the bifurcation between strategy and doctrine, but sought to emphasise the organic link between the two aspects, namely:

> ... political (sometimes socio-political or military-political) and military-technical. An understanding of the two aspects and their mutual relationship is fundamental to and understanding of the overall concept. These aspects convey an appreciation ... on various

> key issues, including the nature of the political and military threat, the nature and essence of future war, and – flowing from these – changing priorities involving the composition, structure and training of the armed forces.[25]

The political dimension of this strategy was to be articulated in such documents as the South African Communist Party's manifesto, 'The South African Road to Freedom', adopted by the party in 1962, in which the initial principles of the strategy of internal colonialism was to receive initial expression. The military components of the strategy were to be reflected more fully in the Manifesto of Umkhonto we Sizwe, which accompanied its launch on 16 December 1961.

Second, it was to lead to the development of Operation Mayibuye: a comprehensive plan designed to create and internalise the structures required for the successful prosecution of the armed struggle within South Africa. Operation Mayibuye had a threefold series of objectives. The first was to prepare an underground structure capable of ensuring the revolutionary overthrow of the state. The second was to provide for the military training of MK personnel, whether at home or abroad, so that MK would possess the capacity to confront the state militarily. The third was to ensure, via the ANC's external structures, that the necessary levels of international support accrued to the liberation struggle.

Very few of these goals were to be fully realised. Barely a year and a half after its formation, MK's High Command within the country was exposed at a farm outside Johannesburg, and virtually its entire command structure was arrested and detained. In the subsequent trial known as the Rivonia Trial, most of those arrested were sentenced to lengthy periods of imprisonment, while a few managed to escape. The rapidity with which the state responded to the emergence of MK reflected two pertinent weaknesses within its organisation, both of which had contributed to the arrest of the High Command and the effective neutralisation of MK activities within the country for the next decade.

The first was the lack of familiarity of the leadership with the basic tenets of underground work (most members were drawn from the tradition of the high-profile resistance campaigns of the 1950's. The second, related to the first, was the extent to which MK relied on the experience and leadership of publicly recognised activists, thereby facilitating the identification and monitoring of these senior commanders by the intelligence services of the South African government.

The post-Rivonia period saw the ANC concentrating on developing its external infrastructure and securing military facilities for the training of existing and prospective combatants. Initially training for the infant guerrilla army was provided by countries such as Algeria (where Mandela himself had received training during his underground period prior to his arrest), Tanzania and the Soviet Union. These training opportunities were to expand considerably in later years, with training being provided in virtually all the former socialist countries as well as in a range of African countries.

By 1964 MK-in-exile already possessed hundreds of trained soldiers available for deployment within South Africa, but was limited in its ability to do so by a number of problems. The first was the smashing of the internal High Command network referred to above. The second was the absence of friendly countries adjacent to South Africa. Unlike the Zimbabwean and Namibian struggles (which possessed the friendly borders of Mozambique, Angola and Zambia respectively), Southern Rhodesia, Bechuanaland (Botswana), Basutoland (Lesotho), Swaziland and Mozambique were either occupied by settler regimes or were too dependent on South Africa to challenge its hegemony in the region.

The effect of this regional configuration was threefold. First, it was to deny MK easy access to South Africa, and to complicate and over-extend its logistical and communications lines (a perennial problem for MK in the 1980s when its military activities within the country increased dramatically). Second, it was to retard the development of an internal underground capable of extending the armed struggle and taking it to qualitatively higher levels of development. Third, it was to lead to a partial demoralisation within MK ranks as highly motivated recruits were denied the opportunity of being deployed within the country.

The neutralisation of the MK High Command within the country was to lead to a series of operational reappraisals that ultimately, at the Morogoro Conference in 1969, led to a revision of its military strategy in general. In 1965 the ANC formed an alliance with the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) and its military wing, the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA).

In the forthcoming two years both MK and ZIPRA did extensive reconnaissance within Rhodesia with the intention of launching a massive infiltration of ZIPRA and MK personnel into Rhodesia. On 30–31 July 1967 a large joint MK/ZIPRA detachment crossed the Zambezi river into Rhodesia. The intention behind the incursion had been for ZIPRA to establish itself within post-UDI (Unilateral Declaration of Independence) Rhodesia and for the MK

contingent, known as the Luthuli Detachment, to traverse Rhodesia on its western flank, and to infiltrate South Africa across the Northern Transvaal borders.[26] The joint force was soon detected by the Rhodesian security forces and a series of pitched battles were to ensue in the Wankie and Sipolilo areas between 1967 and 1968. The MK/ZIPRA forces were routed, but only after Vorster had authorised the despatch of large numbers of South African Police (SAP) and South African Defence Force (SADF) personnel to assist the beleaguered Rhodesian forces in their campaign.

Undoubtedly one of the mistakes made by the ZIPRA and MK commanders in the planning of the Wankie campaign was to underestimate the importance of building a local power base among the people prior to entering into armed engagements with the enemy. Subjectivist accounts of armed struggle in which military actions provide the 'trigger' for mass mobilisation and insurrection were to be critiqued at the ANC's Morogoro Conference in 1969. The conference sought to achieve a higher level of integration between political and military activities (leading to the establishment of the Revolutionary Council), ensure better training of military personnel within MK, and establish a more effective political and military presence within South Africa. The strategy and tactics document that emerged from this conference reflected these concerns and acknowledged the critical importance of building a mass revolutionary base prior to launching a people's war.

Although military activities within South Africa were to remain at a low in the late 1960s and the early 1970s, a number of attempts were made to reconsolidate MK underground structures. Despite the high attrition rate that characterised many of these operations, some commanders remained undetected within the country for long periods (the late Chris Hani being a case in point). Externally, the focus of MK activities remained on the training of its personnel. A number of facilities were availed to the young army, including training in Algeria, Egypt, Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Of these, the Soviet Union remained the most utilised and provided a range of advanced training opportunities, including intelligence, artillery, infantry, engineering and communications specialisation and staff college and academy training for selected volunteers.

The military culture that began emerging in MK in the 1960s and the early 1970s reflected a compound of influences and traditions. MK's politico-strategic parameters were informed by the ANC's strategy and political campaigns within the country and the traditions of people's war developing in the Third World. Its military-specific culture reflected an amalgam of Soviet-influenced military practices (drill, instructor and officer training, weapons techniques, etc) and classic guerrilla army traditions (a minimal rank structure

and an emphasis on self-sufficiency, innovation and mission-oriented command once deployed).

A number of factors coalesced in the mid-1970s to provide MK with more favourable operational circumstances than before. First, the release of some imprisoned MK commanders between 1975 and 1976 (Joe Gqabi, Andrew Masondo, Indres Naidoo and others) had served to popularise MK among a population increasingly fettered, and hence ignorant of the liberation movements, by the extreme censorship laws of the John Vorster administration. Second, the independence of Mozambique and Angola between 1974 and 1975 provided MK with access to training facilities and conduit opportunities through these countries that were considerably closer to home than before. Third, and most important, the 1976 uprisings saw thousands of students leaving South Africa to join MK. Known as the 'June 16th Detachment', their numbers and their experiences were to herald a new phase in MK's armed struggle.

A variety of military training programmes were initiated in newly established MK camps in Angola in the post-1976 period for MK personnel. In addition to basic training (drill, musketry, typography, tactics, political education), a number of shorter, specialised courses were offered in, among others, communications, intelligence, engineering and general 'crash' courses. Hundreds of young recruits were also sent abroad for advanced engineering, intelligence and artillery training. The political education component of MK training remained critical to the development of MK's corporate identity, and no training was complete without the inclusion of political training (as reflected in the importance of the commissar system within MK throughout its existence). By 1977 MK had begun to infiltrate hundreds of its combatants back into the country.

Despite the swelling of MK's ranks and its heightened ability to consolidate its underground network within the country (particularly in light of the students' extensive links with the community) the focus of MK work for the next few years was to remain essentially of a political nature. Recruits were instructed to contribute to the building of the ANC's underground capacity within the country and those who delegated military-specific tasks were instructed to confine their actions to acts of 'armed propaganda'. This meant, in effect, that MK actions sought to complement the various mass action campaigns within the country, and that only symbols of apartheid were to be targeted (police stations, railway lines, administrative institutions, etc).

The 1977–1980 period witnessed MK engaging in a range of operations that were to dramatically increase in the forthcoming years. Police stations were

attacked (Booysens, Soweto, Soekmekaar) and MK combatants were involved in physical clashes with the police in the rural areas (Derdepoort and Rustenberg for instance).[27] Arrests of MK personnel increased, and the SADF lengthened its period of whites-only national service to two years. MK bases in Angola were also targeted in South African Air Force raids and the frequent bombing of SWAPO bases was accompanied by the bombing of MK military facilities. Given the vulnerability of many MK bases in the south of Angola, it was decided to relocate most bases to the north of the country, particularly in those provinces that were accessible to Luanda. The major camps (apart from urban training facilities within Luanda itself) included Malanje, Quibaxe, Pango, Caculama, Funda and Fazenda.

The early 1980s saw MK continuing to focus on armed propaganda and political mobilisation, although the nature of MK operations was to become increasingly more sophisticated. In June 1980 an MK Special Operations unit hit the Sasol oil refinery complex, causing damage estimated at R66 million (South African intelligence personnel believed that it had been inspired by a similar operation by ZIPRA cadres against an oil refinery in Salisbury in 1979).[28] The operation had been well planned, had been executed by MK Special Operations personnel (known as the Solomon Mahlangu Detachment) and had demonstrated MK's capability to move beyond simpler acts of sabotage.

The year 1981 saw MK operations interfacing with the nationwide anti-Republic Day demonstrations and focusing on the sabotage of specific strategic installations. Targets sabotaged included major ESKOM power plants in the Transvaal, attacks on military bases in the rural areas, the sabotage of certain government buildings, and further attacks on the police. On 9 August 1981 MK Special Operations personnel launched a dramatic attack on the Voortekkerhoogte military complex outside Pretoria. Five projectiles were fired from a 122 mm rocket launcher (the first time that artillery was used within South Africa by MK units) and a number of targets within the complex were struck (including a near-miss on the fuel depot within the complex).

The next year, 1982, witnessed a further range of MK actions, including a Special Operations attack on the Koeberg nuclear power plant outside Cape Town. Over a period of 12 hours, a series of explosions rocked the various security areas within the plant. In a further indication of MK's growing sophistication in the sphere of Special Operations, May 1983 saw a car bomb explode outside the headquarters of the South African Air Force and of Military Intelligence in Pretoria. Extensive structural damage was caused to both defence HQs, a number of military personnel were killed and a

number of civilians were also killed in the aftermath of the explosion. While this operation clearly indicated MK's capacity to operate deep within the country's urban areas, it reflected a shift away from symbolic military actions. As if to prepare people for this tactical shift, the ANC announced that it could not guarantee that civilians would not be injured in 'crossfire':

> We further accepted that some civilians might be caught in the crossfire. Apartheid was definitely at war with our people and we understood that in a situation of war some casualties, though unintended, might be unavoidable. But we remained emphatic that we would not deliberately choose white civilians.[29]

Criticisms of these operations, however, maintained that spectacular military operations of the Voortrekkerhoogte type were no substitute for the task of rooting the military underground in the local population. There were definite reasons for a shift to the special operations-type activities, however, and this was reflected in the fact that Special Operations, initially under the command of the late Joe Slovo, resided under the direct command of the president of the ANC, Oliver Reginald Tambo (with the commander of MK, Commander Joe Modise, retaining only nominal oversight over this division).[30]

The Kabwe conference in Zambia in 1985 isolated three sets of problems confronting MK. The first was the urban focus of most of the military operations MK had conducted to date. The neglect of the countryside, it was argued, had allowed the state to counter-organise the population in these areas through the manipulation of tribal elders, the institution of homeland administrations, and the creation of SADF tribal battalions in these areas. The second problem was the belief that MK actions should move increasingly from those of armed propaganda to a position of people's war. This perspective was increasingly reflected in the strategic positions adopted within MK (the development of theoretical positions around the concept of the 'revolutionary army' for instance) and MK training (the emphasis on military combat work being a case in point).

The third was to redefine what constituted a legitimate military target. Particular emphasis was placed on the direct military engagement of SADF and SAP personnel and the 'taking of the war' into the white areas. This did not necessarily entail the targeting of the white population, but rather sought to ensure that strategic installations within the white areas were increasingly targeted and that those white communities who were involved in the SADF's area defence system (such as the rural farming community) were engaged on a military level. Typically this translated itself into a series of sub-strategies

whereby landmines were placed on roads in the border areas of the country, farmers who were known to be active within the SADF commando system were targeted by MK combatants, and military and police personnel and facilities within white suburbs were attacked by MK units.

Despite the declaration of a nationwide state of emergency in 1985, and the detention of tens of thousands of activists between 1985 and 1987, MK managed to maintain a steady increase in both its rural and urban operations. The strategy of taking the war into the white areas was partially realised as economic and strategic installations in white suburbs were attacked. Special Operations activities during this period included the detonation of a car bomb outside the Johannesburg Magistrate's Court (killing four policemen) in May 1987 and attacks on a number of military facilities within the mainly white areas.

Perhaps the most dramatic Special Operations exercise was launched in the rural areas in 1989. A large group of MK Special Operations personnel launched a sustained mortar attack on the South African Air Forces' secret 3 Satellite Radar Station at Klippan in the Western Transvaal. Although no SADF personnel were killed, a number were injured, and considerable structural damage was done to the radar facility itself. What was also significant with regard to MK capabilities in the late 1980s was the development of a relatively sophisticated MK Intelligence Division (MKIZA).

Despite the difficulties encountered by MK in organising and prosecuting the armed struggle within South Africa, it was to accumulate considerable combat experience within the frontline states. Apart from MK's experience of having engaged the Rhodesian Army and the SAP between 1967 and 1968, it was to participate in some of the major military campaigns in neighbouring countries. MK personnel participated with FRELIMO forces in the liberation of Tete Province in the early 1970s, and hundreds fought with ZIPRA forces in Zimbabwe throughout the 1970s (and were even on the verge of being integrated into the new Zimbabwe Defence Force in 1980 before South African Military Intelligence got wind of their intentions and prevented their inclusion).

Rallying to the assistance of their MPLA allies, in 1987 MK opened up a front in Angola against UNITA. Known as the 'Northern Front', it saw the extensive deployment of MK personnel against UNITA rebels in the area for more than two years. Responsibilities included patrols, convoys and attacks on UNITA positions. The equipment used reflected MK's growing sophistication in the field of weaponry, including artillery such as anti-aircraft artillery (ZGUs), 122 mm rocket launchers, and 81 mm and 60 mm mortars.

Dozens of MK personnel lost their lives in this conflict, and MK's involvement in the 'Northern Front' was only terminated by the relocation of its military personnel to Uganda and Tanzania in the light of agreements reached in the run-up to Namibian independence.

Although the subordination of MK to the political authority and direction of the ANC in this period was never seriously questioned, it is perhaps not unsurprising that MK developed a quasi-militaristic identity that sometimes resulted in differences of opinion between the MK leadership and those of the National Executive Committee (NEC).[31] This was the twin product of the initial failure of the ANC to effectively integrate MK activities within South Africa into a corresponding political hierarchy and the physical separation of the bulk of MK combatants in the camps in Angola from the non-military rank and file in their various locations.

The period prior to the unbanning of the ANC in 1990 found MK undergoing a profound re-examination of its roles, missions and capabilities. This reassessment had been a long time in the making and had been reflected, in varying degrees, in the Morogoro Conference, the Kabwe Conference and the restructuring of the ANC in 1983. An observation by Ronnie Kasrils in the late 1980s reflects this strategic thrust behind this re-evaluation:

> It is certainly true that the blows MK has delivered to the enemy, and the heroic sacrifices of our combatants, have played a vital role in inspiring our people and popularizing the ANC. Yet despite the tremendous upsurge of mass resistance over the past three years we were not able to take full advantage of the favourable conditions that materialized. We were unable to deploy sufficient forces at home; our cadres still found big problems in basing themselves amongst our people; our underground failed to grow sufficiently ... the incredible mass resistance and strikes were consequently not sufficiently reinforced by armed struggle.[32]

Acknowledging that MK's major weakness was that it was primarily an army-in-exile, Kasrils outlined the necessity of building the 'revolutionary army' (a concept that reflected the influence of Leninist teachings on underground work, Soviet experiences of establishing clandestine units and classic guerrilla theories). The building of the revolutionary army involved three components. The first consisted of organised advanced detachments, which constituted the core of this army. These detachments consisted of guerrilla units in the countryside; underground combat units in the urban areas; and self-defence units based among the people. The latter were to become a reality, and a

problem within South Africa, particularly as political violence engulfed South Africa in the post-1990 period.

The second component was the revolutionary armed people: those advanced sectors of the population who, trained and armed, would fall under the command and control of the organised advanced detachments. The third component consisted of those units or individuals within the enemy's armed forces – whether soldiers or police – who had consciously sided with the revolutionary army. The entire process of creating the revolutionary army was known as 'military combat work' – the 'military' aspect referring to work within the enemy's armed forces, and the 'combat' aspect referring to the creation of the guerrilla units in their entirety.

The creation of the revolutionary army was only partially realised. The politics of transition pre-empted the emergence of those conditions that would have allowed its fuller realisation. There were, however, areas where aspects of this strategy were realised and these deserve individual mention. The first was undoubtedly Operation Vula: an operation that was a product of the attempts by the ANC leadership to remedy the organisational weaknesses that had been identified at successive ANC national conferences and strategy sessions. The ANC had undergone a wide-ranging organisational restructuring process since 1983 that had profound implications for both the organisation and activities of MK.

Most significantly, this took the form of a reorganisation of the ANC and MK's external and internal structures. Prior to 1983, ANC political structures and MK military structures operated separately and coordination of political and military activities, to the extent that it occurred, took place at a strategic level (the level of the Revolutionary Council) and not at an operational or tactical level (in the rear areas such as Angola; the forward areas such as Botswana, Zimbabwe, Swaziland, Lesotho and Mozambique; and the underground structures within South Africa). Although MK structures strove to harmonise their activities with those of the emerging mass resistance within South Africa, that was seldom achieved and MK units frequently engaged in military actions separate from and uncoordinated with those of the broader political struggle.

Attempts were made to rectify this situation, the most notable being the convening of a meeting of all regional front commander and commissars in Maputo in 1983. By 1986 the ANC political-military hierarchy had been substantially altered in organisational format and strategic direction. The most significant aspect had been the replacement of the Revolutionary Council by the Political Military Council (PMC), which controlled and integrated the

activities of the Internal Political Committee (responsible for the coordination of ANC political activities within South Africa), Military Headquarters (responsible for the coordination of operations, ordinance, intelligence and communications) and NAT (responsible for the coordination of civilian intelligence, counter-intelligence and security).

Political-military structures were replicated downwards at the level of external regional PMCs (Swaziland, Mozambique, Lesotho, Zimbabwe, Botswana and London), internal regional PMCs (Western Cape, Border region, and Northern Transvaal for example), area PMCs in such cities as Durban and Pretoria, and even local PMCs in some towns and villages. Some of these PMC structures worked exceedingly effectively, although others were to suffer from a degree of infiltration from the South African government's intelligence agencies (Swaziland and Botswana for example) and from often strained relations between the political and military components (for example the Zimbabwe PMC in the late 1980s).

It was against this background that Operation Vula was initiated in 1986. It involved the deployment of senior and middle-ranking MK personnel in exile back to South Africa to create and develop the internal underground structures within the country. Vula, until its untimely exposure in 1990, was to prove a successful example of how the internal underground could be strengthened and consolidated. It managed to infiltrate large quantities of weapons into the country; it maintained an effective intelligence network, managing, at various levels, to infiltrate both the Special Branch and the National Intelligence Service; and its communication system was considerably more effective than the cumbersome channels of the past, using, as it did, sophisticated computer links between South Africa and London.

The ANC's and MK's strategy of working within the enemy's armed forces admitted to varying levels of success. The ousting of the Stella Sigcau administration in the Transkei homeland in 1987 by disaffected Transkei Defence Force (TDF) officers and the expulsion of a clique of former Rhodesian officers who dominated the TDF ushered in an intriguing period in the history of the Eastern Cape. A young and charismatic officer, General Bantu Holomisa, assumed the reins of power within the homeland and, almost immediately, allowed prominent political prisoners to return from exile, unbanned the ANC and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) and allowed MK personnel free transit and domicile within the territory.

Between 1987 and 1994 the Transkei was to become, in effect, a 'liberated' area governed by a de facto alliance between the Holomisa administration

and a well-established ANC/MK presence within the region. MK personnel worked closely with TDF personnel; joint training was done both within the Transkei and on courses conducted outside South Africa; and senior MK personnel from exile made use of the territory for the planning of their underground work within the rest of South Africa.

Dissatisfaction within sectors of the other homeland defence forces resulted in two coups d'état by the Ciskei Defence Force and the Venda Defence Force against their respective administrations and an abortive coup by the Bophuthatswana Defence Force against the Mangope administration. Although neither of the successful coups favoured the building of an ANC or MK underground within these other territories, it was clear that a degree of sympathy for MK existed within elements of the officer corps of the homeland defence forces.

The unbanning of the ANC and MK in February 1990 led to a de facto cease-fire emerging between MK and the security forces. This was formally ratified in August 1990 when MK announced that armed actions were to be suspended for the first time in 29 years. The suspension of the armed struggle took most MK members by surprise because little preparation had been done among MK cadres for this reality. Intensive political work among MK structures, however, ameliorated the effects of this initial confusion. As a result of the decision to suspend the armed struggle, MK activities were to assume a qualitatively different hue as peace-time preparations were made for MK's eventual integration into a future defence force.

Recognising the inevitability of integration, Military Headquarters (now located at Shell House in Johannesburg) despatched thousands of MK personnel abroad for conventional command and staff training. This training was provided at a number of locations. The first was the training of new recruits in the new MK camps in Uganda and Tanzania (relocated from Angola since the independence of Namibia). The second was the attendance by MK personnel at both junior and senior staff courses in such countries as Zimbabwe, Uganda, Ghana, India, Nigeria and even the UK.

The third was the training of MK personnel within the country, either in aspects of conventional and counter-insurgency warfare by the TDF or, at a more rudimentary level, the training of self defence units by MK personnel active within the country. The advantage of most of this training was its institutional and cultural compatibility with what appeared, at the time, to be the likely 'model' of a future defence force – a British-style defence force akin to those in other Commonwealth countries (a belief that has been confirmed by the past six years of the integration process). But from 1993 onwards MK was to enter into possibly the most crucial stage of its history – its integration into the new South African National Defence Force.

Notes

1 Deneys Reitz provides a very practical example of the reluctance of white workers and rural poor to fight in the various battles of the Boer War in his book *Commando: A Boer journal of the Boer War*, Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg, 1990, pp 48–50.

2 See D A Baldwin, National security studies: whence and whither, Institute of War and Peace Studies, Columbia University, Paper presented at the 1993 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, 2–5 September 1993, for an excellent overview of the development of national security studies.

3 D Reitz, op cit, p 9 and 32.

4 Ibid, p 42.

5 J Smuts, *Memoirs of the Boer War*, Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg 1994, pp 69–72.

6 Ibid, p 52.

7 J D Harris, The other Vlakfontein: An action in the Anglo-Boer War: 3 July 1901, *Military History Journal* (incorporating *Museum Review*) 9 (6), December 1994.

8 R C de Wet, Three years war, *Scripta Africana*, May 1985, p 75.

9 See Smuts' account of this period, op cit, pp 69–81, as well as Trew, op cit, pp 154–155 for an overview of the initial phase of the guerrilla campaign.

10 T Pakenham, *Die Boere-oorlog*, Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg, 1981, pp 348–349 (author's translation of quotation).

11 P Trew, *The Boer War generals,* Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg, 1999, p 12.

12 Strictly speaking, 'commandos' or 'forces' is a more accurate term.

13 P Johnston, Doctrine is not enough: The effect of doctrine on the behaviour of armies, *Parameters: US Army War College Quarterly*, Autumn 2000, p 37.

14 See the review by D Friend, Training doctrines of the Staatsartillerie of the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek, *Military History Journal* (incorporating *Museum Review*), 11(5), June 2000.

15 G Shubin, Russian perceptions of the Boer and British armies: An introduction through Russian documents, *Scientia Militaria, South African Journal of Military Studies*, 30(1), 2000

16 Churchill was to bestow the title of 'commando' on the British Army's Special Forces units as a sign of respect for the Boer commandos that he had encountered in the Boer War.

17 P Meiring, *Smuts: The patriot*, Tafelberg, Cape Town, 1975, p 49.

18 J Ploeger, Die stigting en werksaamhede van die "Nederlandsch Bijstandsfonds Voor Zuid Afrika": 1900–1903', *Militaria* (professional journal of the SADF), 23(1),1993, p 35.

19 The late Joe Slovo, for example, observes that the former president of the ANC, Chief Albert Luthuli, never endorsed the transition to the armed struggle and neither, he speculates, would many of those in ANC leadership as a whole have done so if the decision had been presented to them in 1960, in J Slovo, *Slovo: The unfinished autobiography*, Ravan, Johannesburg, 1995, p 147.

20 C Hani, ANC and armed struggle, Paper delivered at ANC/IDASA seminar on The Future of the Security and Defence in South Africa, Lusaka, 24–27 May 1990.

21 E Roux, *Time longer than rope: The black man's struggle for freedom in South Africa,* The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, USA, 1978, p 425.

22 S L le Grange, Die *Geskiedenis Van Die Hoof Van Staf Inligting* (The history of the Chief of Staff Intelligence), *Militaria*, 12(2), 1982.

23 D and J de Villiers, *PW*, Tafelberg, Cape Town, 1983.

24 Discussions with *mgwenya* (founding members of MK) reveal that the subsequent development of the 'M' Plan had been based on a systematic appreciation of the history, scope and content of guerrilla warfare.

25 B Menning, Basis of Soviet military doctrine, in *Soviet military doctrine from Lenin to Gorbachev: 1915 –1991*, edited by Willard Frank and Philip Gillette, Greenwood, London, 1992.

26 Many of these combatants are still alive and a number of them currently occupy senior positions in the new South African National Defence Force. They are affectionately known in MK as the *mgwenyas* ('crocodiles') and are generally regarded as the founding members of the organisation.

27 Many of these operations, to date, have not been chronicled and still exist, largely, within the oral traditions of MK. Unless timeously recorded, these experiences run the risk of being forgotten (particularly with the deaths of many older combatants in later years) or mythologised.

28 Author's own experience in the former South African Defence Force between 1978 and 1980.

29 Hani, op cit, p 3.

30 It has been maintained by former senior commanders within the Special Operations division that Special Operations activities in the post-1984 period accounted for almost 50 per cent of the military activities conducted by MK within the country. These statistics are hard to verify, but they do indicate the extent to which Special Operations was active within South Africa in the 1980s.

31 'Militarism' is a contested term that does not admit to easy delineation.

32 R Kasrils, The revolutionary army: Discussion article. Sechaba, September 1988. Available online at < http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/mk/rkmk.html> (Accessed August 2006.)