

‘Did terror tactics help the ANC to end apartheid and take power in South Africa?’

Adam Moolna, July 2009

Terror as a tactic is essentially the use of intimidation or fear to cause a target audience to behave in a certain manner. Its use by guerrilla groups involved in asymmetrical warfare against a militarily superior foe, usually a government, is what is customarily referred to as terrorism. Terror, however, has also been used widely by governments in suppression of those same guerrilla groups. During the apartheid years in South Africa, terror was used widely by both the state and by opposition groups. The African National Congress (ANC) struggle against apartheid illustrates the multiplicity of forms that terror can take and their ability to both help and hinder guerrilla movements.

From the early 1800s to the 1940s, there had been an ongoing contest (and two major wars fought) for political control in South Africa between white settlers of Dutch descent (Afrikaners or Boers) and the British. The second Anglo-Boer war ended in 1902 with a negotiated victory for the British and the newly consolidated Union of South Africa emerged in 1910. The ANC was founded in 1912 as a peaceful organisation to represent black African interests amongst the continued struggle for dominance between the two white communities. However, hard-line Afrikaner nationalists gradually achieved dominance and, from the 1940s, began to legislate for the formalised separation of the races (‘apartheid’). South Africa was to become an exclusively white state, with the black majority segregated into tribal homelands and to supply menial labour. In the face of this, the ANC tried to formulate its opposition through protest meetings and consultative political channels. State terror, however, effectively neutered the ANC as a potential focus for anti-apartheid efforts through intimidation, political arrests and brutal policing. The ANC itself began to employ terror, in the form of sabotage attacks on state infrastructure, during the 1950s. This approach, however, had little effect beyond highlighting the ANC's military and political impotence; and the group's Marxist ideology continued to appeal to only a limited constituency. It was instead spontaneous protests in black townships that became the visible aspect of anti-apartheid opposition in South Africa, typically erupting in angry response to the appearance of a further law restricting the freedom of daily life. The ANC vied with rival groups to assert control over these protests and, by latching on to the widespread unrest, to become a mass movement. Terror was central to exerting control, with the beginnings of intimidation and brutal violence by gangs from the ANC and its rival offshoot the Pan-African Congress (PAC).

In 1960, disorder whipped up by PAC gangs in the township of Sharpeville resulted in a massacre of blacks by the police. In the face of this growing civil disorder, the state banned the ANC and PAC and locked up or deported activists. The massacre and subsequent repression turned global opinion, in the liberal 1960s climate of anti-colonialism, firmly against apartheid. State terror thus helped muster support for the ANC, which was to capitalise by transforming itself into a symbolic guerrilla resistance movement. Exile restricted the scope for ANC operations within South Africa itself; but Zambia and Tanzania both allowed the ANC to set up guerrilla training camps on their territory when, in 1964, they won independence under black majority

rule. Revolutionary fighter symbolism helped the ANC seize the *zeitgeist* of the 1960s; and the ANC armed struggle, although limited in extent, was able to take on major political value. Partly responsible for the lack of actual fighting was the buffer zone between these potential insurgents and the apartheid state provided by Portuguese Angola and Mozambique, white-ruled Rhodesia, and Botswana. This changed, however, when the Portuguese withdrew from Angola and Mozambique in 1974; allowing the ANC to establish bases in these states bordering South Africa. The start of insurgent raids, although negligible on a military scale, provoked South Africa to avow an aggressive 'total onslaught strategy', with systematic cross-border military strikes on ANC targets in neighbouring black states that drew increased international condemnation.

Mass protests gathered pace into the 1980s and became a general uprising in 1984 as the government lost control of the black townships. Terror and intimidation were key to the ANC achieving primacy overall in the leadership of the uprising; although this was whitewashed from the ANC image by blaming government instigators or other black groups. In 1986 an international 'eminent persons group' touring the country, as guests of the state on a peace mission, cut short their visit in disgust when a high profile series of military strikes were launched against ANC targets in neighbouring countries. For the international audience, ANC terror was subsumed within the rightful freedom struggle; whilst the state terror that it provoked fuelled further global anger at the apartheid regime. In 1989, President de Klerk announced the start of the end of apartheid; and, during subsequent negotiations, continued ANC terror convinced the government that it would have to completely dismantle the apartheid system. In the lead up to the multi-racial 1994 elections, the ANC (and other parties) used intimidation tactics to pressure voters; whilst terror attacks by the far-right *Afrikaaner Weerstandsbeweging* (AWB) highlighted the violence of white supremacy and, by juxtaposition, made the ANC appear for the international audience to be the 'peace party'. In this regard, Nelson Mandela's 27 year prison spell and emergence as a frail old man, distancing him from ANC terrorism, was invaluable to the whitewashing of terror from the ANC image.

In summary, the role of terror tactics in the conflict between the ANC and the apartheid government changed through time; and the costs or benefits to the ANC were largely shaped by the wider context within which terror was used. State terror initially hindered the ANC and aided the establishment of the apartheid system. However, terror in the guise of guerrilla fighter romanticism was then used to establish the primacy of the ANC image in the globally supported anti-apartheid movement. Brutal ANC terror and intimidation later helped the party to secure its political dominance over the black majority in South Africa; whilst terror by other actors allowed the ANC to divert attention from its own wrongdoings. The use of terror by the state in its security strategy and the anti-apartheid sympathies of the world were central in allowing the ANC to pull off such a public relations success. Terror tactics in the end, therefore, played a key role both in bringing the ANC to power in 1994 and in allowing it, somewhat ironically, to claim that it did so to bring freedom from oppression and violence.

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