

## **The Formation of the uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK) Spear of the Nation: People's Army, December 16, 1961.**

**Tinyeko Captain Ndhlovu  
Ditsong National Museum of Military History  
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### **Introduction**

The history of uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK) is an authentic version of the liberation armed struggle and an interesting history of the events that transformed the South African political landscape. This article looks at the formation of MK and role played by MK High Command during its early phase development in 1960 -1963 and tells the historical significance of December 16, 1961 the date of launch of the MK, which became known and celebrated as Heroes Day.

### **The Formation and the launch of MK in 16 December,1961.**

Shortly after the Sharpeville massacre, which occurred on the 21 March 1960, the African National Congress (ANC), the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress Alliances leadership decided that the approaches of non-violence were no longer suitable to challenge or address matters with the South African National Party (NP) government (the Apartheid regime). The ANC and the SACP with the endorsement of the Congress Alliance jointly decided to form a military wing known as uMkhonto we Sizwe (shortened to MK) meaning 'The Spear of the Nation', People's Army, which was launched on December 16, 1961. The mandate of MK was to challenge and fight against the Apartheid regime.

Prior to the formation and the launch of MK, in 1961, the ANC resolved that Oliver Tambo and Yusuf Dadoo should leave the country due to increased suppression of activists. They both went to Botswana and later moved to Dar es Salaam, Tanzania to establish the ANC-MK external leadership committee. In May 1969, during the Consultative Conference in Tanzania, Tambo was appointed to be Chairperson and Dadoo as vice-chairperson of the Presidential Council and Revolutionary Council (RC).

In July 1961, in Durban during the night the ANC National Executive Committee (NEC): Working Committee instructed Nelson Mandela and the SACP Central Committee mandated Joe Slovo to create the new independent military organisation. Mandela and Slovo's responsibilities were to choose any person they wished to work with and determine the leadership of the MK High Command of the future military wing and organise national and regional structures such as commands and urban units of sabotage committees.

In August 1961, the ANC and the SACP purchased the Liliesleaf Farm, Rivonia Johannesburg, through Arthur Goldreich, to be used as a secretive headquarters of the ANC, the SACP, the Congress Alliance and the MK High Command as from 1961 to 1963. The MK High Command, co-founding members include Nelson Mandela, Joe Slovo, Walter Sisulu, Oliver Tambo, Govan Mbeki, Andrew Mlangeni and Raymond Mhlaba, Joe Modise, Ahmed Kathrada, Arthur Goldreich, Denis Goldberg, James Kantor, Jack Hodgson, and Elias Motsoaledi.

On the 20 March 1963, the South African Police received a tipoff that Walter Sisulu was an MK official and that the secretive MK headquarters were in Rivonia Johannesburg. Under the leadership of the National MK High Command the urban units and sabotage committees were set up in various cities such as Johannesburg, Durban, Western Cape, and Eastern Cape. They were mandated to launch sabotage campaigns against NP government targets.

MK High Command's targets were objects which symbolised the economic power of the Nationalist Party, such as electricity pylons, factories, and places which symbolised oppression such as pass offices, post offices, police stations or municipal offices. Between October 1961 and July 1963, MK co-ordinated more than 190 acts of sabotage. During that period, MK cadres performed sabotage acts at night to avoid death or injuring civilians. This was to send a strong warning to the NP government, so that they must abandon the Apartheid system with all of its dehumanising policies. For instance, prior to the launch of MK, on 16 December 1961, Joe Slovo organised MK printed leaflets and MK High Command ensured that those leaflets were widely distributed in townships, cities, and country wide.

Most of the MK sabotage acts were accompanied with a warning poster stating "We (MK) are proving what we can do, and this will expand. This is just the beginning. A slight introduction: It is not yet too late to change the course and there may yet be still time for reason to break through".

On the 20 October 1961, Andrew Mlangeni, Wilton Mkwazi, Nangha Naidoo and Ray Mhlaba were deployed to travel to Czechoslovakia for guerrilla warfare training at Nanking Military Academy.

In November 1961 Duma Nokwe recruited Billy Nair to spread the news to the Durban public about joining a sabotage committee that will be targeting the government installations. Later Nokwe invited Harold Strachan to give the Durban Sabotage committee a demonstration of how to manufacture and use of the explosives. Strachan (former South African Air Force pilot and Second World War veteran and first MK Explosive expert) managed to demonstrate how to manufacture explosives with potassium permanganate, thermite, and sea sand at a flat in Ridge in Durban to the following MK cadres were Ronnie Kasrils, Brian Chaitow, Bruno Mtolo, Billy Nair and other the ANC delegates.

### **The special day of the launch**

On the 16 December 1961, Nelson Mandela and Joe Slovo became the first Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) Commanders to organise, lead and launch-sabotage launch sabotage campaigns against South African government targets. Various bombs such as self-manufactured explosive devices which were made from thermite, petrol, and dynamite exploded at various main national key points in our country. During the evening the following sabotage acts occurred:

Across at the Soweto municipal offices in Dube, where the first MK cadre Petrus Molefe died from an explosive device he carried to set up. Between Pretoria and Johannesburg the underground manhole of the telephones cable was blown up by dynamite in the evening. Post Offices at Fordsburg were partially blown up. Another explosion was at the Brickmakers Kloof electrical substation in Port Elizabeth. Walter Sisulu, in the meantime, was busy broadcasting publicly on the banned ANC Radio, talking about the launching of Umkhonto we Sizwe and explaining their manifesto,

including the place and role of MK. That marks the emergence of MK military wing of the ANC and the SACP. Subsequently, MK was banned and labelled as a terrorist organisation by the South African government and the United States. During 1961-1963 the MK High Command leaders focused on three important responsibilities, which were to recruit MK activists, send them out of the South Africa for military training and to bring them back, to execute the envisioned disruptive plans through military action with the assistance of foreign militants.

In 1962, large numbers of MK recruits were sent out of the country to be trained in guerrilla warfare and military struggle. In January 1962, Curnick Ndlovu lead the Natal Command Region and Bill Nair led Durban Sabotage committee. In May 1962 Looksmart Ngudle (who later died in security police detention in 1963) and Fred Carneson were appointed to lead the Western Cape Command. And Washington Bongco became the Boarder regional commander (later was hanged by the Apartheid regime for MK activities in August 1963). Vuyisile Mini was appointed to lead the Eastern Cape command (later executed in 1964). On the 11 July 1963, the South Africa Police raided the Liliesleaf Farm, in Rivonia, and all vital documentation and plans were confiscated during this Rivonia Raid. The evidence found was used against the National MK High Command during the Rivonia treason Trial with the charge sheet at the trial listing 193 acts of sabotage. In March 1962, Nelson Mandela was deployed to African countries (Algeria, Egypt, Ghana, Ethiopia and Morocco) to get military training and support for the MK's armed struggle. In August 1962, another group of MK recruit were sent to Ethiopia for the 13 weeks sabotage training programme.



Figure 1. and 2. Nelson Mandela's tour of the Army camps and headquarters of the Algeria Front de Liberation National (FLN) in near the border of Morocco on the 18 March 1962.

In June 1963, Bram Fischer announced that the MK High Command had sent Joe Slovo and JB Marks abroad to present the new MK strategic plan for guerrilla warfare to external leadership (OR Tambo and Yusuf Dadoo). On the 20 June 1963, Slovo and Marks were in Francistown interviewed by Bulawayo Chronicles. JB Marks stated that "I predict the outbreak of the guerrilla warfare which will began in South Africa within the next two years, both inside and outside the country. I am aware that our opponent the NP, South African Defence Force (SADF) and SAP are fully armed. However, we (MK) also have a way to get advance modern weapons, I will not reveal where they come from, but our supplier is from East Asia." This was published on the article titled "Guerrilla warfare will start soon- S.A refugee". Slovo and Marks took leave from Francistown, Botswana on a chartered Dakota plane with the company of twenty-

six other ANC refugees to Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. The MK strategic plan of the guerrilla warfare was presented by Slovo and Marks to external leadership under OR Tambo at the Palace Hotel, Dar es Salaam at Tanzania.

Oliver Tambo went through the plan and approved it. In October 1963, the MK High Command introduced the plan that was approved by the ANC external leadership. The document plan was called 'Operation Mayibuye' (OM) mean 'Come Back Africa'. This document was the MK strategic operational plan to infiltrate its trained cadres back into the country, to bring revolution by armed invasion of the country. For the Operation Mayibuye to be successful, the High Command had three tasks to do. Firstly, it was to set up MK structures throughout the country. Secondly, was to deploy political organisers in each region immediately to operate these new MK structures. And thirdly they had to strategise political and military campaigns to commence at the same time as trained cadres returned to the country. In 1963 forwards, MK was ready to maximise the level of the armed struggle. MK already had an access to modern weapons such as AK 47 automatic assault rifles and managed to send their guerrillas to military training abroad in Ethiopia, Morocco, East German Democratic Republic, Cuba, Soviet Union; China and Czechoslovakia

### **Historical significance of the 16 December, the date of launch of MK, Heroes Day.**

The choice of the date December 16, the initial sabotage campaigns and the MK formation was not a random choice. It was chosen because the date had a holistic historical significance. First it was a public holiday in South Africa honouring the military victory of Afrikaner Voortrekkers over the African warriors on the banks of the Ncome River (re-christened by the settlers Blood River) at Natal in 1838 and is thus symbolic of power of white supremacy over the Africans. Second it was the date in 1930, Comrade Johannes Nkosi communist activist got slain by police in Durban during burning of passes riot. Nkosi's death was one of the few overt verifications of communist activity in South Africa in an otherwise unfortunate year for the SACP. This established a martyr's role for Nkosi, with an additional mythologising of the story of his death and an honorary status as a revolutionary martyr in the South African freedom struggle. Nkosi's death is annually commemorated by the ANC and the SACP during their Heroes Day on 16 December. Finally, for Africans it was Dingaan's Day, which symbolises struggle and the determined quest for liberation and democratising of South Africa. This date also marks the historic formation and the launch of the MK, People's Army, which is celebrated each year as a Heroes Day. Former President of the ANC and Chief in Commander of the MK, O.R. Tambo used to deliver an anniversary speech of the formation of MK addressing MK cadres and the ANC (NEC). Post-apartheid era, the first December 16, 1995, was renamed and officially declared to be a Public holiday 'Day of Reconciliation' which ties the diverse history of South Africa.

In the spirit of Commemoration of the 59<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Formation of the MK December, 16, 2020, we from Ditsong Museums of South Africa, DNMMH an agency of Department Sport Art and Culture are currently working with the relevant stakeholders developing the MK Communication Exhibition. We are glad to be the custodians and official story tellers of South African military struggle history.

## Conclusion

Fifty-nine years ago, on the 16 December 1961, MK was born at the outbreak of the country wide revolution in South Africa. MK was formed out of the chronological necessity to expand the South African struggle for freedom and social justice. Mandela of the ANC and Slovo of the SACP were mandated to create the new military wing of the ANC. They were responsible in creating the MK High Command leadership structure, national and regional commands, urban units and sabotage committees. MK High Command commenced with an approval of the external leadership prepared the documentation called Operation Mayibuye which includes the task of recruiting MK cadres, sending them out of the country for military training and plan to return them back. MK High Command co-ordinated more than 190 acts of sabotage during 1961–1963 with no death or injuries. The date of the launch 16 December has a holistic historical significance which ties the past diversity. It is celebrated as Heroes Day and as from December 1995 it is celebrated as the Day of Reconciliation.

## Work Cited

Simpson, T. Umkhonto we Sizwe: The ANC's Armed Struggle. (Cape Town, Penguin Random, 2016) images: pp.278-279.