



## Quest for freedom

**U**NDER SEGREGATION and apartheid, Africans were not only dispossessed of their land, as we saw in chapters 2 and 6, or economically exploited on farms and in mines and industry, as we began to explore in chapter 5. They were also deprived of political rights, and therefore the ability to help shape the society they increasingly shared with other South Africans.

This began when the Boers arrived in the eastern Transvaal and established the ZAR. Even after subordination to the ZAR, Africans were not made *burghers*, or citizens. (It must also be noted that many foreign whites were not made citizens either.) At the beginning of the 20th century, many Africans supported the British in the South African War in the hope that they would restore African chiefdoms to their former strength, and relieve Africans from Boer control. But their hopes of equal political rights were soon dashed; when the Union of South Africa was formed in 1910 – combining the Cape and Natal colonies as well as the former Boer republics – blacks were denied the vote (except for a small number in the Cape province who qualified for a restricted franchise).

This set the scene for events during much of the 20th century. Unlike the 19th century, when people fought wars for the rights to land and independence, the new century saw the beginning of a growing struggle for political rights. People in Mpumalanga played a significant part in various stages of this struggle; however, to create a context for these events, we need to provide a brief summary of political resistance in South Africa in general in the 20th century.

In 1912 African chiefs and other leaders met at Bloemfontein to form the South African Native National Congress, later the African National Congress (ANC), to advance the rights of Africans and advocate an inclusive democracy. Its views were moderate, and it followed a non-violent approach. In the 1910s and 1920s trade unions and socialist organisations began to organise the growing numbers of black workers in South Africa's cities, and established a new tradition of shop floor organisation and resistance. In 1921 socialist

Facing page:  
Demonstrating youths  
at Leandra, mid-1986.





Women on an anti-pass  
march in Standerton,  
September 1957.

organisations formed the Communist Party of South Africa, which later became the South African Communist Party (SACP).

In the mid-1940s a new generation of African leaders formed the ANC Youth League, and began to advocate more militant strategies for challenging white domination. In 1949, just after the NP had risen to power, the ANC adopted a programme of action that rejected white domination and called for more militant non-violent resistance in the form of protests, strikes and demonstrations. In the early 1950s this resulted in a widespread campaign to defy unjust laws.

In the mid-1950s an alliance of democratic organisations adopted the Freedom Charter at a Congress of the People held at Kliptown in Johannesburg. Spelling out agreed principles for a non-racial democracy, the charter became a blueprint for much of the South African liberation movement. But not everyone agreed with this approach, and in 1958 the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) broke away from the ANC to express a more 'Africanist' position.

March 1960 brought a turning point in South African history when police opened fire on people demonstrating against the pass laws at the township of Sharpeville south of Johannesburg, killing 69 and wounding many others. Unrest broke out, and spread throughout the country. The government responded by banning the ANC and PAC, declaring a state of emergency, and arresting or detaining thousands of people. An international campaign began at the United Nations and other forums to isolate South Africa internationally and subject it to punitive sanctions. These events started a pattern of popular



Policemen watch  
the women's march  
in Standerton, 1957.

resistance and state repression in an increasingly beleaguered country that continued in phases until the early 1990s.

Driven underground, the popular political movements turned to armed resistance. In 1961 the SACP and ANC formed an armed wing called Umkhonto we Sizwe (Spear of the Nation), which began to attack government installations. In 1963 MK leaders in South Africa – including Nelson Mandela – were arrested, convicted of sabotage, and sentenced to life imprisonment on Robben Island.

In the 1970s two new forms of resistance developed to the apartheid state. The first was the black consciousness movement which took root at segregated black universities. Steve Biko was its most influential leader. But he was killed by security police, and the wider movement was also suppressed; numerous organisations were proscribed, and their leaders banned or imprisoned.

The second was the resurgence of independent trade unions, which pursued a disciplined campaign to advance workers' rights. The unions forced both employers and the state to recognise them, lent new legitimacy to mass organisation, and established democratic traditions and procedures that informed the political struggle to follow.

The year 1976 brought another turning point in South African history: the Soweto uprising. On 16 June police opened fire on African school children in the huge township of Soweto adjacent to Johannesburg who marched in protest against the use of Afrikaans as a compulsory language of instruction in 'Bantu education'. Riots broke out, and spread to other parts of the country. A new generation of young people joined the political movements in exile.



While the apartheid government again repressed political resistance, it also realised it needed to introduce some reforms. In 1983 it introduced a new constitution that extended limited parliamentary representation to coloured and Indian people, but continued to exclude Africans; instead, Africans were given limited rights to form their own local authorities in the townships. The United Democratic Front (UDF) was established to co-ordinate popular opposition to the new constitution. UDF affiliates sprung up throughout the country, and it rapidly became the domestic arm of the liberation movement.

Unrest broke out in the Transvaal and Eastern Cape, and spread throughout the country. Responding to a call by the ANC in exile, scores of organisations associated with the UDF – many of them led by youths – set out to make the townships ‘ungovernable’. The government responded by declaring two states of emergency, and invading the townships. Thousands of people died, and tens of thousands were detained. Fierce struggles were also waged in the homelands.

A woman resettled in KwaNdebele surveys her new surroundings.



In the late 1980s, facing growing domestic and international pressures, a new group of NP leaders decided to unbanned the liberation movements, release their leaders, and negotiate an end to the South African conflict. In 1994, after protracted negotiations, Africans finally gained the franchise in a fully democratic South Africa.

Against this background, we can now turn to events in the eastern Transvaal. In this region, early resistance began in the reserves.

### Reserves and 'homelands'

The African reserves were residual areas of traditional African occupation where communities were controlled by chiefs, and land was owned communally. Under apartheid these areas were enlarged and turned into 'bantustans' or 'homelands' – nascent independent 'states' in which all Africans were meant to exercise their political rights. Land owned by Africans in 'white' South Africa were declared 'black spots', and their owners were dispossessed and removed to the 'homelands'.

The very name 'homeland' was misleading. Africans had lived all over the eastern Transvaal (and much of the rest of South Africa), and individuals, families and communities had never been completely bound to a particular area or chiefdom. However, the apartheid government was determined to divide Africans into separate ethnic groups, tied to different 'homelands'.

Some idealistic apartheid planners believed the homelands should develop their own economies so that they could become truly independent. However, given that South Africa already had a national economy centred on its urban areas, and the 'homelands' were often situated in remote rural areas, this idea was entirely unrealistic from the outset.

The dominant approach was that African men should continue to work as migrant labourers in 'white' South African cities and towns, and return periodically to their families in the 'homelands'. Allied to this was the notion that migrant workers' families had a 'subsistence base' in the 'homelands' – in other words, that they could largely sustain themselves by means of subsistence agriculture, practised on communally owned land. This doctrine was also used to justify paying migrant workers very low wages. In practice, all this meant that the 'homelands' became reservoirs of labour for white industries, some of them situated just outside the homelands borders. Many families of migrant workers lived on the edge of starvation.

The movement of Africans outside the homelands was strictly controlled. From the 1950s the increasingly harsh application of the pass laws along with

the growing populations in the reserves undermined what little capacity these areas still had to sustain their residents.

### **Rumblings in the reserves**

From the 1940s onwards, the African reserves were the site of mounting popular resistance to white domination. One crucial cause was the 'betterment' policies pursued by successive governments. In the 1930s, in a context of mounting international concern about the impact on the environment caused by destructive farming practices, officials started to worry that fertility of the land in the reserves would be destroyed, forcing the population to move en masse to the towns. This outcome threatened their vision of a segregated society, and a divided and controllable African population. They ignored the fact that the basic problem in the reserves was that far too many people had been squeezed on to far too little land. Instead, they decided that people had too many cattle and were far too dispersed. So the solution they came up with was to cull cattle, and resettle communities in regimented villages. This produced an angry and sometimes violent response in many of the communities on which it was imposed. It also deepened the antipathy to the individuals, officials and chiefs who were seen as serving this system.

As we have seen, the apartheid government decided that it would entrench a separate form of government for Africans. Chiefs would be the foundation of this new order. To this end the Bantu Authorities Act was passed in 1951. While some chiefs had previously been recognised within the system of segregation, this act led to a huge expansion in the numbers of chiefs who fell under direct government control. Their subjects feared, with good reason, that the chiefs would no longer see themselves as servants of the people but as agents of the government. And they were especially concerned that the chiefs would throw their weight behind the hated system of betterment. This fear sparked a wave of rural revolts which spread from the Zoutpansberg to the Eastern Cape. Some chiefs joined their subjects in resisting the establishment of Bantu Authorities, but many did not. Rural uprisings such as the Sekhukhuneland Revolt of 1958 and Pondoland Revolt of 1961 presented the apartheid government with a major challenge, but in the end resistance was crushed. In the 1960s Bantu Authorities led by compliant chiefs became a pervasive feature of life in the reserves. This order also became the basis of the homeland system, and what support existed for a move to independence in the 1970s.

But while this political fantasy evolved, the lives of ordinary people in the reserves became ever more desperate. Some were there as a result of forced removals, which itself was a traumatic process. They weren't always welcomed



by local people who watched anxiously as more and more people were settled on marginally fertile land. As the populations in homelands increased, land became harder to come by. Those with land had their plots reduced in size to make way for new arrivals and growing families. The land could not sustain such large numbers of people, and the soil deteriorated even more rapidly. Eventually, large areas of once fertile land became barren and desolate. People came to depend even more on the migrant labour system. The late 1970s and 1980s brought more misery when the South African economy went into recession, and jobs became scarce. As the flow of migrant remittances to rural households decreased communities increasingly had little alternative to trying to survive on the pensions paid to the elderly, which were insufficient to sustain individuals, much less extended families.

In the 1960s an uneasy quiet settled over many rural areas. But, in the 1970s and 1980s attempts to force communities to accept homeland independence rekindled protests and even open revolt in a number of regions. We will look at KwaNdebele and KaNgwane, two homelands that followed very different paths from their establishment under apartheid rule to their dissolution in 1994.

### KwaNdebele

Established in the mid-1970s, KwaNdebele was meant to be the 'homeland' for the Ndebele people, most of whom lived in the eastern Transvaal. In 1981 it was given 'self-governing' status, which meant that it could form a fledgling government, including a legislative assembly, executive, and civil service.

A resettlement camp in KwaNdebele.





S S Skosana, chief  
minister of KwaNdebele.

In theory, this 'homeland' was meant to give Ndebele people an opportunity to realise their independent nationhood. The reality fell far short of this: KwaNdebele's government was run by a group of thugs who used violence and other oppressive methods to suppress opposition and shore up their own positions. Residents were made to pay a variety of tariffs, taxes and licence fees, which were used to enrich the ruling group.

The KwaNdebele government was dominated by two notorious figures: S S Skosana, chief minister and minister of the interior, and Piet Ntuli, a cabinet member. In 1981 Skosana and Ntuli formed an organisation called Mbokodo ('grinding stone') which terrorised KwaNdebele and the neighbouring district of Moutse. According to its founders, Mbokodo was a cultural and political organisation aimed at re-establishing an 'original' Ndebele identity. In practice it was a private militia that terrorised those who opposed the KwaNdebele government and the apartheid system as a whole. If a 'troublemaker' participated in a boycott or resistance campaign, members of Mbokodo would 'fetch such a person from the police and hit him'. Numerous forms of torture were used to teach 'troublemakers' a lesson. Some would be taken to an abandoned building, forced to run around in soapy water, and if they slipped or fell they would be severely beaten. Members of Mbokodo and other thugs would storm areas of resistance and assault people indiscriminately.

Who were the resisters, and what were they resisting? Youths and others living in KwaNdebele as well as Moutse were angered by the tactics used by the KwaNdebele government, questioned its legitimacy, and opposed its plans for the future of KwaNdebele and Moutse. The government owed its existence to the apartheid regime, and collaborated with it to keep residents subservient to this social order. The KwaNdebele government wanted two things that would not benefit anyone but itself: firstly, it wanted Moutse, an adjoining area that fell in the homeland of Lebowa, to be incorporated into KwaNdebele.

Moutse had fertile agricultural land and mineral resources that could boost the economy of KwaNdebele. But the residents of Moutse were not Ndebele and were afraid that they would lose all their rights to land, resources, and political representation if they were incorporated into KwaNdebele. They also did not want their children – who spoke Pedi – to attend Ndebele schools, or to suffer in a poor and violent homeland.

Moutse residents fought hard to resist their incorporation into KwaNdebele. After hearing about the proposed incorporation, residents signed a petition stating their opposition to this move. On 18 November 1985 a delegation from Lebowa took the petition to Chris Heunis, South African minister of Constitutional Development. Moutse residents also raised R42 000 for legal





Piet Ntuli, a key figure in the KwaNdebele government and the vigilante organisation Mbokodo.

representation. But these tactics did not work. On 5 December Heunis announced that Moutse would be incorporated into KwaNdebele on 1 January 1986. After the announcement, 1 000 protesters met at the kraal of the Moutse regional authority, Chief Tlokwe Mathebe. At the meeting they reiterated their opposition to the plan, and started violent protests. Youths went on the rampage and burnt shops belonging to two suspected KwaNdebele supporters. Police arrived and fired teargas into the crowd.

On 31 December 1985 Proclamation 227 was passed, which amended the KwaNdebele constitution to include Moutse within its borders. Moutse residents protested, but Mbokodo moved in and attacked the resisters. Mbokodo launched three separate attacks on the villages of Moteti and Kgobokoane. Some 380 resisters were abducted, taken to abandoned buildings, and tortured.

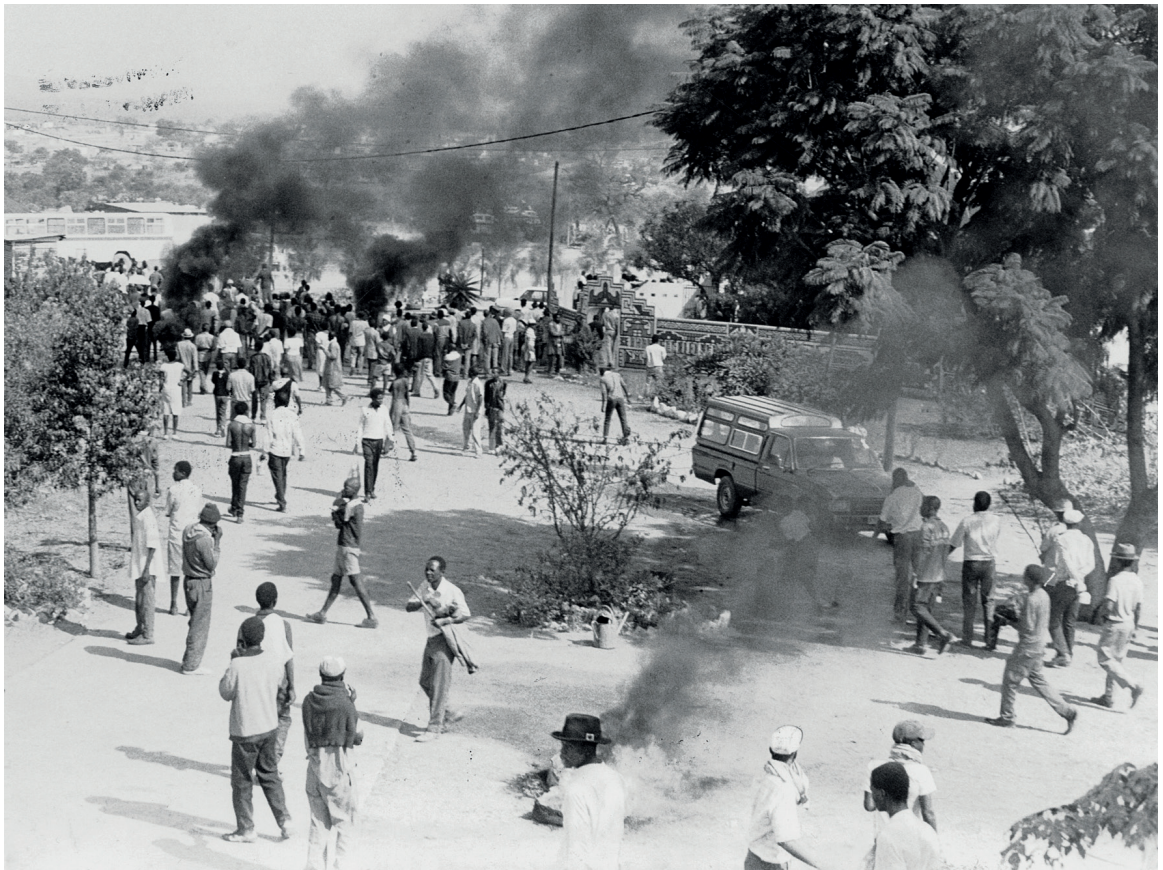
The KwaNdebele government also wanted the territory to become fully independent. This would give the ruling group more power and influence, but would take away the South African citizenship of all those forced to live in KwaNdebele.



Community meeting at  
Moutse, February 1986.



Unrest in KwaNdebele,  
May 1986.



In February 1986 residents of KwaNdebele and Moutse began to hear rumours that the KwaNdebele government intended to accept full independence. Students and even adults resorted to widespread violent protests, and Mbokodo fought back. Mbokodo targeted prominent opponents of independence, to serve as an example to the masses. Its victims included Jacob Skosana, a leading critic of independence. Mbokodo thugs abducted Skosana from his home and took him to a Mbokodo camp, where they beat him in a latrine until he was unable to speak or move. They then took him outside and shot him. Finally, they left his body in front of his home.

On 7 May 1986 the South African president, P W Botha, announced that KwaNdebele would become independent on 11 December 1986. Resistance became more united than it had been previously, as the royal family, headed by Prince James Mahlangu and King David Mahlangu, took the lead in organising people and protests. They organised mass protest meetings as well as a stayaway from 15 to 18 July in which almost the entire labour force in the territory took part.

Mbokodo continued its terror campaign, and at least 120 resisters were killed in ongoing violence. But change was to come. In late July, Ntuli was assassinated when a bomb was planted in his car outside the KwaNdebele government buildings. Many residents celebrated in the streets. Shortly afterwards the legislative assembly, minus Ntuli as well as Skosana (who was ill), rejected independence. This decision was soon overturned by the faction that supported independence. However, the apartheid regime began to recognise that it could not foist independence on to KwaNdebele if this was opposed by most of its residents. In 1987 P W Botha announced that residents would be allowed to vote in a referendum on whether or not they wanted to become independent. The referendum was never held, as the outcome was obvious. This particular struggle in KwaNdebele had ended.

### KaNgwane

KaNgwane was a 'homeland' created for Swazi people living in South Africa. Its chief minister was Enos Mabuza, who – unlike most of his counterparts – enjoyed genuine popular support, and was sympathetic to the liberation struggle. As such, Mabuza was critical of the homelands policy, and supported the idea of a unified and democratic South Africa. However, he recognised that the homelands were a temporary reality, and used his position to improve the lives of residents and work against the apartheid regime.

The apartheid government wanted KaNgwane to be incorporated into adjacent Swaziland, a fully independent country that had never formed part of



Members of the KwaNdebele legislative assembly in a special session during which 'independence' was rejected, 12 August 1986.



Enos Mabuza, chief minister of KaNgwane.

People celebrate outside the KwaNdebele legislative assembly after its rejection of 'independence'.





South Africa. Many believed that South Africa's offer to incorporate KaNgwane into Swaziland was really aimed at bribing Swaziland into signing a security deal with it; specifically, it wanted the Swaziland government to help the South African security forces track down members of the ANC and MK operating from that country.

When the announcement for incorporation was made in 1982, Mabuza contested it in the South African courts. This was a good move. After papers were presented to the Supreme Court in November 1982, the South African government proposed an out-of-court settlement; it agreed to bear the legal costs that KaNgwane had incurred, and rescinded the proclamation to hand over KaNgwane to Swaziland. It also agreed to establish a commission of inquiry into the future land transfers. The Rumpff Commission found that KaNgwane residents were strongly opposed to being incorporated into Swaziland, under any terms.

In August 1983 KaNgwane was granted self-governing status. Mabuza made good strategic use of his relative autonomy from the South African government, and made his countervailing views publicly known. In 1984 he declared that KaNgwane residents 'would seek to promote non-racialism, equality and democracy in KaNgwane, just as we hope in the future to participate in the development and promotion of non-racial democracy in South Africa as a whole'.

In the mid-1980s, against the wishes of the South African government, he made KaNgwane a place of safety and refuge for 50 000 Mozambicans who fled the civil war in their country. A representative of those refugees told the British ambassador to South Africa:

The troubles in Mozambique made our world so unhappy that we had to run away from our land. Here we found the police going from door to door looking for us. But Mabuza gave us a home, and we thank him for being so brave. He says we are all Africans.

In 1986 Mabuza led a delegation to meet ANC leaders in Lusaka, capital of Zambia. The ANC was generally opposed to homeland leaders, on the grounds that they were collaborating with the apartheid regime, so its relations with Mabuza were a testament to his distinction among other leaders. The two parties declared that 'our country should be governed by all its people, both black and white, as equals, brothers and sisters'.

In the early 1990s, after the liberation movement had been unbanned and their leaders released, Mabuza called for the dissolution of KaNgwane. He continued to support the ANC, and gladly took his leave of power.

### The time of the comrades

Being a young African in rural areas had, for centuries, been a disciplined yet carefree life. Children were expected to do chores; boys tended cattle, and girls helped their mothers to cook, collect wood and water, and care for smaller children. But these chores were often done in a space of freedom and exploration. Once in the fields boys had relative freedom and autonomy to play games, get up to mischief, and, when girls came collecting water or firewood, seek their company. Girls had far more structured days, but also found time for fun and laughter. As they grew older, boys would work towards accumulating cattle so that they could, one day, pay bridewealth and marry.

From the middle of the 19th century to the middle of the 20th, young men often went to work in factories, mines and shops to earn money to help them achieve this goal. But to grow up, and reach the goal of marriage and status, young men and women had to listen to, and respect, the wishes of their parents and other older people.

From the 1970s, though, youths began to challenge the authority of their elders. Being young was a whole new experience. The rapid spread of primary and then secondary schooling meant that school and western education became the central experience in many young people's lives. While they were subjected to 'Bantu education', which was designed to limit their horizons, some were able to use their new-found literacy and learning to challenge the content of their education, and question the legitimacy of the apartheid order. In this changing world they were also subjected to a host of new experiences. Youths from the cities arrived at homeland schools, bringing with them stories of resistance and action; records of Bob Marley and Miriam Makeba; and political pamphlets. The curious and politically conscious listened to stories about MK, read the newspapers, and tuned in to Radio Freedom.

But organisation and action were not entirely spontaneous. A new political consciousness spread slowly among youths in the rural areas. Fish Mahlalela, an activist who moved around lowveld boarding schools spreading political awareness, said of that time:

The dearth of formal political organisations in the region in the early 1980s was responsible for the lack of youth mobilisation. We worked as individuals most of the time. A few of us who had some awareness would bring a few youngsters to discuss simple things like toyi-toyi with no political guidance.

Andries Johnson was expelled from school in 1976, and a group eager for organisation formed around him:



I began helping in the shop, and there were always boys around me and some strangers. Some of these boys were school-leavers, the unemployed and local students; others were strangers who just befriended us. The numbers increased as from 1980 with more strange faces appearing every day ... in 1982, and ever since then, we started talking politics and strategising about how to involve some of the boys we normally spent time with at the shop. But I must say, we local boys knew very little about politics then, except hearing from the radio and reading papers about Soweto and other urban places.

Youths on the march,  
eastern Transvaal,  
late 1980s.

But 1984 was a turning point for young people in the eastern Transvaal. From that year onwards youths began to join a range of organisations affiliated to the UDF, as well as independent labour movements. Youths spoke the language of resistance learnt from migrants, committed themselves to the political goals of democracy, and identified with the struggles of workers. The relatively well organised trade unions and migrants often provided the organisational backbone for energetic youths who acted as 'shock troops' in the struggle. From 1984 youth politics spread like wildfire across the region. One of the most important places for young people to organise was in the schools.

At school, youths had the opportunity to discuss politics and distribute political material. Further, the conflict caused by gaining an education at school and then entering a world of repression out of school fuelled the desire for political change.



Simon Zwane was a young man with aspirations that were frustrated by his environment. Simon was born in Mambane in July 1969. He attended a farm and a mine school, and in 1983 moved to Ermelo. He had no money to continue studying, so for a year he worked on a dairy farm to earn the money he would need. In 1984 he enrolled in Lindile High School in Ermelo. It was, he thought, 'the best school around'. It was not troubled by the same political activity as other schools. In 1986 it was awarded a prize of R10 000 for being a model school.

The prize had unforeseen consequences. There were, in fact, politically active students in the school who were affronted by the award. When the students were forbidden to leave school during breaks, and outsiders from entering the school, they became enraged. They began to throw stones, broke windows, and broke open the gates. They were joined by youths from other schools, and those who had already left school, and embarked on a wider protest. They burnt beer halls, buses, a delivery truck, and a local hostel. Zwane described the mood of the crowd:

You just feel the power. You were there, it was happening, it was really happening and it was very exciting at the same time that we were there outside doing it. ... I mean, to be there for the first time, really seeing it happening and having started where you were and you've seen how it all started, I mean, there was that kind of elation, I mean, you feel the power, it's happening, it's now.

Five hours later, when the police arrived, the protesters had built a barricade and armed themselves with stones. The police shot rubber bullets into the crowd, and dispersed them. They caught female students and interrogated them, wanting to find out who had started the protest. A teacher, joining the police, fired shots into the crowd, and a student was killed. It was a week before the situation returned to calm. For days after the protest the leaders lay low.

Zwane, who had played a role in the protest, stayed with family in Donaldson to wait out the worst of the reprisals. When he returned to school it had changed in subtle ways. Tension remained, but some of the students' grievances had been addressed. Corporal punishment was no longer used, and students became more serious about their political affiliations. Zwane joined the UDF and became an activist in Ermelo.



### Remaking the world

Like young people everywhere, youths in the eastern Transvaal found themselves at odds with the world as they found it – the world created or accepted by their parents – and set out to remake it. Some joined the struggle to end apartheid and create a non-racial democratic order. Others acted to rid their society of another perceived evil, namely witchcraft.

Traditional healers play a prominent role in African society, and their roles are generally regarded as legitimate and benevolent. However, in parallel with this, there is a long-standing belief in the existence of witches, who are thought to use spells and potions for malevolent purposes.

African communities have acted against witches at various stages in South African history. However, in the eastern and northern Transvaal, anti-witchcraft campaigns resurfaced in the 1980s with a new twist: they were largely driven by young people. In Sekhukhuneland and Lebowa in particular, youths returning home from educational institutions elsewhere believed that

Security forces patrol a township in the eastern Transvaal during the unrest in the mid-1980s.



witchcraft was widespread, that witches were using their powers to harm young people in particular, and that they were obstacles to a new social order. Therefore, they had to be eradicated before democracy could be attained.

Historically, it had been the role of chiefs to deal with people identified as witches. Such people could be banished, their potions removed, and their hair cut off. But in the northern homelands during the 1980s, chiefs were increasingly regarded as apartheid collaborators, and were even thought to

Relatives gather the  
charred remains of a  
victim of the witch  
burnings in the eastern  
Transvaal, 1986.



have taken part in witchcraft themselves, killing children for *muti* (traditional medicine) that would give them strength and power. Without chiefs to take on the duty of punishing those regarded as witches, and faced with the political anxiety and apathy of their parents, some youths took it upon themselves to rid their communities of people whom they thought were exercising such a baneful influence.

Throughout Sekhukhuneland and Lebowa, elderly women were threatened and killed by young men who would sing:

Our lives are in great danger  
We are bewitched  
We are poisoned  
Abortions are the order of the day  
Comrades, wake up, remake the world  
Our parents' hour has passed away  
This hour belongs to the youth  
We, the Comrades  
Forward Comrades  
We are a generation of war

On 21 April 1986, on a soccer field in the Brooklyn district of Lebowa, youths met to form the Brooklyn Youth Organisation (BYO), a grouping that became notorious for killing witches. Soon after its formation the BYO called a meeting where members of the public were invited to submit the names of people suspected of being witches. The witches at the top of the list, known as the 'Big Five', were brought to the BYO, interrogated, and beaten. They were elderly women, and one died. After releasing the others, a discussion among the youths ensued. Surely, being let free, the witches would exact their revenge? Over the next few days youths attacked the remaining 'Big Five' by forcing them into their huts and then burning the huts to the ground. Eight more suspected witches were killed; seven were elderly women, and one was a man who had allegedly been in possession of herbs. Ultimately, hundreds of people were killed, often brutally, in a wave of hysteria that swept the region in the years before the advent of democracy.



### Labour movements and the Kinross mining disaster

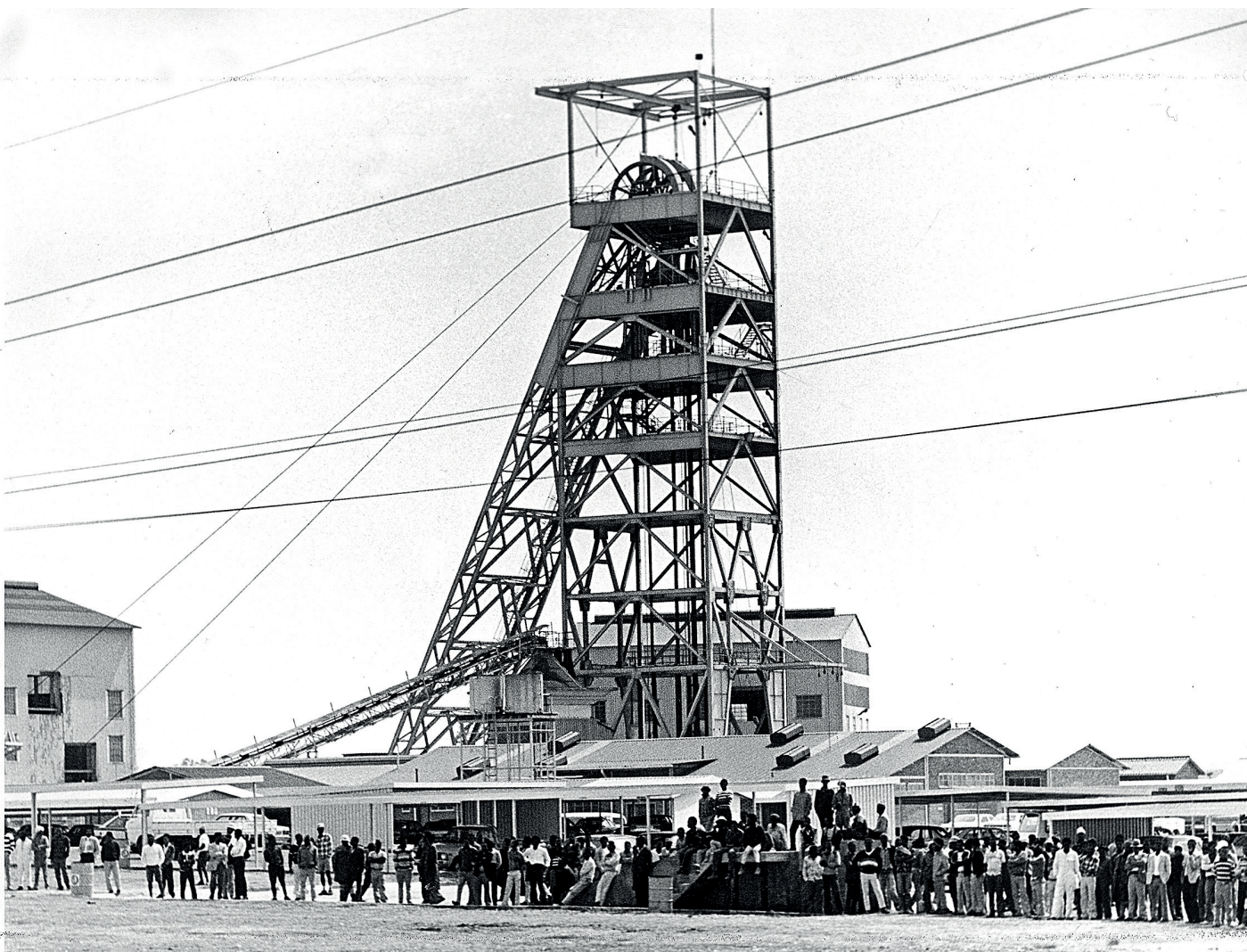
While youth movements traced a mercurial path across the political landscape, resurgent African trade unions played a more organised and disciplined role in the mines and factories in the region. Two unions – the Chemical Workers' Industrial Union (CWIU) and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) – had a particularly significant impact on the eastern Transvaal. In 1984 Sasol fired 6 000 workers who had participated in a stayaway, but the CWIU fought back and was able to get most workers reinstated, and secure recognition from Sasol.

In 1986 a disaster occurred at Kinross Gold Mine on the south eastern highveld, and the NUM played a central role in exposing the conditions that had caused the tragedy and in mobilising support for workers and their families. On 16 September 1986 Isisi Mbuthuma took his team to fix a broken railway track in an arterial of a shaft at the Kinross mine, owned by the mining company Gencor. Kinross had a skeleton in its closet, and Mbuthuma and 230 other miners working in the shaft would discover it that day. Mbuthuma's team installed a gas welding machine at the railway track and waited for the welder to come and do his job. The welder arrived, lit the welding torch, and began his work while the other miners waited for him to finish. When the job was completed, disaster struck. As the welding torch was switched off the flame travelled back into the gas cylinder, which caught fire and exploded. The flames leapt around the arterial, which was insulated with a substance that had been banned in the United States and United Kingdom for 20 years. This substance was polyurethane foam, and it was highly flammable and highly toxic.

The fire travelled quickly down the shaft, and the burning foam produced a thick black smoke infused with deadly carbon monoxide. A few miners managed to escape, but 177 men were trapped. Before anything could be done to save them, they were poisoned and burnt to death. Their bodies were recovered from the shaft, severely disfigured.

The disaster caused an outcry. South Africa was criticised for not adhering to international safety standards, and the mine was accused of negligence. International labour unions offered NUM financial support. NUM organised a memorial service, which was attended by 5 000 workers. It called for a national day of mourning and a stayaway on 1 October. The Chamber of Mines spoke against it, but NUM and the Confederation of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) went ahead. On 1 October 325 000 mineworkers and 275 000 other workers failed to turn up for work.

At least partly due to the efforts of the NUM, Gencor paid out R2,6 million to the families of those who had died. The NUM distributed this money, as well



Mine workers and community members waiting at Kinross Gold Mine near Evander for news about their colleagues trapped underground, 17 September 1986.

Miners in Embalehle Stadium near Secunda at a memorial service for the 177 miners killed in the Kinross mine disaster.



as money given to them by international unions. The blame for the disaster was laid at apartheid's door. The South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU), in exile at the time, noted that:

This high fatality rate and injury rate ... stems from apartheid. It is the racist and exploitative conditions in pursuit of super-profits that makes mining in South Africa one of the most dangerous occupations in the world.

### Joining Umkhonto we Sizwe

From the 1960s onwards, armed wings of the liberation movements added another dimension to the political struggle in the eastern Transvaal. Umkhonto we Sizwe, also known as MK, was started in the early 1960s as the military wing of the ANC. The PAC also formed a military wing, initially called Poqo, and later the Azanian People's Liberation Army (APLA). But MK had the greatest impact in the eastern Transvaal.

MK fighters were regarded as heroes by many in the townships and 'homelands'. But to become an MK operative required more than just idealism. They were hunted down by South African security forces, both in South Africa and outside it, and had to work undercover in very dangerous conditions. Recruiting potential MK operatives was a complicated and risky process.

*Askaris* were the biggest problem. These were Africans – some of whom had defected from the liberation movements – who collaborated with the South African security forces. Typically, they would be sent to infiltrate the liberation movements, and inform the security police of the actions and identities of MK operatives. When MK recruiters looked for people likely to join their force, they did everything in their power to make sure they were not *askaris*. Once candidates were deemed to be committed and trustworthy, they were invited to join MK, trained, and provided with missions.

### MK at work in the eastern Transvaal

In the eastern Transvaal, MK was responsible for recruiting more fighters, and also for maintaining clandestine routes in and out of South Africa across the Mozambican border. People leaving and entering South Africa could use the Mbuzini border because security there was relatively poor. The fences were easy to breach, and the people on the Mozambican side of the fence supported MK. At least, most of them did. But while MK gave the villagers of Mbuzini gifts to win over their support, the apartheid government could give much bigger gifts to a few individuals to ensure *their* support. The South African security forces found out that the border was being used by MK,

and took action. Matthews Phosa, then an MK operative, who later became Mpumalanga's first premier, explains what was happening:

We were operating from that border. There was no electric fence at that time. The electric fence was built under our noses as we were operating. An electric fence was a result of an operational situation and activities, responding to us taking advantage of the border as it was.

In June 1986 MK operatives at Mbuzini were alerted to the identity of a man who was possibly a government informer. The man, Samuel Mpanani, had been harassing villagers (to gain information from them about MK). Four MK operatives went to Mbuzini to find him. The operatives later told the Amnesty Committee of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee what had happened when they got there:

When we approached his house, he came out, and we saw that he had a revolver. He tried to escape, but we formed a circle around him. He fired a shot – I don't know whether he was shooting at us or shooting into the air. He fired more shots, and we ran away from him, but then he ran out of ammunition, and we reached towards him and held him.

We took him to a sugar plantation. When we got there, Temba started



A Breyten farmer and labourers with a tractor blown up by a landmine in 1986.



putting tyres around him, so that he could not be recognised because of all the tyres. We stacked the tyres one on top of the other, and doused him with petrol. I wanted to set him alight, but another comrade did before I could, and he burnt to ashes – he could not be recognised thereafter ...

### Sacrifice and bravery

MK cadres were thus capable of extreme violence, but some also displayed great bravery and endurance. The story of Patrick Chamusso provides a powerful example. He was a worker at Sasol 2, the massive industrial plant in the eastern Transvaal that converts coal into oil. Given that this was a ‘strategic industry’, aimed at bolstering the ability of the South African economy to survive in the face of sanctions, it was regarded as a symbol of the strength of the apartheid regime.

In 1980 Chamusso was detained by the security police. He had done nothing wrong, but was suspected of being part of an ANC attack on the Sasol 2 plant. Following his release, he went into exile. Once in exile he was approached by Joe Slovo, MK chief of staff and general secretary of the South African Communist Party. Slovo asked him a fateful question: would he be willing to attack the Sasol 2 plant? Chamusso said he was. He remembers:

[Joe Slovo and Rashid] asked me if I knew about those reactors, how they were positioned. I said, yes, I know about them. And then Slovo said, what if you find somebody, not myself [Slovo]. What if you find someone who is going to train you, can you go back there and burn that Sasol? I said I would be very glad. I will go there very happily and running, you see. He then said, why are you going to run? I told him that these Boers have made me angry, you see. These Boers have made me angry, look, they had assaulted me and I know nothing ... He then said this thing [apartheid] doesn’t absolve anybody, it affects everybody who is a South African.

Chamusso was flown to Angola and given a crash course in armed combat, specialising in explosives and marksmanship. When he had finished the course Slovo asked him again whether he was willing to attack the Sasol 2 plant. Again, he said yes. But there was a part of Slovo’s plan that he did not like. Slovo wanted Chamusso to be accompanied by a group of MK operatives. Chamusso recalls his response:

I said, hey, *aikona*, no. I want to go single-handedly. He asked me why I wanted to go alone. I then said, no, it is because we are told that there are *mothlembe* [infiltrators], people who enter here [exile] to come and



Patrick Chamusso (left) and Derek Luke on the set of the feature film *Catch a Fire*.

infiltrate... what if you send me with somebody who is *mothlembe*, and he sells me out there?

Slovo was sceptical, and Chamusso had to prove to him that he was trustworthy and wasn't a *mothlembe* himself. He managed to do so, and was given the mission to undertake on his own.

Seven months after going into exile, Chamusso began his mission. He set off for the South African border, with a fake passport and a car packed with explosives. His first challenge was to get the explosives over the border. It couldn't be done in his car. He was stopped at the border post and questioned. He was searched, and so was his car. He had guessed that this might happen, and had removed the explosives from the car and left them in a bag near the border. His plan was to cross the border again on foot and fetch the bag, hopefully without being seen or searched. The guards eventually let him through, but asked him to give a black policeman a lift to Bethal. Chamusso had little choice but to agree.

After dropping off the policeman, Chamusso hoped to return to the border to fetch the explosives. But he soon realised he was being followed by an old car, and once again had to change his strategy. He drove all the way to Springs, on the East Rand, but the car still followed. He drove to a taxi rank, stopped, and the person or persons following him finally drove off. His car, he realised, was a hazard. He had to find another way to get back to the border. He approached an old man who owned a van, asked him to take him to the





Firemen battle to quell the flames at Sasol's synthetic fuel plant at Secunda after a limpet mine attack by Umkhonto we Sizwe in June 1980.

border, and paid him R150 for petrol. On the way he explained his story. He was meeting a woman on the other side of the border. She had his luggage, and they would return to South Africa together. They reached the border, Chamusso went to fetch his bag, and returned to the car without a hitch. But Chamusso had to explain to the van owner why there was no sign of a woman:

I told him, hey, man, the person I was looking for – this woman has tricked me. She only left the luggage. They are saying, she got a lift to go and look for me that side, maybe we will find her because I told her that, no, I will come to Van Dyk's Drift, at her house. *A o, ngase sekhathe se sa mathola* [we will find her another time].

Chamusso wasted no time once he had the explosives, and went to Sasol 2 the next morning. He thought he would be able to enter the plant quite easily, as he had done when he had worked there. But since the first attack on the plant

a high fence had been built around it, and all workers had to wear security badges, which were checked when they entered the plant. Chamusso went to the nearby town of Evander, bought a set of overalls similar to those worn by Sasol 2 workers, and had an identity photo taken. Arriving back at the mine with his identity photo he entered a beer hall ...

I went to the mine, I met some guys, exchanged some greetings. They were [beer] drinking people, you see. Hey, man, I wanted their entrance cards. If I could get it I was going to take it out and insert mine. At that time they [the cards] were not similar to the present ones. At the moment you can't take it out. They are computerised ... at that time you were able to remove the photo from its cover. I stayed with them for a while at the beer hall and eventually stole it. It disappeared, his entrance card.

On 21 October Chamusso was ready to complete his mission. He put on his overalls and boots, hoisted his bag with the explosives, and entered the plant with his new identity card. He picked up some tools and went onwards, looking like a man about to go underground. But things still did not go smoothly.

Then, I saw one man who could recognise me. Hi, Pat, when were you employed really? I said, hi, man, they have employed me but they gave me the job of sweeping the belts. Ah, man, it is better; I never thought they would re-employ you. And, he was a baasboy, a so-called bossboy. Where is the scope of your work? He said he was in charge of the belts underground ...

Chamusso made an excuse, and walked off. He had to move quickly. He cut a hole in the fence surrounding the main reactors, went through it, and reached for the mines in his bag. He could destroy the entire plant if he blew up the main reactor's petrol pump. But if he did that he would have the deaths and injuries of many innocent workers on his hands. He decided he would blow up the entire plant, but would give the workers enough of a warning to allow them to get away. He set up two explosive devices. The second would set off a chain reaction, and would destroy the whole plant. But the first would blow up a water pump, scaring people away but not harming them. The first bomb went off. As workers fled the area, Chamusso beat a hasty retreat.

The next day Chamusso bought the newspapers to find out what had happened. He had failed – the second bomb had been defused, and Sasol 2 was still in existence. He was determined to inflict damage on the apartheid



The memorial  
at Mbuzini  
commemorating the  
death in October 1986  
of the president of  
Mozambique, Samora  
Machel, in a plane  
crash in the Lebombo  
Mountains.



Memorial in  
Sekhukhuneland to  
imperial soldiers killed  
in the attack on the  
Pedi capital of Dsjate  
in 1879. In the 1980s  
youth groups in the  
area claimed the site  
as part of a tradition of  
resistance.



regime, and set off for Witbank to attack a transformer at Transalloy. This time he succeeded, and the transformer was destroyed. His mission completed, Chamusso made his way to the border.

But before he left the country he wanted to say goodbye to his children, whom he hadn't seen in more than a year. As he reached Dennilton, their home, he came across a massive roadblock. He panicked. In full view of the roadblock he turned his car around and fled. The police followed. They realised it was Chamusso, the man they wanted. Snipers blew holes in the tyres of Chamusso's car, forcing it off the road. Chamusso crawled out of the car, injured and without a gun. He fled to a nearby mealie field and hid. The police sent a dog unit and spotter planes to find him. He stood no chance. After surrendering, he was beaten, tortured, tried, and sentenced to 24 years' imprisonment on Robben Island.

As he watched Cape Town receding from the ferry taking him to this bleak island, he had little idea that within 10 years the ANC would be unbanned and Nelson Mandela released. Or that, in 25 years' time, a major Hollywood film, *Catch a Fire*, would celebrate his exploits.

### A new beginning

By the end of the 1980s the situation in the homelands, towns and cities of the region had spiralled beyond the control of the apartheid government. The fact that a region such as the eastern Transvaal, which had not previously been seen as a major political battlefield, had also ignited in protest contributed to a growing recognition in government that its approach was no longer viable. In 1990 the ANC, PAC, and SACP were unbanned, and Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners on Robben Island and elsewhere were released. In 1994 the first inclusive elections ushered in a new beginning, for Mpumalanga and for the rest of South Africa.