One Hundred Years of the ANC

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‘Mzwandile Piliso ... His name is known from Cape Horn to Cairo. For Africans he has become a symbol of the fighter for freedom of the Black Continent,’ wrote a Soviet journalist in an article devoted to this member of the National Executive Committee of the African National Congress (ANC) in 1970. The author’s lack of knowledge of geography is obvious, and his knowledge of African politics was hardly adequate. To say that Piliso’s name was known everywhere and that he had become a ‘symbol’ was definitely an exaggeration, although Piliso did become really well-known among those in Africa and beyond who were involved in supporting the South African liberation movement. Indeed, by the time the article was published in 1970, Mzwandile Piliso had become one of the well-known faces of the ANC in the international arena.

The journalist met ‘Comrade Mzwai,’ as Piliso was often called, in Alma-Ata (now Almaty), during an international conference to commemorate the centenary of Lenin’s birth. This was just one of the many conferences Piliso attended in that period on behalf of the ANC. Incidentally, Piliso’s presentation at the conference was noted by reactionary forces as far away as Australia. The newsletter of the Australian League of Rights, a far-right political organisation, drew attention to a paragraph in Piliso’s speech:

> With Lenin’s ideas as a guide, the oppressed exploited people of South Africa are fighting for their liberation. Our main task is to abolish the fascist tyranny and establish a revolutionary democracy ... Without the support we receive from the Socialist countries, particularly the Soviet Union ... our struggle would have been inconceivable. The world national liberation movement will achieve complete victory only on the road illuminated by Lenin’s ideas.

Piliso’s involvement in the liberation struggle had begun ten years earlier. A week after the Sharpeville massacre of March 1960, Oliver Tambo, then ANC deputy president, left South Africa illegally and went to the United Kingdom. Reporting in Durban to the first national conference of the ANC after its unbanning in July
1991, Tambo said that the ANC’s leadership had taken the decision to send him abroad even earlier, in 1959, ‘to rally international support for the isolation of the apartheid state’ and also ‘to create a reliable rear base for our struggle.’\textsuperscript{14} Tambo recalled the aspirations and hardships of the first period of his exile: ‘Those were hopeful and exciting days. They were also particularly frugal ones when we often did not know where the next meal was coming from.’\textsuperscript{5}

Among the South Africans living in Britain who Tambo met was Mzwandile Piliso, who, like Tambo, came from the Transkei in the Eastern Cape. Piliso had graduated as a pharmacist in Edinburgh and was working in Britain to earn enough money to open his own pharmacy back home. However, Tambo briefed him about the developments in South Africa and persuaded him to join the external mission of the ANC as a full-timer.\textsuperscript{6}

Piliso’s ‘conversion’ from full-time pharmacist to full-time activist in the liberation movement was rapid. When, in June 1960, the ANC became a co-founder of the South African United Front (SAUF), Piliso was in the midst of the process. The SAUF consisted of the ANC, the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), the South African Indian Congress (SAIC) and the South West African National Union (Swanu) and was formed with the active encouragement of Ghana’s Kwame Nkrumah and other African leaders.

At a meeting of the SAUF held in Addis Ababa on 19 June 1960 (during the Second Conference of Independent African States), it was decided to open offices for the Front in Accra, Cairo and London.\textsuperscript{7} The Front spelt out its aims as: the overthrow of white domination and destruction of the myth of white supremacy, the establishment of a democratic state based on universal adult suffrage, canvassing independent African states and other states for individual and collective action against South Africa, raising funds and the unconditional release of all political prisoners.\textsuperscript{8}

The next SAUF meeting (which, although only seven people attended, was called a ‘conference’) took place in London on 30 June 1960. Piliso, together with Tambo, represented the ANC at the meeting.\textsuperscript{9} Shortly afterwards Piliso left for Cairo, where he initially manned the SAUF office together with a PAC representative, Vusi Make.\textsuperscript{10}

However, Piliso was soon disappointed with the lack of unity in the Front, whose representatives were placing ‘individual organisations above the will of the people and their well-being.’ In a letter to other representatives of the SAUF, Piliso wrote: ‘We must choose whether our first love and devotion is in the FRONT or outside.’\textsuperscript{11} No doubt, Piliso’s comment was directed at his PAC colleagues.
After the dissolution of the Front, Yusuf Dadoo (who had been the SAIC representative in the SAUF) wrote more candidly: ‘Much was achieved in the early stage of the United Front’s existence ... We succeeded in winning wide international support for our cause ... largely through our efforts, South Africa had to leave the Commonwealth.’ According to Dadoo, though, ‘behind the back of the United Front the PAC representatives worked for privileged contacts with governments and public organisations abroad.”

Sharp differences between the ANC and PAC around the March 1961 Pietermaritzburg conference and especially the May 1961 strike destroyed the basis for unity in South Africa and by the end of 1961 the Front was practically defunct. Its dissolution was officially announced in London on 13 March 1962. So, the ANC established its own office in Cairo, with Piliso as its head. Soon he took part in the first conference held by the ANC in exile, in Lobatse, Botswana, very close to the South African border, and became a member of the National Executive Committee.

On the threshold of the 1960s, and before the independence of Tanganyika, Nkrumah’s Ghana and Gamal Abdel Nasser’s Egypt played a crucial role in supporting African liberation, even though the South African movements encountered some difficulties in both countries. In Ghana, for example, the authorities imposed ‘control on the money at the disposal of the Front,’ which had been advanced earlier to the Accra office from London, and required that a ‘government official be co-signatory.’ In Cairo, the Egyptian government also did its best to control the liberation movements, mostly through the African Association. But the Egyptian capital had one advantage: it also hosted the permanent headquarters of the Afro-Asian Peoples’ Solidarity Secretariat (later Organisation, AAPSO), a body created at a conference held in Cairo in the last days of 1957, ending on 1 January 1958, with one of its main tasks to support the anti-colonial and anti-apartheid struggle. Soon Piliso became a member of the Secretariat.

The liberation movements were considered equal members of the Secretariat and had an opportunity to influence directly its decisions and activities. Besides, Cairo was a very useful point for communications between the ANC and foreign governments as well as non-governmental organisations.

In particular, the Afro-Asian Solidarity committees of both the USSR and China had their representatives on the AAPSO Secretariat and Piliso immediately made contact with them. As he told me several years later, initially he had more cordial relations with the Chinese representative (the Chinese revolution was very popular among the African liberation movements), but the relationship soured when the
ANC and the South African Communist Party (SACP) failed to side with China in the growing Sino-Soviet dispute in 1963. When Piliso visited China on his way to Japan for the commemoration of the victims of Hiroshima on 6 August 1963, he was given a friendly reception. But on his way back, just a few weeks later, he was practically ignored.

Piliso was involved in establishing contact with other socialist countries as well. In 1961, while still representing the SAUF, he visited the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and held talks with the Solidarity Committee, the German-African Society and several trade unions. Later that year, a Solidarity Committee delegation from the GDR held another meeting with Piliso, this time in Cairo. The contacts became regular when, in 1964, the GDR Solidarity Committee opened a liaison office with AAPSO in Cairo.15

In the 1960s, Piliso often visited the USSR. In particular, I remember a picture of him and Daniel Chipenda – then a rising star in the Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA) and later the leader of the anti-Neto Revolta do Leste (Eastern Revolt) in 1973–74 – as guests of honour at the wreath-laying ceremony in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, at the time of the Soviet Afro-Asian Solidarity Conference in 1964.

It was Piliso who, judging by the archival records, for the first time secured from Moscow direct material assistance, as limited as it was, for the ANC.16 Among the documents of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) stored in the Russian State Archive of Modern History, I found a transcript of the Central Committee Secretariat’s decision of March 1962 ‘on rendering assistance to the representatives of the African National Congress’ who took part in the Afro-Asian Writers Conference in Cairo. The Secretariat approved the Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee’s proposal to provide the South Africans with 100 roubles in foreign currency (equivalent to $111 at the time).17

The names of the ‘ANC representatives’ did not feature in the transcript, but later my student, Maxim Sivograkov, while doing research into Soviet-ANC relations in the 1960s in another archive, the State Archive of the Russian Federation, found the original letter (zapiska) of the Solidarity Committee to the CPSU Central Committee.18 Dmitry Dolidze, the then secretary-general of the Solidarity Committee, said Piliso had requested modest help – in the form of £50 – for the ANC delegation, consisting of ‘Oliver Tambo, Nelson Mandella [sic] and Robert Resh [sic].’ Dolidze added that
‘taking into account that these persons are known progressive people and due to their positive attitude to us deserve necessary support,’ and asked for permission to provide them with foreign currency ‘from the limited fund of the Committee.’\textsuperscript{19} Permission was granted in the form of the Central Committee Secretariat’s decision ‘on rendering assistance to the representatives of the African National Congress.’\textsuperscript{20}

Piliso maintained close relations with the rotating Soviet Solidarity Committee representatives in Cairo, especially with Dr Latyp Maksudov (who, incidentally, as a member of the AAPSO delegation, was present at the inauguration of the Organisation of African Unity in Addis Ababa in May 1963). Maksudov was himself an outstanding figure, so active that some people confused his background and responsibilities. Former Mozambican minister of intelligence, Jacinto Veloso, who stayed in Cairo after his defection from the Portuguese Air Force, wrote in his memoirs that ‘Maksudov was certainly a representative of the USSR secret services for “work” with liberation movements.’\textsuperscript{21} This is completely wrong, as before his appointment to AAPSO, Maksudov was head of department of Oriental Studies at the Central Asian University in Tashkent and much later was appointed ambassador to Gabon.

However, other secret services, first and foremost those of the South African regime, did ‘work’ with the ANC. A Pretoria agent, Gerard Ludi, who ‘penetrated’ Moscow in 1962 through the structures of the world peace movement, as he boasted in his book, wrote about meeting Piliso, although referred to him as ‘Paliso.’\textsuperscript{22} More successful were the actions of Pretoria’s (or their Western allies’) spies in Egypt. Many years later an Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) fighter, who came to Moscow for medical treatment after serving a long sentence on Robben Island, told me that during interrogation in South Africa he had been shown a picture of himself and his friends taken in Heliopolis, a suburb of Cairo.

In the early 1960s, Piliso was involved not only in arranging the training of MK fighters in Egypt, but also in their transportation from Tanzania to Algeria. Piliso described to me how he had helped to organise their route: from Dar es Salaam to Nairobi they travelled by plane, from Nairobi to Juba by hired taxis (on extremely poor roads), from Juba to Khartoum by ship down the Nile, from Khartoum to Cairo by train and from Cairo to Algiers by plane again. The conditions of training in Egypt were rather harsh; moreover, after the completion of their course, the MK cadres were not allowed to meet Piliso.\textsuperscript{23} Perhaps the Egyptian authorities were guided
by the rules of secrecy, but, as mentioned above, this did not prevent Pretoria from spying on the trainees.

In 1965 Piliso was replaced in Cairo by Ambrose Makiwane and moved to Dar es Salaam to head the ANC office there as the chief representative. The official explanation for his recall was health reasons, but climate and medical facilities in Tanzania were hardly better than those in Egypt. Probably, rumours about leaders ‘living in luxury,’ spread by the ANC’s enemies and opponents, targeted Piliso as well. In his letter to the ANC headquarters, he complained that nobody, except perhaps Tambo, worried about how he made ends meet. He continued bitterly:

Some comrades suddenly saw me getting rich overnight. We have written articles from this office, for which we were well paid. That money did not go to wine, women and cabarets but was used in the office … I am at service and not in employment.

In the same mood, while serving in Tanzania, Piliso wrote to the Tanzanian representative at the end of 1965: ‘Those of you who have passed here must know that we live on one meal a day eating bread and tea morning and evening.’

He continued to live in modest conditions in the forthcoming years. Although the Soviet Union and its allies usually provided airfares and accommodation for guests from the liberation movements, pocket money was not always available. I recall how, during one international meeting in Moscow in the early 1970s, I shared with Piliso the four roubles (about $5) I had on me: three went to him and one remained with me.

Piliso was in the midst of the developments leading to the ANC Consultative Conference held in Morogoro, Tanzania, in late April 1969. In particular, he was appointed a member of the tribunal created to judge Chris Hani and his co-signatories of the Memorandum, which severely criticised the ANC leadership, which, in turn, regarded the document as a violation of military discipline, even a betrayal. The majority of this body favoured applying the most severe punishment; however the firm objection from Piliso averted what could have been a tragedy. According to Hugh Macmillan’s research, Piliso also tried, through third person, to persuade Hani and his comrades to apologise for their actions.

At the Morogoro conference, Piliso was elected to the ANC’s National Executive Committee. He had been co-opted onto it several years earlier, but it should be emphasised that in Morogoro, the NEC was reduced from twenty members to eight, and the fact that ‘Comrade Mzwai’ was one of them is proof of his leadership role in the movement at the time. He also became a member of the Revolutionary Council.
a body created at Morogoro with the specific mission of developing structures inside South Africa and waging the armed struggle.  

In 1969, after Makiwane had had problems with the core of the ANC leadership, ‘Comrade Mzwazi’ returned to Cairo. He was the first ANC leader I met. This was in June 1969, soon after I joined the staff of the Soviet Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee, having left the military service. Piliso was one of several prominent leaders of African liberation movements, among them Peter Nanyemba of the South West Africa People’s Organisation (Swapo), Jason Moyo of the Zimbabwe African People’s Union (Zapu) and Mariano Matsinha of the Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (Frelimo), who came to Moscow in transit to and from Berlin to attend an international peace conference. Piliso passed through Moscow again on his way to the conference in Alma-Ata mentioned above. I also accompanied him to Kiev, the capital of Ukraine, and later to Alma-Ata.

The ANC leadership involved Moscow in overcoming problems detected in MK during joint Zanu-ANC operations in Zimbabwe in 1967–68. Thus, to improve medical services, a group of cadres was sent to a medical school in Kiev for special training. When Piliso and I visited the school in 1969, its principal praised the students, but told us that there was a problem. The presence of MK members in the USSR was secret, but secrets were not easy to keep: the attempt to disguise the ANC students at the school as Zambians failed, as authentic Zambian students could not understand why their supposed compatriots could not speak their vernacular languages.

The year 1969 was an extremely difficult one for the ANC. The months before and after the Morogoro Conference became known as ‘the era of the Lusaka Manifesto.’ The document, which was approved behind the back of the ANC and other liberation movements by the conference of the Eastern and Central African states in Lusaka in April 1969, confirmed that the liberation of southern Africa was their aim, but stated their readiness to normalise relations with colonial and racist regimes and promised to urge the liberation movements ‘to desist from their armed struggle’ provided those regimes recognised ‘the principle of human equality’ and the right to self-determination.

Soon after the Lusaka Manifesto was adopted, the ANC, as Oliver Tambo reported years later at the Kabwe Conference in 1985, ‘had to evacuate [most of] our army [from Tanzania] to the Soviet Union at very short notice.’ Having agreed to receive MK members for ‘refresher courses,’ the Soviets were worried about the ANC’s future. This was, in particular, the theme of a discussion in Alma-Ata, which I attended,
between Piliso and Professor Rostislav Ulyanovsky, deputy head of the CPSU International Department.

Fortunately, the situation in African countries changed frequently, with one or another country coming forward to support the ANC. On this occasion, it was the new government of Sudan, formed after the military coup of May 1969. It was not accidental that at the meeting in Alma-Ata, Ulyanovsky raised with Piliso the question of using Sudanese territory as a base from which MK units could move south, even if support from other governments en route would be wanting.37

Before long, Piliso and I developed a warm relationship of mutual trust and respect. Piliso had never been a ‘conscious abstainer’; he liked a good drink and I was young enough to be able to match him, even if not always. During our ‘sessions’, he was very candid with me while speaking about his life story and the evolving situation.

He shared with me problems he sometimes faced in his relationships with his comrades. His weak point was the fact that he had not been active in ANC structures in South Africa before the organisation’s banning in 1960. In his own words, before he left for the UK, ANC structures in his native Transkei had been limited, although he had been active in other fields, such as rugby clubs.38 Indeed, according to Arianna Lissoni, ‘Tambo argued that Piliso did not officially belong to any organisation at the time he was brought into the [South African United] Front [in 1960], and only later joined the ANC.’39 However, I would underline the word ‘officially’ and add ‘for a short time,’ because, in practice, Piliso was with the ANC from the moment Tambo approached him.

Not much is known about Piliso’s life before he left South Africa for the UK and unfortunately I was not curious enough to ask him more questions. Stephen Ellis and his co-author, who shamelessly used the pen name Sechaba (People), wrote that Piliso ‘had joined the ANC with Walter Sisulu.’40 Unfortunately, as in most other instances, they do not provide any reference. In any event, Sisulu left the Eastern Cape in 1928,41 and was ‘formally recruited into the ANC’ in Johannesburg in 1940.42

Another painful subject to him was his relationship with the SACP. Perhaps it should be explained that we in the Soviet Union never asked South African friends whether or not they were members of the SACP. ‘Nobody organised me to be a communist,’ Piliso would say, disclosing that he joined the Communist Party of Great Britain during his stay in the UK, ‘and nobody can chop me off the party.’43 More
than once he told me in Moscow, ‘I belong to this place,’ meaning, of course, not the USSR per se, but the world anti-imperialist movement.

At a very gloomy point in ANC history, after the Lusaka Declaration in the early 1970s, Piliso asked the ANC leadership to send him to the Soviet Union for military training. This experience must have helped him greatly several years later when MK was, so to speak, resurrected. However, after completing his training, his newly acquired skills were of no immediate use and he was allowed to take long leave to join his family in Burnley in the UK – one of the few occasions on which he was able to spend some months with them. Later, he could only see his wife Joyce and children once or twice a year, having sacrificed his family life for the struggle. During this period Piliso was embittered by the differences in the ANC, which resulted in emergence of the group known as ‘the Gang of Eight.’ Like other members of the National Executive Committee, he eventually voted for the expulsion of the group from the movement.

His situation started to change after the 1974 Portuguese revolution and the independence of Mozambique and Angola in 1975. The late 1970s were probably the most productive and important period in Piliso’s life. As head of the newly formed Department of (Military) Training and Personnel, from 1976 to 1980 he was directly responsible for the creation of the ANC military network in Angola, which became the movement’s main rear base. (For the first time a fully operational regional command was formed there in 1980.) A dozen training and transit camps were established in Angola, which was regarded a military zone because of the war in the country. Some of these camps were in existence for only a few months, others for many years.

It was not easy for him to deal with the new wave of young South Africans who swelled the ranks of MK after the Soweto uprising of June 1976 and were eager to be trained and ‘go home to fight.’ James Ngculu, an MK veteran, wrote in his memoir:

> Whenever we had general meetings in the Engineering camp comrade Mzwai Piliso, who was always in our midst, would be repeatedly asked when we were going for training. We would tell him in very undiplomatic terms that we had not come for anything else but to fight. He would repeatedly tell us to be patient and inform us about the need to make the necessary arrangements, especially logistical, to ensure that the training programmes ran smoothly.
The training of ANC cadres in Angola was not limited solely to military skills. Piliso and Andrew Masondo, the ANC national commissar, were in charge of supplying camps with various books, mostly of a political and historical nature, requested from socialist countries and western anti-apartheid organisations. Piliso was also responsible for arranging the training of MK cadres abroad. His earlier contacts, no doubt, helped him to get the GDR to establish a military training school at Teterow in Mecklenburg, where about a thousand cadres were taught.

In October 1978, Piliso was a member of the ANC delegation to Vietnam, led by Oliver Tambo. The ANC delegates were impressed by the Vietnamese methods of political mobilisation and underground armed struggle during the many years of US occupation. Jack Simons recalled in his Angolan diary ‘Mzwai’s address [about Vietnam] to [Umkontho] Detachment ... in broiling sun’ in the camp of Novo Catengue.

In early 1981 Piliso received a new and even more important assignment: he was made head of the national intelligence and security department, known in the ANC as NAT. However, his departure from Angola deprived the region of the ‘one senior person who spent all his time in Angola.’ Ngculu believes that

[t]he decision to deploy him to Lusaka was a mistake. Mzwai had a gift of reading any situation and anticipating danger. Once he sensed a problem he would call the entire detachment and brief it on the issues and thereby avert a crisis. He was our main link with the headquarters in Lusaka, and his deployment to Lusaka created a gap that later proved to be dangerous for the leadership. In addition, after Mzwai left no one could give an acceptable explanation of the shortages that were arising in the camps and resolve other problems of the cadres. Mzwai also played a central role in motivating the cadres ...

Mzwai Piliso was one leader who literally lived together with the soldiers through the formative years of the detachments that followed the Luthuli Detachment. He patiently dealt with our impatience to go home and ‘deal with the boers.’ He explained that ours was no racial war, but a struggle for democracy for all. We called him Tata (father), in acknowledgement of his fatherly demeanour and actions. Everybody in the camps or residences in Luanda looked forward to his addresses whenever he visited. He was never unavailable to give a talk.

When hundreds (and then thousands) of young South Africans started leaving for exile after the Soweto uprising the ANC had no special security machinery in place, and the screening of new recruits was carried out by the department of training and personnel. this was not adequate, and, in 1977, the directorate of intelligence and
security was virtually recreated from scratch. (Though there were still some small and weak comparable structures in the ANC, neither documentation nor personnel was transferred to the new body.) For several years NAT was headed by Sipho (Simon) Makana and initially operated from Angola, where the Revolutionary Council was stationed, but soon moved to Lusaka.51

The NAT faced a very difficult job. It is worth remembering that the South African minister of police boasted in 1976 that ‘of every ten who cross the border to join the ANC, five are mine.’54 In fact, during the first two years of NAT’s existence, 932 new recruits were interviewed, twenty-six of whom confessed to being enemy agents, while a further thirty-five were still under interrogation.55 The spies had been ordered to find out the location of ANC houses and camps in the forward areas, their daily routine, the identity of the people who lived there and the system of protection and defence. Special attention was given to finding out the names and locations of the leaders.56

However, a number of apartheid agents continued to operate within the ranks of the ANC, and a network of infiltrators was uprooted in 1981.57 Spies of the regime carried out various subversive and dangerous acts, such as the attempted mass poisoning of cadres, supplying intelligence which led to the bombardment of an MK camp in Angola, sabotage of equipment and attempts to encourage indiscipline. Moreover, some agents supplied Pretoria’s security services with information which led directly to the assassinations of leaders and the arrest, torture and imprisonment of ANC cadres.58 These events demonstrated the need for a stronger security mechanism and resulted in the replacement of Makana, an honest, hardworking, but perhaps too ‘gentle,’ person, by Piliso, who was much tougher.

Piliso’s activities at that time went beyond exclusively security and intelligence matters. For example, in January 1983, a delegation, which he led, held talks in Harare which resulted in Zimbabwe’s promise to give some assistance to ANC – in particular, to facilitate the movement of ANC cadres into South Africa. Together with Joe Modise and Chris Hani, he discussed in Maputo on 31 May 1983 the situation in the ANC camp in Nampula, in the north of the country, in an attempt to ensure the continued stay of MK cadres there.

Piliso was involved in the initial ‘talks about talks’ on the political settlement in South Africa. It was he who made public the ANC leadership’s contacts in Lusaka in August 1984 with Professor Hendrik van der Merwe of the University of Cape Town, who was close to some important figures in the National Party: ‘Van der Merwe said
that as a Quaker he was concerned about the state of violence in South Africa. Underlining the fact that this meeting did not constitute the beginning of negotiations, Piliso nevertheless said, ‘the ANC is not saying there never will be any talks.’

At the same time, in his new capacity as head of intelligence and security, Piliso faced many problems. The ANC leadership believed the South African regime attempted to ‘jam’ NAT’s screening procedures by throwing large numbers of infiltrators into the field, often ill-prepared for the missions that had been assigned to them. It appears the regime hoped the ANC’s structures would be overwhelmed by this influx, which would ‘create conditions under which the more professional infiltrators they deployed might slip through the net.’

It should be emphasised that, by and large, the ANC and its NAT were relatively lenient (perhaps, too lenient) towards self-confessed infiltrators – nearly 40 per cent of them were never imprisoned, although more dangerous elements and those who had committed serious crimes ‘had to be isolated.’ The place of isolation was, as a rule, Camp 32, which was established in 1979. It was later called the Morris Seabelo Rehabilitation Centre, after the former head of ANC security in Angola, killed in Lesotho in 1985.

In the past two decades, much has been said about the incidence of malpractice committed by ANC security personnel, especially in Camp 32. As an organisation, the ANC accepted collective responsibility for this, but I believe the ANC security’s actions can only be properly assessed if and when the archives of Pretoria’s security services are opened (that is, provided the secrets have not been destroyed). In its report on the NAT, submitted to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), the ANC says:

Given the very limited resources accorded to this Department, the trying physical conditions under which it worked, the nature of missions with which enemy agents had been tasked by their masters, and the lack of training of cadres in certain duties (such as prison services), it was probably almost inevitable – but by no means excusable – that regrettable incidents occurred.

I believe that the formulation ‘almost inevitable – but by no means excusable’ adequately reflects the situation which evolved when Piliso was heading NAT. I also agree with the ANC’s own assessment that, because of its achievements in disrupting enemy attempts to destroy the ANC, NAT was targeted for sustained attack by apartheid regime’s structures and the perception has been deliberately
created that it ‘became a monstrous and lawless force which terrorised ANC members in exile, and killed large numbers of detainees or “dissidents.”’ As the ANC stated in its submission to the TRC: ‘The suggestion that any cadre of the ANC was trained specifically in torture is rejected with contempt.’

There have been attempts from various quarters to put the blame for the excesses of the NAT personnel on the SACP and socialist countries. According to the report of the ANC Department of Intelligence and Security, ‘certain cadres were selected and sent for specialised training in Security and Intelligence work in various countries, mainly the Soviet Union and the German Democratic Republic’ in the late 1970s. But the report also emphasised that ‘[t]his training emphasised that the use of force was counter-productive, and stressed the use of the intellect.’ Ronnie Kasrils confirms this in his autobiography: ‘Whatever might be thought about interrogation methods in communist countries, I found that Soviet and East German training emphasised the need to depend on brain work and not beating to arrive at the truth.’

During ‘Piliso’s time,’ ANC security personnel were mostly trained in the GDR. If any blame is to be laid at the feet of their instructors, it is perhaps that they were not sufficiently insistent that ANC cadres should never use methods typical of the South African regime and (unfortunately) also of the security services of some independent African countries.

Ellis and Sechaba admit that ‘the rank and file of Umkhonto we Sizwe, including the mutineers [of 1984 in Angola], generally commended the [Communist] Party,’ but claim they did not know that the ANC security department ‘was a Party fiefdom.’ On the contrary, archival documents prove that the SACP (and the USSR for that matter) were determined to prevent abuses. On 29 November 1982, immediately after Moses Mabhida’s return from a trip to Moscow, the SACP Central Committee Secretariat discussed at a meeting in Maputo ‘the question of the method of interrogation in the MK.’

The timing of this meeting was not accidental. Information (or at least rumours) of unacceptable methods of interrogation in the ANC had reached Moscow, and the matter was raised with Mabhida during his visit. Both then and on later occasions we reminded the SACP and ANC leaders and activists of the dangers and tragedies caused by ‘spy mania’ in the USSR, particularly in the late 1930s. The November 1982 meeting of the SACP Secretariat decided: ‘The question of interrogation in our camps to be further looked into.’ The matter was considered important enough to
be referred to the party’s politburo, which resolved: ‘Luanda delegation to discuss
this question further with selected comrades.’

The NAT’s actions were a hot issue at the ANC National Conference in Kabwe,
Zambia, in 1985. The decision was taken to create juridical structures and ‘Mzwai
Piliso fully accepted’ them, even if, according to the ANC submission to the TRC,
given the degree of pressure he was under on various fronts, he was
distinctly unenthusiastic about dealing with the complex and time-
consuming logistics involved in flying staff of the [newly-created] Office
of Justice into Angola to interview all prisoners and review their cases.

It was thus not accidental that the ANC’s top leaders decided during their visit to
Moscow in early November 1986 to make drastic changes in its security structures.
Ellis and Sechaba connected these changes with an alleged inter-tribal feud between
Piliso (Xhosa) and one of his lieutenants, Boroko (Tswana). They argued that
a compromise was found. The entire directorate of the Intelligence and
Security organ was dissolved in January 1987 … Thus the ANC response
to the problem was to fire both Boroko and Piliso. Despite the fact that
Piliso’s conduct was not at that point in question …

This claim is wrong on several fronts. ‘Piliso’s conduct’ was precisely in question
and the main reason for the dissolution of NAT was the ANC leadership’s
dissatisfaction with its activities. (By chance I happened to be present when Oliver
Tambo discussed the matter with Joe Slovo after the meeting with the Soviet
military.) Besides, the ANC National Executive took a formal decision in this

The intention of this chapter is not to consider various aspects of NAT’s activities,
such as unfair treatment of suspects and detainees, rather, it is an attempt to draw a
multidimensional portrait of one of the ANC leaders. But probably one of the main
reasons for flaws and excesses in the ANC in exile was the lack of proper training
and experience of the security personnel. Therefore, during the November 1986
visit to Moscow of an ANC delegation headed by Tambo, an important meeting took
place with Soviet security officials. Initially the ANC was to be represented by Joe
Modise and Chris Hani but at the last moment the ANC’s president decided to lead
the discussion. In particular, he requested that new personnel be trained in the USSR
in the security field, no doubt to rid the NAT of the blunders and abuses of the past.

Soon after Tambo’s visit to Moscow, the National Executive Committee finally
decided to reorganise the ANC’s security service: ‘The present Directorate of NAT will
be dissolved, effective as from the date the Presidential Committee formally announce it. The decision was to be announced on 20 February 1987. The department’s top officials were informed that they would all (with the exception of Sizakele Sigxashe, who headed the Central Intelligence Evaluation Sector) be transferred to other missions. In particular, Piliso became head of the Department of Manpower Development. According to the personal recollections of Barry Gilder, who was then a leading ANC intelligence operative, when Oliver Tambo made the announcement to the intelligence and security officials, Piliso remained expressionless and attentive, with a disciplined and respectful look on his face, receiving the news with dignity. An interim directorate was set up under Alfred Nzo and in July 1987, the NEC appointed the new permanent directorate of the department. Joe Nhlanhla became the director and Jacob Zuma his deputy.

When in 1991, after political negotiations had started, the remaining 32 people detained by the NAT were released and allowed to return to South Africa, several of them ‘immediately rejoined their handlers’ and fronted for the ‘Returned Exiles Co-ordinating Committee,’ managed by Pretoria’s Special Branch. One of the members of this committee was Mwezi Twala, a former detainee in Angola, who, after his release and transfer to Tanzania, managed in 1990 to run away to Pretoria’s embassy in Malawi. Having been welcomed by the South African authorities, he co-wrote, with Ed Bernard of the Inkatha Freedom Party, a book on NAT, which is still advertised by the most reactionary adherents of the old regime who publish extracts from it on their ‘Volkstaat’ website.

Among the critics of the ANC’s activities in the security field, one of the fiercest and most biased is Paul Trewhela, a former member of the underground SACP. During the past two decades, he has published extensively on the matter: from a journal article, ‘Inside Quatro,’ in 1990, to a book with the same title 20 years later. As to the value of his allegations, it is sufficient to give one example: referring to ANC fighters’ participation in the struggle for liberation in Zimbabwe, Trewhela wrote:

\[\textit{Umkhonto we Sizwe} \text{ functioned as an extension in Africa of the KGB} \]

… According to the ex-detainees, the KGB-apparatus in the ANC even sent its troops to Rhodesia in 1979 to fight against the guerrillas of the Zimbabwe African National Union, Zanu, which was not a Soviet client.

As we say in Russian, such allegations are \textit{nizhe pslintusa} (below the plinth). Hugh Macmillan, on the other hand, has provided more profound analyses of the ANC in exile, including its security service. While not shying away from ‘difficult’ pages
of the ANC’s exile history, Macmillan’s work has put these developments into a proper context.\textsuperscript{82}

In the early 1990s, ‘Comrade Mzwai’ became the subject of both fair critique and unscrupulous allegations. The 1992 ANC commission of inquiry, headed by Zola Skweyiya, into complaints by former detainees, stated in its report that Piliso “candidly” admitted that he had personally participated in beating a suspect in 1981 on the basis that a plot to kill members of the leadership had been discovered and he wanted information “at any cost.” In the ANC submission to the TRC, this was regarded as ‘setting an example,’ which ‘would have affected the behaviour of other members of the security department.’\textsuperscript{83} The same submission underlined that when ‘an ailing Mzwai Piliso had to testify to both the Skweyiya and the Motsuenyane Commissions in 1993, … he publicly admitted that he had to take responsibility for allowing certain abuses to continue.’\textsuperscript{84} In truth, as one of his comrades put it, Piliso was ready to ‘carry the can,’ defending the ANC by all means, whether from the subversive activities of enemy agents in the 1980s or from slanderous attacks by self-appointed defenders of human rights after 1990.

The TRC, some of whose members had also served as members of the pre-1994 South African Parliament and other apartheid bodies, asked ‘how the ANC justifies the fact that Mzwai Piliso and Andrew Masondo\textsuperscript{85} retained senior posts in the post-1994 administration.’\textsuperscript{86} In reply, the ANC stated that they ‘were seriously censured by the leadership of the ANC … These officials both performed well and with loyalty to the ANC in their new postings.’ It emphasised that

these officials [had] not acted with personal vindictiveness; they had acted within the broader context of weaknesses and problems afflicting the ANC as a whole … To hound loyal anti-apartheid fighters who made mistakes in the course of struggle would be to perpetrate a gross injustice.\textsuperscript{87}

Indeed, Piliso never complained about being demoted as head of NAT and remained active in his new post as head of the Department of Manpower Development as well, be it by visiting Cuba or discussing the academic training of young South Africans in the USSR.

I met Piliso again several years later, in Cape Town, after he had been elected a member of National Assembly in 1994. He was the same ‘Comrade Mzwai,’ still strong, although his personal problems had accumulated. He had developed diabetes, but what worried him most was that outside of the parliamentary village he had no
place to live: his old family house was occupied by one of his relatives. Soon Piliso resigned from Parliament and went to live in his native Eastern Cape. In 1996, at the age of 72, he succumbed to his illness. His (and the ANC’s) foes wrote with malevolent glee that of the movement’s national leadership only Thabo Mbeki and Joe Modise were present at his funeral.\textsuperscript{88} This is false, because others, notably Ronnie Kasrils and Joe Nhlanhla, were also present. However, perhaps some people wanted to distance themselves from the person who honestly accepted personal responsibility for errors committed under his command.

I was glad to find out that a proper tribute was eventually paid to him: the main campus of the South African Intelligence Academy in Mafikeng bears his name and, at its launch in 2003, Jacob Zuma, then deputy president, spoke about ‘fond memories’ of Mzwandile Piliso. To me, as an historian, one phrase in Zuma’s speech seems especially important: ‘It is very unfortunate that many of the veterans of the struggle, of which Mzwandile Piliso was one, passed away without putting the wealth of their experiences on paper for the benefit of future generations.’\textsuperscript{89} I believe that it is our duty honestly to tell the next generations about them.

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**Endnotes**

1. This chapter is devoted to Mzwandile Piliso, a prominent, although controversial member of the ANC leadership in exile. It is based on ANC and Soviet archival documents, on my personal and political discussions with Piliso’s South African and Soviet comrades-in-arms and, especially, my own memory of meetings with ‘Comrade Mzwai’ himself over a 25-year period. I think that the history of the ANC during the exile, underground and armed struggle years cannot be complete without painting a political portrait of this prominent member of the Congress leadership. When I was invited to participate in the One Hundred Years of the ANC Conference, I looked at biographies published on South African History Online and was deeply disappointed not to find Piliso’s name on the list of prominent South Africans. It was this absence which prompted me to write this chapter, as I believe that the ANC centenary obliges us to fill this gap.

6. This part of Piliso’s story is based on my conversation with him more than 40 years ago.
7. University of the Western Cape-Robben Island Mayibuye Archives (hereafter UWC-RIMA), Historical Papers, ANC London Collection, Minutes of the South African United Front Conference held in London from 25 August to 4 September 1961, 11.
8. UWC-RIMA, ANC London Collection, Dr Yusuf Dadoo Papers, Minutes of a meeting held on 19 June 1960.
10. I arrived in Egypt in April 1960, but my mission then was far from the affairs of the South African liberation movement, and I only met Piliso nine years later.
16. However, indirect financial assistance to the ANC was provided much earlier. Yusuf Dadoo had indicated to Soviet officials on one of his visits to Moscow in 1960 that the SACP was providing assistance to the ANC Emergency Committee during the state of emergency. No doubt, a substantial part of the allocation to the party in 1960 and rapidly increasing allocations in the years that followed ($50 000 in 1961 and $112 445 in 1962) were spent on the needs of the ANC and *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (MK). (Russian State Archive of Modern History, Collection 89, Inventory 38, File 4/3-5, Head of the CPSU Central Committee International Department BN Ponomarev’s report on application of the International Trade Union Fund for Assistance to Left Workers’ Organisations, 1 November 1961; *Ibid.*, File 5/5-6, Head of the CPSU Central Committee International Department BN Ponomarev’s report on application of the International Trade Union Fund for Assistance to Left Workers’ Organisations, 3 January 1963. See also V Shubin, *ANC: A View from Moscow*, 2nd edition (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2008).
17. Russian State Archive of Modern History, Decisions of the Secretariat, No 17, Item 37g, 10 March 1962.
18. State Archive of the Russian Federation, Collection 9540gs, Inventory 2s, File 47, 20. D Dolidze, Executive Secretary of the Soviet Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee to the CC of the CPSU, 28 February 1962. This example also shows that in their attempts to mobilise support for the ANC, Mandela and his colleagues used every opportunity they could – after all none of them was a writer.
22. G Ludi, *Operation Q-018* (Cape Town: Nasionale Boekhandel, 1966), 101. Ludi alleged that the Freedom Charter was ‘sent to the Moscow Africa Institute for approval’ (quoted in S Ellis and T Sechaba, *Comrades Against Apartheid: The ANC and the South African Communist Party in Exile* (London: James Currey; Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), 27). However, the CPSU Central Committee’s decision to establish the Africa Institute was only taken in June 1959, exactly four years after the Charter was adopted by the Congress of the People in Kliptown.
27. University of Fort Hare (hereafter UFH), National Heritage and Cultural Studies Centre (hereafter NAHECS), ANC Morogoro Papers, Box 4, Piliso writing to the Tanzanian representative, 1 November 1965.
29. Discussion with C Hani, Moscow, 27 April 1992. However, at my last meeting with Joe Modise on 12 June 1999 in Dar es Salaam, he confirmed the suspension of Hani and his co-signatories, but denied that they had been charged by the tribunal.
33. When the Revolutionary Council was reorganised as the Political-Military Council in 1983, Piliso became a member of that, too.
34. Before meeting Piliso, I had met rank-and-file members of the ANC in Moscow, among them Joseph Nhlanhla, future minister of intelligence services, and Max Sisulu, a future speaker of the South African National Assembly. In 1969 both of them were completing their Masters’ degrees in Economics.
36. UWC-RIMA, ANC Lusaka Collection, African National Congress National Consultative Conference, President’s Statement, 19.

37. Discussion between R Ulyanovsky, Deputy Head of the International Department, CPSU CC, and M Piliso, Alma-Ata, 2 October 1969.

38. He later played rugby in Birmingham.


40. Ellis and Sechaba, Comrades against Apartheid, 35.


42. Ibid, 63

43. I heard that in the early 1970s Piliso was suspended from the SACP, but in the late 1980s he was back in its ranks.

44. ANC, Further Submissions and Responses, Appendix Two, MK Camps and Commanders.

45. Ibid.


47. ANC, Further Submissions and Responses, Appendix Two, MK Camps and Commanders.


49. Sisulu, In Our Lifetime, 272. However, some other authors do not include his name in the list of delegates.


51. ANC, Further Submissions and Responses, Appendix Two, MK Camps and Commanders.

52. Ngculu, The Honour to Serve, 162.

53. Report of NAT, May 1979, 1-3. I do not know whether this document is available in one of the archives, but I was able to read a copy of it.

54. Quoted in Mail & Guardian, Johannesburg, 8-14 October 1993.


56. Ibid, 12.

57. See the chapter by Hugh Macmillan in this volume.

58. ANC, Further Submissions and Responses.


60. Ibid.

61. ANC, Further Submissions and Responses.

62. Ibid.

63. ANC, Further Submissions and Responses, Operations Report: The Department of Intelligence and Security of the African National Congress.

64. Ibid.

65. ANC, Further Submissions and Responses.


68. Ellis and Sechaba, Comrades Against Apartheid, 202.

69. UWC-RIMA, Yusuf Dadoo Collection, Secretariat activities since its formation.

70. Ibid.

71. ANC, Further Submissions and Responses.

72. Ellis and Sechaba, Comrades Against Apartheid, 178.

73. UWC-RIMA, ANC Lusaka Collection, Final Version, Decision and Recommendations of the NEC Meeting, 11 to 15 February 1987.

74. Ibid.

75. Ibid.

76. Personal discussion with B Gilder, Johannesburg, 21 September 2011.
ANC, Further Submissions and Responses, Operations Report: The Department of Intelligence and Security.

78. Ibid.


81. P Trewhela, 'Inside Quatro.'


83. ANC, Further Submissions and Responses.

84. Ibid.


86. ANC, Further Submissions and Responses.

87. Ibid.
