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ARTICLE

Navigating the Underground in Plain Sight: Experiences of Clandestine Solidarity in South Africa

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Abstract

From 1967 onward, the ANC in exile recruited young non-South Africans classified as "white" to carry out clandestine solidarity missions because of their ability to travel freely around the country. Drawing on the recollections of these recruits, as documented in two books and presented in a series of webinars, this article examines how they exploited their white privilege to support the liberation struggle. By foregrounding female perspectives and focusing on the tensions caused by concealing political convictions, the article provides new insights into daily life in the underground movement and sheds light on this lesser-known dimension of international solidarity.

Résumé

L'ANC en exil recrute à partir de 1967 des jeunes non-sud-africains considérés comme « blancs » pour mener des missions de solidarité clandestines, car ils ont la liberté de voyager dans le pays. En s'appuyant sur les témoignages de ces recrues, tels qu'ils ont été consignés dans deux ouvrages et présentés lors d'une série de webinaires, cet article examine de quelle manière ils ont mobilisé leur privilège blanc pour appuyer la lutte pour la libération. En mettant l'accent sur les points de vue des femmes et en soulignant les tensions engendrées par la dissimulation des convictions politiques, l'article offre une nouvelle perspective sur la vie quotidienne dans le mouvement underground et met en évidence cette dimension méconnue de la solidarité internationale.

Resumo

A partir de 1967, o ANC exilado começou a recrutar jovens não sul-africanos classificados como "brancos", para que, graças à sua capacidade para viajarem sem restrições pelo país,

levassem a cabo missões solidárias clandestinas. Partindo da recolha dos testemunhos destes colaboradores, que se encontram documentados em dois livros e têm sido apresentados numa série de webinares, o presente artigo analisa a forma como eles exploraram o seu privilégio branco para apoiar a luta de libertação. Ao atribuir especial relevo às perspetivas femininas, centrando-se também nas tensões provocadas pela conciliação de diferentes convicções políticas, são apresentados novos pontos de vista sobre a vida quotidiana no movimento clandestino, permitindo compreender melhor esta dimensão menos conhecida da solidariedade internacional.

Keywords: underground; clandestinity; critical whiteness; memory; solidarity; apartheid; South Africa

Introduction

More than three decades after the first democratic elections in 1994, the dominance of the ruling African National Congress (ANC) in shaping how South Africa's liberation struggle is remembered has been fiercely contested from various quarters (Bridger 2021, 5; Soske, Lissoni, and Erlank 2012, 29–30; Southall 2013). Several groups have felt excluded and unseen, from former comrades in rural areas (Wale 2016) to students who made their voices heard in the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements a decade ago. The post-apartheid "born free" generation has questioned "why Mandela was singled out in the collective struggle against apartheid" and argued that the role of "ordinary people" was not given enough attention alongside the role of other, more radical heroes (Kenyon and Madlingozi 2022, 502–503).

Historians have emphasized the importance of diversifying the genre of biography by focusing not only on the accounts of leaders, but also on the narratives of individuals who played less prominent roles in resistance struggles (Lindsay 2017, 23; Angelo 2021). In South Africa, scholarly debates on autobiographies/biographies of resistance were intense, challenging the dominant linear way of telling life stories (Rassool 2010; Money 2020; see also van Walraven 2020). Opening up interest in diverse ways of telling life stories was also expected to bring to the fore everyday aspects of the struggle that had long been left out (Soske, Lissoni, and Erlank 2012, 33).

This article focuses on the memories of a particular group of so-called "ordinary" people who were in fact quite extraordinary: white non-South Africans who were recruited for secret missions on behalf of the ANC and South African Communist Party (SACP) from 1967 onwards. They used their white privilege to support the liberation struggle, navigating the underground while remaining in plain sight. The international recruits practiced a form of clandestine solidarity that overall has received little recognition in South Africa despite some individuals being honored. This is partly due to the long silence that those involved kept about their missions. This changed when some of these recruits' memories were published in two books, initiated by the recruits themselves (in 2012 and 2021), and shared in a series of webinars co-hosted by the author in 2021–22. This article provides a methodological reflection on these sources that offer intimate insights into how former recruits remember their missions. Drawing on these recollections, this contribution

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highlights the personal experiences of white, non-South African activists. This essay extends our understanding of daily life underground during the anti-apartheid struggle. It also sheds new light on the lesser-known clandestine dimension of international solidarity, which was intertwined with the open anti-apartheid movement. The psychological impact of these clandestine missions on individuals and how they are evaluated from a contemporary perspective are given particular focus. Consequently, the analysis illuminates the long-term impact of international solidarity work.

Before turning to a deeper discussion of the sources, I provide some background on the historical context in which these recruits became active and discuss the meanings of underground and whiteness in this context.

Historical context

What finally brought down the apartheid system, established in 1948, has long been debated. While some argue that the armed struggle did not play a significant role because apartheid's demise was a consequence of external conditions (see, for example, Ellis 2013), others emphasize the importance of what the ANC called the four pillars of struggle—mass political struggle, armed operations, underground organization, and international support—and argue that the ANC's position would have been much weaker without the armed wing (Lodge 2014, 423; Simpson 2019, 1093–94).

The Sharpeville massacre of 1960 had convinced many that armed resistance had to be taken up, leading to the formation of Umkhonto we Sizwe, or MK for short, in December 1961 by individuals involved in the ANC and SACP, welcoming people of all backgrounds into its ranks (Switzer 2000, 1–2). MK members carried out acts of sabotage against infrastructure with the aim of disrupting the rule of the apartheid regime (see Cherry 2011; Davis 2018; Simpson 2019; Landau 2022). They continued to work underground until the arrest of Nelson Mandela and other ANC leaders during the Rivonia Trials in 1964 made it clear that staying in the country was no longer an option. Many fled the country and considered ways to support the remaining underground resistance from abroad.[1]

Exile was closely linked to the underground organization, as operations were often planned and logistical, financial, and training support was provided from there (Suttner 2008, 1). The idea of undermining the racist ideology of apartheid by recruiting young people who would be categorized as "white" by the regime is credited to Oliver Tambo, the exiled president of the ANC in London.[2] Their skin color, combined with their unknown political profile in the apartheid state, made them ideally suited to act as the missing link between the resistance organization in exile and those South Africans still active in the underground inside the country as it allowed them to enter South Africa without suspicion and to move freely.

Despite its close links with other forms of struggle, the underground has certain specificities and "raises complex moral, social and psychological issues that do not arise in the same way in other spheres of action. There is something extreme and often hermetic about the demands on the life of the underground

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operative which is not found in other forms of struggle" (Suttner 2008, 3; see also Davis 2018; Bridger 2021; and Ngculu 2009 for MK perspectives on life in the underground).

One specific condition that shaped the underground in the South African context was obviously the way in which the apartheid system segregated the population according to skin color. While underground activity is most often associated with people who operate in full hiding, the underground also includes people whose public persona differs significantly from their underground persona (Suttner 2008, 6). This is true of those "white" recruits who were in the public eye while in the underground. I am interested in how whiteness enabled a very particular form of being in the underground and how these recruits remember the daily struggle to navigate the unmarked underground while making use of their white privilege.

Whiteness has been theorized in critical whiteness studies as a condition/structural position that is usually unmarked (Steyn and Conway 2010). In the apartheid system, South African whiteness was clearly marked—in a legal, social, and moral sense (Schroeder 2012, 7). In the context of institutionalized racism, whiteness was widely understood to signify a particular political position and thus served to camouflage international recruits who had no known political profile at the time of their entry into the country. The latter point is important to emphasize because this made the situation of these recruits very different from that of white South Africans who had joined the liberation struggle but were hunted by the Apartheid regime and thus left the country to continue the struggle from exile (Ellis 2013, 90; Hain 2021; Southall 2022).

As is well known, several white South Africans held leadership positions in the ANC and SACP, many of them with Jewish backgrounds. Joe Slovo, Ruth First, Denis Goldberg, and Ronnie Kasrils were among those men and women whose lives and contributions to the struggle have been well documented, partly in the form of auto/biographies (e.g., First 1965; Kasrils [1993] 2013; Wieder 2013; Goldberg 2016).

Indeed, it was Kasrils, a co-founder of the MK, who was tasked by Oliver Tambo with identifying young people in London who were willing to go to South Africa and assist the ANC in its operations.[3] During his own studies at the London School of Economics (LSE), he encountered potential recruits in the classroom or in student groups committed to international solidarity and the struggle against racism. Most of the first recruits were born at or shortly after the end of the Second World War, and the experience of fascism in Europe and colonialism had politicized them. While many of the first recruits were British, people of other nationalities, especially Americans, Irish, Greeks, and French who had encountered the ANC in Britain, also joined. The missions of these early recruits, which began in 1967, were intended to send a message of life to South Africans, to show that the ANC was still active despite the bans. The actions of this first generation of recruits tended to be of low intensity, although they occurred "at least once a year, every year from 1967 to 1973."[4] The means used to raise awareness ranged from playing audio messages and exploding leaflet bombs in public places to sending letters to individuals. In the early years of these operations, material was brought into South Africa in suitcases with false bottoms. In addition to leaflets,

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letters, and audio messages, resistance literature was also smuggled into the country for distribution.[5] Resistance struggles in other countries, notably Nazi Germany, Greece, and Algeria inspired the means by which the recruits contributed to the anti-apartheid struggle.[6]

The nature of these clandestine solidarity missions changed over time. Those who traveled to South Africa in the late 1960s and early 1970s usually came for short-term missions, whereas those who came in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s tended to stay longer, up to several years. Not only did the length of their stay vary, but there were also significant differences in their backgrounds and missions. While the first recruits were either recruited at university or through the Young Communist League—the youth wing of the British Communist Party—in the 1980s, many individuals were involved in the overt anti-apartheid movement before being recruited to participate in MK's covert missions. With the increasing role of neighboring countries in the struggle against apartheid following the independence of Angola and Mozambique in 1975, more recruits from the frontline states were also involved, and the whiteness that was a prerequisite for the recruits of the first cohorts became less important, although it continued to shape the strategies, as will be discussed below.

When the 1976 uprising of black youth in Soweto led to a much greater involvement of South Africans in the underground (see Simpson 2011a), the tasks for which recruits were needed changed. They provided cover for MK fighters when they had to cross borders and maintained safe houses where they could stay, meet, and plot while traveling. Recruits were also involved in regular reconnaissance missions. They identified suitable locations for weapons caches, were involved in the storage and preparation of military equipment, and crossed the South African border with vehicles full of weapons. Former MK commander Aboobaker Ismail "Rashid" emphasized that arms smuggling was a task for which the topography of South Africa required the involvement of white recruits to compensate for the lack of terrain conducive to hiding[7] (see Davis 2013, 125).

The use of armed resistance was a contentious issue between the ANC and the international anti-apartheid movement. While the use of arms was widely accepted as a means of liberation struggle, this position proved difficult for individuals within the solidarity movement to accept (Bundy 2013, 221). Although most recruits were pacifists when they joined the underground, they would have been willing to take up arms once they were exposed to apartheid. However, the MK leadership considered it paramount to ensure that recruits remained in a supportive role and did not become involved in direct combat, as this would have been detrimental to their struggle if it became known.[8] Some of them never encountered problems with police or security, while others managed to evade them successfully. For a few, however, their missions ended in prison. These exceptional experiences will not be explored further in this paper, which focuses instead on the ways in which the demands of daily life in the underground are remembered. Before proceeding with the analysis, the following discussion presents the sources in their chronological order and discusses their potential and limitations.

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Autobiographic writing and webinars as spaces to overcome the burdens of secrecy

In general, sources that provide insights into underground activity in South Africa were rare in the first decade after the end of apartheid as practitioners did not want to be identified (Suttner 2008, 7). In Chapter Eight of his autobiographical book *"Armed and Dangerous": My Undercover Struggle against Apartheid*, first published in 1993, Ronnie Kasrils (2013) coined the term "London recruits" and mentioned some of the activities of the recruits, but did not name them because "it was too early and we were reluctant to reveal who the recruits were at that time. We still were kind of in a semi-legal, semi-illegal mindset."[9]

In 2012, the book *London Recruits* was published, in which former recruits wrote about their experiences in the underground. It was edited by Ken Keable, himself a member of the first cohort of recruits, who after writing down his own memories in 2005, resolved to track down others who had been involved and motivate them to write their stories.[10] With the support of Kasrils, who was then the South African Minister of Intelligence, he organized a reunion at the South African High Commission in London on June 12, 2005. Many of the former recruits attended the event, where they learned about the identities of others with whom they had a shared history of covert solidarity missions.[11] The tension inherent in the concept of clandestine solidarity is that the solidarity aspect of the work involves standing up for others, while the clandestine aspect requires isolation from the very people one is joining. The publication of the autobiographical accounts, as well as the webinars, can thus be seen as a process of grappling with, if not overcoming, this tension. This dynamic was particularly evident in the three webinars that I (co-)organized.

Two webinars took place prior to the publication of *International Brigade Against Apartheid* (Kasrils, with Andersson and Marleyn 2021), the second edited volume that is part of my corpus, and a third webinar was organized as one of the events to launch the book.[12] All three took place in 2021–22, during the pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. The impact of the pandemic on empirical research conditions has been a growing concern in the academic literature (e.g., Ruokonen-Engler 2025). In this case, the webinars did not serve as a substitute for face-to-face meetings; rather, they emerged as a viable option in this specific context, with the added advantage of not requiring funding. In addition, these webinars were not created primarily for research purposes, but also as a space to reunite and share memories, exchange recognition, and pass on experiences to a younger generation (see Mpofu 2023, 278–79).

The first webinar, held on April 29, 2021, was part of a seminar I was teaching at the University of Vienna. I invited Ronnie Kasrils to speak, and to my pleasant surprise, he also invited several former recruits to join us online. However, due to a mistake he made in telling them about the time difference, most of them did not join until shortly before the seminar was scheduled to end. This mistake was humorously taken by all and led to an impromptu decision to hold a follow-up webinar on June 1, 2021, bringing together more recruits and former MK members. While the responsibility for hosting the event on the webspace of

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the university fell to me, the selection of speakers for this second webinar was made by Ronnie Kasrils and Ken Keable. The almost four-hour-long webinar convened ten speakers representing the first and second generations of recruits, as well as MK members whom they supported. It also attracted around ninety participants, including more recruits and people who had been active in the anti-apartheid movement.[13]

This webinar, more than others, functioned as an online reunion, facilitating connections among participants, including those who had not previously met in person. This was particularly noticeable among individuals who joined later, when the recruitment process had become more diverse. This dynamic also led to individuals correcting each other on details such as who introduced whom to the network or when exactly a particular action took place. Participants used the chat function to exchange greetings, reminisce about past encounters, and share anecdotes with the audience in addition to those presented by the scheduled speakers.

This intense interaction, which was recorded, provided insights into dynamics and networks that would not have been possible in one-on-one conversations. In such settings, however, it is obvious that not every voice is heard to the same extent, and interviews would allow for a deeper interaction with the researcher. However, the chosen approach—which combines an in-depth analysis of memoirs written by individuals or couples, and webinar transcripts—provides insight into narratives created without direct researcher intervention.

In particular, the June 1, 2021 webinar provided a forum for introspection on the impact of clandestinity on the memory of participation in the liberation struggle. Mary Chamberlain was most explicit about the situation in which memories were created:

> possibly in retrospect, it was our anxieties that exaggerated the danger, because we knew we were guilty, they didn't know we were guilty. And we were white as well, so we knew, you know, we would be getting away with things. But the memories of Cape Town are really jagged. It happened nearly fifty years ago now, and I think the memories were created with too much fear-induced adrenalin, then they were buried so deep, to be processed into neat narratives. And we could never talk about our mission for fear of compromising security, even after the regime had fallen. And we learned to lie. You know, people often saying: "South Africa, have you been there?" "No," we said."[14]

I approach these webinars from an oral history perspective, an approach that focuses on the ways in which subjects give meaning to history. As Bridger (2021, 16) reminds us, it helps us to understand "what is remembered, by whom, and, most importantly, why. It is less interested in historical 'truth' than in misremembering, embellishment, secrets, or lies." Oral history can shed light on how these recruits see themselves today, how they wish to be seen, and how they situate their involvement in the struggle within broader socio-political contexts and collective memories of the liberation movement (Bridger 2021, 16–17;

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Suttner 2008, 8). By initiating this oral exchange and including a diverse range of experiences, particularly those of female participants, the long-term consequences of life in the underground emerged as an important issue.

The second collection of memoirs, *International Brigade Against Apartheid: Secrets of the People's War that Liberated South Africa* (2021), was subsequently edited by Kasrils with the help of two former recruits, Muff Andersson and Oscar Marleyn, and contains some contributions originally prepared for the webinar of June 1, 2021. The book emphasizes the internationalist dimension of the struggle and the "Rainbow Brigade Against Apartheid." The first part of the book is dedicated to these clandestine missions, while the second part consists of memoirs of individuals who had supported the MK and the ANC through the open anti-apartheid movement.

Crucially, both collections of autobiographical writings by former recruits were written and edited by individuals involved in underground operations rather than overseen by professional historians. The same is true of the organization of the webinars, which were realized with my support and, in one case, Arianna Lissoni's support from the University of the Witwatersrand. All materials were created out of a need identified by the people involved, which likely influenced the level of openness with which contributors recounted often highly personal experiences. More importantly, this provided insight into what actors considered memorable, as opposed to edited projects produced by historians.

Recent scholarship on autobiographies as historical sources (Angelo 2022) has emphasized the need to pay more attention to women's voices, a view that was echoed in the webinars[15] (see also Soske, Lissoni, and Erlank 2012, 34). Scholars have demonstrated a commitment to exploring the gender dimensions of underground work (Suttner 2008, 104–32) and the liberation movement more generally (most recently Bridger 2021 and Magadla 2024), but more work is certainly needed to bring women's experiences into the broader picture. The present analysis of white recruits' recollections of their underground experiences is based on the accounts of both male and female subjects. However, particular attention is paid to the memories of female recruits and how they dealt with the multiple consequences of clandestine solidarity work, whether they worked alone or with their husbands or partners. The volume *London Recruits* contains thirty-three chapters, including the perspectives of six women.[16] In the first part of the *International Brigade Against Apartheid*, which is devoted to clandestine solidarity, there are thirty-six chapters with fourteen women's voices, some in coauthored contributions by individuals active since the late 1970s.

The following section provides an overview of the recruits' backgrounds and the recruitment process. The ensuing analysis will focus on how the subjects used their white privilege to navigate the apartheid regime, before going into more detail about how the recruits coped with the stresses and strains of life between the underground and the above-ground.

Becoming aware and taking off

The recruits were predominantly young, with an average age of 19–20 among unionized workers and slightly higher among students. Those who belonged to

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the first generation of recruits stressed how much the legacy of fascism had shaped their childhood. Both workers and students emphasized that their upbringing had led them to participate in the struggle against apartheid. A significant proportion of these individuals came from communist families and showed a heightened level of political awareness from an early age. While the recruits generally had a left-wing political orientation, their individual political socialization and positioning varied. In addition to their family backgrounds, the anti-colonial wars and geopolitical struggles of the 1960s had a strong impact on the recruits' awareness of racism. As Mary Chamberlain put it, "internationalism was part of the air we breathed."[17]

For Hélène Passtoors, the Suez crisis and the anti-colonial Mau Mau war in Kenya were pivotal in her understanding of the nature of colonialism. Her political awareness was accompanied by a strong desire to see the world outside Europe, although her father did not allow her to go until she was in her early twenties. She then seized the opportunity to travel to the United States where she was further influenced by the civil rights movements of the 1960s, much like many of the recruits who had grown up there. There she met a young anthropologist who would eventually become her husband and take her to the Congo.[18] Although female recruits were the exception in the early years, more women joined from the 1980s onwards. Some women were recruited because their male partners had previously been recruited and they subsequently joined them (see, for example, Stephen 2021, 168; Seidman 2021, 149). However, there are also examples of the female partner of a couple being recruited first, as in the case of Hélène Passtoors, who was recruited through Joe Slovo, whom she had met through his wife Ruth First, who happened to be her colleague at the University of Maputo, Mozambique (Passtoors 2021, 94).

There was a correlation between social class and mobility, such that the young workers of the first cohort typically lacked passports and had no experience of international travel, let alone air travel, while some university students had travelled prior to recruitment.[19] Most female recruits who were active in the 1980s were from middle-class backgrounds with parents who had been involved in political protests and various solidarity movements. Travel had been instrumental in their socialization, giving them a keen awareness of injustice and oppression in various regions of the world. This experience often served as a catalyst for their subsequent desire to engage in solidarity networks and, ultimately, to undertake missions. The American Judy Seidman, for example, moved to African countries with her parents, who worked as lecturers at various universities across the continent. Her awareness of the anti-apartheid movement was first sparked during her childhood in Ghana (Seidman 2021, 148; 2018). Andrea Meeson, a Canadian citizen born and raised in Toronto, left home at the age of 16. After completing her secondary education in the late 1970s, she embarked on a journey that took her to Brazil and Guatemala before finally returning to Canada. It was during this time that she became involved in both Latin American solidarity and feminist movements (Meeson 2021, 130).

While many individuals recalled their experiences abroad as crucial to their decision to join the underground, others—especially those from working-class backgrounds—cited domestic politics as the "trigger" that prompted their

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decision. In the case of Eddy Donnelly, the decisive moment came when he was listening to the BBC on the radio and heard "Margaret Thatcher speaking in parliament and condemning the South African freedom fighters as terrorists, and for me personally that was the trigger."[20]

The practical aspects of enlistment proved particularly attractive to individuals who had become disillusioned with theoretical discourse. Canadian Andrea Meeson, for example, saw the prospect of enlisting as a recruit as a viable alternative to participating in student circles devoted to revolutionary political theory (Meeson 2021, 130–31). While many emphasized that their politicization was a lengthy process, marked by different locations and involvement in different groups, most recalled that the decision to become involved as a recruit had been rather spontaneous (Koster 2021, 117; Douglas and Douglas 2021, 178). Individuals identified as potential recruits were made aware of the potential risks involved and those belonging to the first generation were generally trained in the principles of underground operation in green spaces around London, such as Hampstead Heath and Epping Forest. The training included how to avoid "breaking apartheid laws, how to behave as typical apolitical tourists."[21] Later generations of recruits were recruited through more varied processes, and as recruits usually embarked on longer missions, training often only happened upon arrival.

Upon arrival in South Africa, most recruits recalled an intensification of their feelings of solidarity, with some describing their initial arrival as a profound emotional shock (Douglas and Douglas 2021, 178). The phenomenon of being overwhelmed by the reality of the situation, despite prior theoretical knowledge, is a recurring theme in numerous accounts of individuals who have traveled on open solidarity delegations. Although the purpose of such solidarity delegations is primarily to facilitate the communication of experiences to diverse audiences upon return, for those engaged in solidarity missions in clandestine contexts, maintaining silence was paramount. Mary Chamberlain emphasized that the most difficult aspect of the situation was the inability to articulate the injustices while engaged in active deception:

> I mean we knew about the iniquitous nature of the regime, but to see it actually operating in the flesh, and not do anything or say anything, was really a very cruel twist that we hadn't quite anticipated.[22]

Navigating the underground in plain sight

Most recruits active in the late 1960s and early 1970s entered South Africa as tourists, often carrying suitcases of leaflets or letters. The tourism sector had grown considerably during the 1960s, with the number of foreign visitors more than tripling to 60,000 in 1967. Grundlingh (2006, 106) emphasizes that the "political quietude" following the banning of "black political organizations" had contributed to its growth, along with investment in road networks and infrastructure. In addition, technological advances had made commercial air travel affordable to the masses, making South Africa attractive to tourists who

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had shied away from the long voyage on ocean liners. As Grundlingh points out, the government "insisted on high-income tourists," whom it expected to be more politically conservative, and thus, more likely to speak positively about the country when they returned from their vacations.

The Soweto uprising in 1976 led to a brief dip in tourism numbers, but they soon rose again in the 1980s. Growing criticism of the political situation in South Africa meant that "tourist officials intensified their efforts in the 1980s to create what they considered to be a more positive image of the country. Foreign tourists, more than before, became valuable ideological commodities" (Grundlingh 2006, 115; see Southall 2022, 1). Thus, those who entered South Africa in the late 1980s were seen as acting against the existing international boycott. This helped to camouflage their political activities, but it also increased the distance between their political convictions and the identity they chose as a cover.

The creation of credible legends was crucial for all generations of recruits. The logic of the apartheid state always had to be taken into account when carrying out the tasks assigned to them, especially when looking for places to bury weapons. The challenge was to find suitable places that would not arouse suspicion: neither if "white" recruits wanted to bury weapons there, nor if "black" comrades wanted to dig them up, so areas designated as "white only" by the racist regime were obviously unsuitable. Garraway (2021, 114) describes how he prepared the site where he was to dig "a one-meter-square, 50-centimeter-deep hole" for burying the weapons with items that would indicate a picnic area: "my bottle of wine, gas stove for tea, plates and food, and my novel." In case anyone approached, he pretended the hole was an improvised toilet.

Tourism has also been used more systematically as a cover for clandestine activities, which deserves a deeper discussion than is possible here. In 1986, "Africa Hinterland" was founded as a tourism company that sold relatively cheap safari trips from Nairobi to Cape Town to backpackers who were unaware that they were sitting on crates of weapons that MK was smuggling into South Africa. An estimated 40 tons of arms entered the country in this way, also known as "Operation Laaitie" (Garraway 2021, 113; Saloojee et al. 2021, 102–10; Gordon, Godt, and Craig 2021, 126–29).

Especially since the 1970s, recruits also came disguised as new settlers. In 1972, Mary Chamberlain, who later became a historian and novelist, pretended to be settling in South Africa with her newlywed husband, Terry. Traveling by ocean liner allowed them to smuggle much more material into the country than they could by air. Not only did the voyage by ship take a long time, but so did the process of eventually sending the material to a long list of sympathizers within South Africa.[23] As Suttner (2008, 89) points out with reference to MK members in the underground, seemingly simple tasks such as mailing letters required patience and intelligence. To avoid suspicion envelopes had to be of different sizes, addresses had to be written in different handwriting, and care had to be taken to post letters from different mailboxes. Recruits of later generations also emphasized the patience required in their missions, partly because they had to move slowly to avoid arousing suspicion, but also because communication did not always work smoothly. Some had to wait months before being contacted by

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their MK comrades (Douglas and Douglas 2021, 179; see Simpson 2011b on communication problems within the organization).

What international recruits remember as the greatest psychological challenge was the need to present themselves as average "white" South Africans, which meant adopting a lifestyle deemed "appropriate" within the racist logic of apartheid. This was especially true for those who stayed longer, as it involved finding employment and housing that would allow them to go about their daily lives without suspicion. In practice, it was generally not a problem to find a job that would serve as a cover, which former recruits saw as an expression of their white privilege. This was true not only in apartheid South Africa itself, but also in the frontline states where many of the later generations of recruits settled. Andrea Meeson recalls her start in Botswana as follows:

> I had no qualifications, like none, I had maybe a year of tertiary education. So, I walked into that job and I started teaching primary school. And it gives you a sense of the ease with which many white expatriates operated in countries like Botswana at the time.[24]

Although housing itself was not difficult to find, it was often difficult to find a suitable house that could serve as a safe house for MK members. Canadian couple Rob and Helen Douglas recall how surprised they were to find that the house they had rented in Johannesburg was already occupied by an African family living in the servants' quarters at the back of the house. Not wanting to make them move out, they moved into another house themselves. However, this was not suitable as a safe house either, so they moved again and put up an advertisement looking for a tenant. This was the legend to cover up the fact that Mac Maharaj, a MK member, was living in the house with them. An automatic garage door was installed to allow him to come and go discreetly (Douglas and Douglas 2021, 179). In other cases, secrecy even existed between the MK member and the supporting international recruit. Thenjiwe Mtintso, who used the house of Norwegian Gunvor Endresen in Botswana as her base, said that she initially assumed her host was unaware of her activities. However, one day, Endresen gave her the keys and told her to be careful.[25]

Recruit status entailed the cessation of overt discourse on political matters. In essence, recruits were required to adopt an apolitical stance in public in order to conceal their clandestine activities. Rob and Helen Douglas provide a detailed account of their transition to an apolitical state characterized by the deliberate suppression of personal opinions and the complete avoidance of any involvement in political activities. They made good friends at work while "always lying to them about who we were" (Douglas and Douglas 2021, 179). This also meant that recruits were unable to express their joy at moments of political victory, as Susan Grabek recalls. As a teacher of township youth, she "shared, silently, in their joy as they danced in the school's halls on Nelson Mandela's release from prison" (Grabek 2021, 183).

Their white privilege protected recruits in difficult situations, sometimes intersecting with other structural categories. Susan Grabek, who ran a safe house

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starting in 1987, analyzes how a combination of racism and sexism saved her from police suspicion when the papers on her stolen car did not match when she came to retrieve it:

> I went to the police station to claim the car, but the color and license plate numbers didn't match those on the car's paperwork. I fumbled through somehow blaming the thief, shrugging and looking for excuses until I was eventually escorted to the car. ... Racism and sexism worked hand-in-hand to save the day. I was white and played ditsy. The cop, rather than becoming suspicious, drove me—the "damsel in distress"—to a panel beater to repair the car. (Grabek 2021, 184)

Her experience was reminiscent of an earlier encounter Mary Chamberlain had with a police officer in the early 1970s who, seeing the young woman leaving her apartment with a large bag—full of incriminating materials—took the bag to the car and commented on the heavy weight the "ladies" were carrying in their suitcases.[26]

Hierarchies between different "white" identities, in which "the Afrikaners felt superior to the black Africans, but the Afrikaners were deferential to the British tourists," were also used to cover up underground activities, as John Rose noted. He describes how he and two other recruits, while "sitting in a car park with three packs of bucket bombs," encountered South African police officers, who backed off and began apologizing upon him telling them that they were British tourists.[27]

Not always, however, did recruits manage to convincingly play the roles assigned to them within the logic of apartheid. In some situations, they acted in accordance with their political convictions and attracted suspicion. For example, Danny Schechter, one of the first generation of recruits, fell out of his role as a white tourist when he caused the bathwater in his hotelroom to overflow and, to the astonishment of the black cleaners, began to mop the floor together with them (Schechter 2012, 51–66). Another recruit put himself in the "black" queue when buying stamps at the bank until he was made aware by an angry policeman,[28] and in another, much-told episode, Denis Walshe and Graeme Whyte forgot that the cleaner had a key pass to their hotel room. At one point, while they were building a leaflet bomb, the cleaner surprised them in their room. Spontaneously, they decided to trust her, told her about their mission, and got away with it (see Walshe 2012, 266–72; Whyte 2012, 249–65).

Such situations caused temporary distress among those on short-term missions. For those who stayed longer, the tensions usually left a deeper impact. Janet Love, a South African who initially fought the apartheid regime from exile and was part of the underground Operation Vula[29] from 1987, points to the extraordinary challenges faced by international recruits who stayed longer:

> I had experienced the dislocation of exile: but these comrades had to embed themselves in a society that was not only away from their homes but, more often than not, they also had to ensure that they avoided socialising with

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> those with whom they had most in common in order not to draw attention to themselves. (Love 2021, 177)

The experience of exile is characterized by the uncertainty of return and includes feelings of isolation and loneliness, but usually holds the possibility of connecting with others in a similar situation (see Bundy 2013, 218–19). This was not an option for recruits on long-term missions in the unmarked underground, who in turn knew that their passports would allow them to leave at any time if they could avoid being arrested or killed.

Coping with the burdens of secrecy

The intense secrecy required by underground activity means that "[w]hat is normally a source of comfort or solace may become a danger or a potential basis for suspicion" (Suttner 2008, 85). The absence of family members was a significant challenge for many recruits, with numerous individuals reporting feelings of isolation. Some recruits revealed the true purpose of their trip to South Africa to close family and friends, while others maintained confidentiality. In some cases, individuals went to great lengths to conceal their true destination from friends and family, including arranging for postcards to be sent to them from other countries.

The tensions that accompanied the clandestine struggle had a significant impact on couples' relationships, often due to controversies over the nature of their involvement. The Douglases recall different perspectives on their own roles in the struggle. Rob's inclination toward increased activity and risk-taking was at odds with Helen's perception of her role as providing a safe house for MK fighters as stressful enough (Douglas and Douglas 2021, 180).

Some couples became families while underground. On the one hand, being a family with children contributed to their legend.[30] On the other hand, the frequent and prolonged separations experienced by these families were a significant source of strain. Judy Seidman, for example, attributes the breakdown of her marriage to the constant tension they lived under. She and her husband chose to live separately in Gaborone and share childcare. During the South African Defense Forces' attack on Botswana on June 14, 1985, her home was not targeted, in her perspective, because of her status as a single white American woman with two young daughters and no known connections to the liberation struggle other than her involvement in art. After her ex-husband's house was petrol bombed while he was away, he decided to move to London with the children. She remained in Gaborone and became even more involved in underground work (Seidman 2021, 149–51).

During the webinar, Hélène Passtoors, whose four children were born on the African continent, spoke about the impact of recruitment on her children's lives, shedding light on an aspect of the struggle that has rarely been discussed so far:

> The insecurity we lived, the fears for us and so on, you know, they knew we were involved, we couldn't just hide all that. And I think we should think a

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> lot more of what happened to our children. I think they suffered more than we did, really. Because we knew what we were doing, so it was all part of the thing. But they say we decided for them, and they didn't have a choice, you see.[31]

Although many recruits worked on their own, especially those who stayed for the long haul saw the value of collective action and maintaining connections as paramount. However, the underground structures were not conducive to the level of connectivity that was required. Andrea Meeson emphasized that her mental health was significantly affected by the "schizophrenic existence" inherent in this type of work, to the extent that she was reluctant to seek hospital treatment for a broken finger sustained during a routine weapons delivery. Fear of exposure of her true identity was a predominant concern:

> I was so terrified to go to the hospital because I thought if they saw the damage that had been done to my finger then they would know that I had been in the bush digging a hole burying arms. So, which sounds completely ridiculous, but that's where my mind would take me sometimes. … This kind of life isn't romantic in any way. I think a life of struggle in the long term is detrimental to health and wellbeing of individuals and communities and it's exhausting and it contributes to intergenerational trauma.[32]

Long absences also caused suffering for parents and children, whether they were involved as recruits or as MK members acting from exile. While the specific situation varied, both groups experienced pain that received little attention. As Mtintso put it, "the post-revolution trauma, … has [not] been sufficiently addressed both in South Africa and internationally."[33]

While the length of time individuals spent as recruits had a significant psychological impact on most, for a significant number the departure from South Africa or the frontline states was also a distressing experience, particularly in the absence of a debriefing process or psychological support. The transition back to life in Europe was experienced by many as alienating. Individuals coped with this transition in different ways, often further exacerbating interpersonal challenges (Koster 2021, 122; Douglas and Douglas 2021, 180). Following the end of apartheid, some chose to return to South Africa.

Some have been formally recognized by the South African government or the South African Communist Party, with the highest awards being bestowed upon them. Conversely, there are those who did not receive any form of recognition during their lifetime, as former MK member Thenjiwe Mtintso reminded webinar participants.[34]

Concluding thoughts

By writing and speaking about how they navigated the underground in the public eye, former recruits aimed to share their experiences with a younger generation that is witnessing contemporary struggles for liberation and social justice. In

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addition, they experienced sharing their stories with others as a way to overcome the long-standing silence that resulted from the clandestine sphere in which they operated. Oral history and biographical approaches were used to analyze these sources in terms of how individuals recalled using their white privilege to act in solidarity with South African liberation movements forced into exile from which they attempted to rebuild a functioning underground network.

Clandestine solidarity did not exist in isolation from overt solidarity movements; the two were very much interrelated, and many of those involved in clandestine missions had first been involved in the anti-apartheid movement or other solidarity contexts. Many also remained involved in such movements after their clandestine missions had ended.

Being part of clandestine solidarity missions was an experience that left deep marks on individuals. The need to conceal their political identity created a situation of constant tension. In particular, those recruits who stayed in the country for years struggled with the lifestyle they had to lead to maintain their legends while navigating the underground in plain sight. The privileged living conditions they experienced as part of their cover stories were difficult to reconcile with their political positions but crucial for remaining in the supportive role designated to them by the ANC leadership. While this text does not offer a systematic analysis from a gender perspective, the focus on the accounts of female international recruits brings to the fore the ways in which life underground affected mental health, family life, and relationships more generally. In the exchanges facilitated by the webinars, former female recruits also spoke of intergenerational trauma as a result of living underground, an issue that needs to be explored in more depth in future work.

Engaging with the recruits' accounts revealed how the MK strategically exploited the white privilege that underpinned apartheid. Examining this exploitation of the racist notion of equating skin color with political beliefs held by the regime in no way intends to diminish the role of Black South Africans in the struggle. Rather, this article sheds light on the lesser-known clandestine dimension of international solidarity, paying particular attention to the subjective experiences and memories of white international recruits. By doing so, it responds to calls from civil society and academia for a more nuanced acknowledgement of the complexities of the liberation struggle, challenging one-dimensional narratives. Hopefully, more research on this aspect of the struggle will follow.

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Notes

1. Many first crossed borders to Botswana or Zambia and continued to Tanzania. From there, however, many left for Europe, especially London. These countries had already freed themselves from the colonizers and thus formed the so-called "Frontline States," which were joined by Angola and Mozambique in 1975 and by Zimbabwe in 1980.

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2. Ronnie Kasrils, Webinar, June 1, 2021. In his introductory chapter to *London Recruits* (2012, 5), Kasrils wrote that the small group of people from the ANC and SACP tasked with reviving clandestine propaganda and underground resistance within South Africa was led by Yusuf Dadoo and Joe Slovo, who linked the group's work to Oliver Tambo and the ANC leadership in Zambia. Since recruits were used to support the resistance, this was not seen as contradictory to the fact that non-Africans were not admitted as members of the ANC until after the Morogoro conference in 1969 and could not serve on the national executive committee until 1985. The SACP was open to white membership from its beginning (see Lodge 2024 for its history).
3. Kasrils had fled South Africa in October 1963 and after stations in Botswana (then Bechuanaland), Tanzania, and military training in Odessa, he was transferred to London in summer 1965 at the request of Tambo. See also Kasrils ([1993] 2013, 55–71) and Kasrils (2010).
4. Ken Keable, Webinar, June 1, 2021.
5. Such as the comic book *Simon and Jane*, which provided instructions for armed combat.
6. Ronnie Kasrils, Webinar, April 29, 2021 and June 1, 2021.
7. Aboobaker Ismail "Rashid," Webinar, June 1, 2021.
8. Aboobaker Ismail "Rashid," Webinar, June 1, 2021.
9. Ronnie Kasrils, Webinar, April 29, 2021.
10. See Keable (2012). In addition, Keable established a website, where additional memoirs are published alongside secondary sources and materials: https://www.londonrecruits.org.uk/. Also, the documentary film *London Recruits* by Gordon Main (Inside Out Films and Barefoot Rascals) that came out in 2024 is based on Keable's book, https://www.londonrecruits.com/. The film is also announced as "Comrade Tambos' London Recruits" or "Tambos' London Recruits."
11. Ken Keable, Webinar, June 1, 2021; see also Duval Smith (2012).
12. Videos and transcripts stored with the author.
13. Invited speakers on June 1, 2021 were Mary Chamberlain, Ken Keable, Patrick Mangashe, Hélène Marinis Passtoors, Andrea Meeson, Alex Moumbaris, Thenjiwe Mtintso, James Ngculu, John Rose, Clarence Kwinana, Aboobaker Ismail "Rashid," and Rapulane Molekane; invited speakers on March 2, 2022 were Muff Anderson, Riaz Saloojee, and Ramzy Baroud. Only Ronnie Kasrils had been invited as speaker to the seminar on April 29, 2021 but he brought along, among others, Ken Keable, Mary Chamberlain, June Stephens and Ramila Patel.
14. Mary Chamberlain, Webinar, June 1, 2021.
15. Thenjiwe Mtintso and Mary Chamberlain, both Webinar, June 1, 2021.
16. Ken Keable (Webinar, April 29, 2021) asserted that despite the ambiguity surrounding the definition of membership, his list comprised sixty individuals, including thirteen women, who were designated as "London recruits," thus belonging to the inaugural generation of recruits, serving from the late 1960s to the early 1970s. To my knowledge, no such list is available for later generations.
17. Mary Chamberlain, Webinar, June 1, 2021.
18. Hélène Marinis Passtoors, Webinar, June 1, 2021; cf. Passtoors (2021, 93–94).
19. Ronnie Kasrils, Webinar, April 29, 2021.
20. Eddy Donnelly, Webinar, March 2, 2022; Ken Keable, Webinar, March 2, 2022.
21. Ronnie Kasrils, Webinar, April 29, 2021. See also Chapter Eight in Kasrils ([1993] 2013, 72–88).
22. Mary Chamberlain, Webinar, June 1, 2021.
23. Mary Chamberlain, Webinar, June 1, 2021; see also Chamberlain (2013, 147–57).
24. Andrea Meeson, Webinar, June 1, 2021; see also Meeson (2021, 131–32).
25. Thenjiwe Mtintso, Webinar, June 1, 2021.
26. Mary Chamberlain, Webinar, June 1, 2021.
27. John Rose, Webinar, June 1. 2021.
28. See also Ronnie Kasrils, Webinar, April 29 2021, T. Bell (2012, 215–32), and R. Bell (2012, 233–39).
29. Operation Vula was the plan by the ANC to set up a structure in South Africa that would allow for forcefully overthrowing the apartheid regime. It ran simultaneously with the first stages of the negotiation process; see Braam (2004) and Ellis (2013, 233–35).
30. June Stephen, Webinar, April 29, 2021; see also Stephen (2021, 168).
31. Hélène Marinis Passtoors, Webinar, June 1, 2021.

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32. Andrea Meeson, Webinar, June 1, 2021; see also Meeson (2021, 132).
33. Thenjiwe Mtintso, Webinar, June 1, 2021. This aspect would benefit from inquiries into the perspectives of the respective children.
34. Thenjiwe Mtintso, Webinar, June 1, 2021.

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April 29, 2021. "Translocal Solidarities in Practice in the Context of Apartheid South Africa and Beyond," organized by Birgit Englert (University of Vienna)
June 1, 2021. "Solidarity in Practice: Memories of International Recruits on Undercover Missions in the Fight against Apartheid," organized by Ronnie Kasrils, Ken Keable, and Birgit Englert (University of Vienna) in cooperation with the Southern Africa Documentation and Cooperation Centre (SADOCC)
March 2, 2022. "International Brigade against Apartheid: Secrets of the War that Liberated South Africa," organized by Arianna Lissoni (University of the Witwatersrand) and Birgit Englert (University of Vienna) in cooperation with Jacana Media

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