



Umkhonto We Sizwe

The ANC's Armed Struggle

Thula Simpson

Penguin: Johannesburg, 2016. 616 pp

Reviewed by Jeremy Veary (Umkhonto We Sizwe veteran, former member of the ANC's department of intelligence and security)

Umkhonto We Sizwe: *The ANC's Armed Struggle* reads well as a military history of Africa's longest liberation struggle, and is unusual in its foregrounding of guerrilla warfare. True to the military genre, the present-tense narrative bloods the reader directly in the heat of the action with a vantage point from all operational angles: the command post, infiltration, execution, outcome, etc. It also offers detailed insight into the use of indirect action tactics such as assassination, special operations, espionage and counterespionage behind enemy lines on both sides.

The history of the armed struggle waged by Umkhonto We Sizwe (MK) between 16 December 1961 and April 1994 is told in an impartial manner, with balanced tactical and strategic perspectives. The structure of the book follows the motive political developments within the African National Congress (ANC)'s broader political strategy and integrated programme of action, beginning with the transition from nonviolent mass action to armed struggle, sabotage, guerrilla warfare, armed propaganda, people's war, and negotiations.

The book builds on a range of primary and secondary sources, including interviews with, and books by, actual participants, and policy documents, media reports and police records of the time. This scholarly backbone enhances the

book's distinctly organic narrative style, which makes it read more like a biography on the subject than a dry historical treatise. The author animates the characters' actions, and the operational theatres in which they act, with spare, driving, image-textured prose. Simpson's account of the Wankie and Sipolilo campaigns, for example, is filled with frenetic battle sequences but avoids any exaggerated or inappropriate sense of drama.

This is not a glorified hagiography of Umkhonto We Sizwe or the armed struggle. It respectfully treads the terrain of botched operations, leadership and command failures, ill-discipline and corruption in a matter-of-fact manner, depicting the historical dialectic of the armed struggle as a whole, with all its internal contradictions, without judgemental hindsight. Here the story is not force-fitted into the author's post- or preconceived notions – and whatever these may be is not evident in the telling.

Although the title could suggest otherwise, the book gives a fair account of the primacy of politics over structural or operational military concerns. The integral role of non-sectarian mass-based struggle inside the country is given its strategic due as the primary motive force that shaped the broader political programme of the ANC and MK. Simpson also shows the seminal influence of ideological and policy discourse in ANC strategy, the

importance of which is often missed in generic contemporary accounts. His thorough treatment includes less familiar source material, such as the discussion of Michael Harmel's "South Africa, What's Next?" at the 1960 South African Communist Party Congress; Oliver Tambo's notes on guerrilla warfare at a briefing by officials of Vietnam's National Ministry of Defence in October 1978; and the ANC national executive meeting of August 1979 at which the Green Book was adopted as a strategic guideline.

This informative study should appeal to a wide readership interested in a primer on the topic. Readers of military history will find its tactical and operational insights of value. As a political account, readers of a more activist or scholarly inclination will appreciate the refreshing use of atypical source material.

However, it was the reaction of my matriculant son's visiting classmate that suggested its appeal to an unexpected audience. Whether his enthusiastic request to borrow it had more to do with his interest with military strategy games than the history of MK, I am not quite sure. But if a South African of his age and interests is excited to read *Umkhonto We Sizwe: The ANC's Armed Struggle*, then it bodes well for the book's appeal to today's youth, and suggests that we must enliven that history to spark their interest beyond mere educational value. [NA](#)