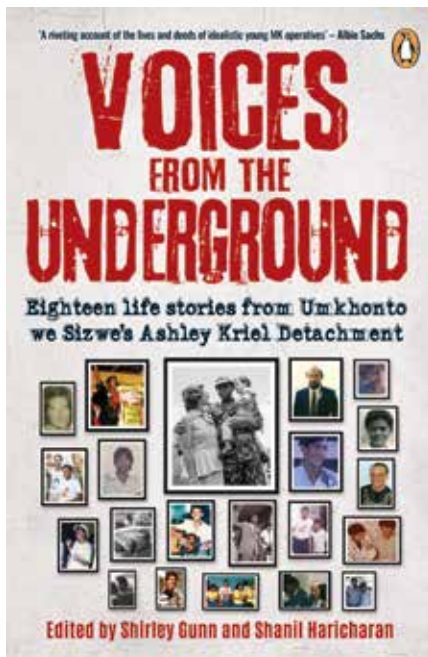


Voices from the Underground: Eighteen life stories from Umkhonto we Sizwe's Ashley Kriel Detachment

Edited by Shirley Gunn and Shanil Haricharan

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Book review by Moira Levy



Ben Turok's first attempt at sabotage as a member of the newly formed Umkhonto we Sizwe is presented rather comically in his autobiography, *Nothing but the Truth*. He describes how his car had suddenly filled with smoke when one of the bombs they were carrying proved faulty. Ben pulled to a stop at

“one of the busiest [intersections] in the whole of Johannesburg”, immediately drawing a curious crowd and the attentions of a traffic cop, and he leapt out of the car to make a run for it.

But his unit commander ordered that they proceed with their mission – to set off an explosive in the Rissik Street post office. Except that the explosive did nothing more than singe Ben's hair and burn holes in his suit, which made Mary rather suspicious. And he was left to try to convince a determined journalist that it was not he, Ben, who had been spotted running away from a burning car in central Joburg.

It makes a good story, and Ben was always able to tell a good story. He was also able to laugh at himself. But that does not mean he did not take the incident very seriously. He wrote: “I was concerned about the amateurishness and bungling of the whole operation. I went to see Joe Slovo to say that I thought that the whole operation had been schoolboyish.”

He indicates that MK reviewed its operations and in time could report that over 18 months, it successfully

carried out 193 attacks. His own story had a serious ending. The security police identified a fingerprint at the scene of the “crime” with the result that Ben spent three years in jail as a result of his first MK operation.

The MK that Shirley Gunn and Shanil Haricharan describe in *Voices from the Underground* also include stories of some bungling, and a serious incident with a faulty limpet mine that resulted in the tragic death of two young combatants. But the preface to the book written by James Ngcula, who was then the AKD's front commander in Botswana, declares “anyone wanting to understand supreme commitment and discipline need look no further than the pages of this book”.

Voices from the Underground comprises a collection of life stories from 18 former members of MK's Ashley Kriel Detachment (AKD). Co-editor Harichara described the importance of the AKD life story project:

“We talk about reconciliation and healing in South Africa; however as former combatants and activists, we have not done much to reflect on our >>

traumatic experiences. Expressing deeply held feelings made me realise that we have not had a time to grieve.

“Our feelings of betrayal, loss, sadness, guilt and hurt remain within us. The process of sharing my story has put me on a journey of healing past wounds.”

This is the voice of the MK of 30 years later than the one Ben described, and it provides an interesting counterpoint.

Named after comrade and student leader Ashley Kriel, who was killed by the security forces soon after his return to South Africa after undergoing military training in an ANC camp in Angola, the AKD kept going after many others decided it was all over.

A number of these personal accounts of very different people who found themselves united in a common purpose, make reference to the declaration by Nelson Mandela from the balcony of Cape Town city hall on his release: “The factors which necessitated the armed struggle still exist today. We have no option but to continue.”

And the AKD continued, only laying down their arms years later when demobilisation was announced. Following the instructions of the newly released Commander-in-Chief, and to demonstrate that the ANC was still armed and ready to carry on the fight, on the very day of Mandela’s release they carried out three simultaneous operations. They blew up the turnstyle at the Newlands Cricket Grounds to protest against the English rebel cricket tour, and attacked the Parow Civic Centre and Paarl’s Magistrate’s Court.

Like MK when it was launched in 1961, the AKD also operated during one of the most intense periods of state oppression and violence. The significant difference was that MK was formed when the apartheid government was all-powerful. A statement broadcast by the ANC at that time, quoted in Ben’s book, states that it was forced into armed struggle by the apartheid state. “The choice is not ours; it has been made by the Nationalist Government which has

rejected every peaceable demand by the people for rights and freedom and has answered every demand with force and yet more force!”

The AKD took on the state during the 1980s, at a time when OR Tambo had called on the people to make the country ungovernable, and they had responded with a massive show of the strength of organised communities.

The contribution of the AKD unit was significant. It introduced a shift in tactics, moving away from the “Big Bang” approach of single, large-scale operations, to multiple synchronised attacks, which sent the security forces running in all directions, unable to mount an intensive counter attack.

Probably the most audacious operation the unit carried out was the setting off of a bomb right in the belly of the beast, at the Castle of Good Hope which was then the provincial headquarters of the South African Defence Force. This attack was conducted by co-Commander Shirley Gunn, posing as a tourist. Another time she placed a limpet mine outside a meeting of the Conservative Party, which went off just as proceedings were closing with the singing of Die Stem.

The strategy that the book describes indicates a close link to community struggles as the unit targeted the symbols of authority used to implement apartheid oppression; local police stations, magistrate’s courts, municipal offices, a rent office during a rent boycott, the blowing up of railway lines in support of striking workers.

Their mission was to set up the AKD in coloured, Indian and white areas and they successfully transported weapons into South Africa from the ANC, mainly in Botswana; communicated and carried out instructions from MK commanders as high up as Chris Hani; crossed the border illegally, or helped others to do so; and underwent military training that enabled them to carry out attacks within South Africa under the noses of a security force that had demonstrated it

would stop at nothing to wipe them out.

Senior members of the AKD were trained in Cuba, Angola, Zambia and Tanzania. They then recruited and trained units within the country. In the book they describe the intense stress of living with the constant threat of detection, betrayal, detention, torture, or worse. Some were forced into living deep underground, moving constantly from one safe house to another.

At the same time, unit members tried to assert some form of normalcy into their lives; couples married, started families, others tried to finish their schooling. Those who were not forced into hiding held down normal jobs while working underground, contributing their salaries to the unit. By also engaging in above ground activism they disguised their underground work as they participated in the Mass Democratic Movement by taking part openly in the protest and turbulence of those times.

This book is not about heroes, though much of what the AKD did was indeed heroic. This is a collection of the tales of ordinary people who, having decided they simply would not tolerate apartheid, did what they had to in order to dismantle it, at enormous danger and personal cost to themselves. What also stands out in the book is the unquestioning support they got from ordinary people, who provided support, safe houses, medical attention, much needed food and money, without any questions asked.

This is not only a book which provides a rare inside view of an MK unit that, under the most dangerous conditions, succeeded in launching more than 30 attacks between late 1987 and early 1990. It also tells the story of the communities that created them, protected them and supported their work in a way that made all of them heroes and combatants in the struggle against apartheid oppression. **NA**