



Apartheid's Stalingrad

How the townships of the Eastern Cape defied the apartheid war regime

Rory Riordan

Publisher: Jacana, Johannesburg. 2022, R420

Review by Dominique Souchon

This book's subtitle grabs the imagination. Strategies and tactics that organisations developed first in the Eastern Cape to resist the apartheid system were adapted and repeated by many organisational forms across the country over decades.

Rory Riordan is well known as a human rights activist. He was a key founder of the Human Rights Trust and its journal, *Monitor*, as well as a systematic recorder of many atrocities against both individuals and communities in the Eastern Cape during the 1980s and 90s.

In his book, Riordan shows that despite the apartheid regime's extreme efforts to oppress and repress resistance to it (particularly in this region), ultimately the defiance of Eastern Cape communities and organisations were key to apartheid's failure.

He begins by illustrating the deep roots of resistance to racism in the Eastern Cape from the 1940s. The building of mass-based and representative organisations started at this time and in these places, and patterns that were established then were repeated right up to the end of 1990.

The book sets the scene with the life stories of stalwart ANC leaders Raymond Mhlaba, Govan Mbeki and Wilton Mkwayi as they moved the ANC into becoming a mass representative organisation. Their individual life

decisions, political education and support of each other's political work shows how much can be done by so few. Individual activists and leaders are quoted at key points of the book. Their personal and political decisions are powerfully outlined, which inspires one to apply these reactions to the injustices that we still face today.

Raymond Mhlaba's political journey starts with the simple act of needing to find work in Port Elizabeth to support his impoverished parents. Soon after landing a job he joined a trade union and became its organiser by 1943 – all of which he described as obvious decisions that anyone would make in similar circumstances.

The ANC chose the township rent increases in 1945 by the Port Elizabeth City Council for their first resistance campaign. The victory which it won resulted in a large increase in its membership, and provided vital lessons for the future.

This early history shows that the ANC in Port Elizabeth organised and attracted a cross-class and cross-race membership before detailed debates were held about these issues. It drew people into its campaigns according to their needs and accepted whatever useful assistance was offered. The cross-membership of individual activists in unions, the ANC and the Communist Party led to solidarity across organisations and cross-pollination of

strategy and tactics.

The book provides comprehensive coverage of oppression, dispossession and resistance to repression from the 1940s to 1994. Its main – persuasive and controversial – claim is that the defiance of the people of the Eastern Cape demonstrated that apartheid could be defeated, just as the Soviets' 1942 holding of Stalingrad during World War Two showed that Hitler's armies could be beaten.

The author sets out the extent of the cruelty of the apartheid oppressors from the 1950s to the 1980s. Vigilante killings, forced removals, detentions and torture were used to destabilise organised resistance. He quotes horrifying individual accounts documented from several sources, including the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's amnesty hearings, Eastern Cape academics, and those that he personally documented and published while editing *Monitor*.

The apartheid state used the 1966 Vietnam war-based study, *The Art of Counter-Revolutionary War* by the USA's Colonel John J. McCuen, as its guide. The systematic and interlinked strategies to destroy people, communities and their organisations in the Eastern Cape came from lessons outlined by McCuen. This is demonstrated by linking detailed events with quotes from McCuen.

An example of this intricate war strategy is the description in the book of how the forced removals of ➤

communities in Gqeberha and Kariega were planned in order to destroy community, social and organisational relationships by forcibly moving people far from their work, without access to transport, water or sanitation. Simply staying alive took up all the people's time. They had no space for planning and carrying out acts of resistance. The simultaneous killing of people by vigilantes and the notorious South African Police unit of "special constables" or *kitskonstabels*, as well as the detention and torture of thousands and the assassination of leaders, were all aspects of this "counter-revolutionary war" against the townships of the Eastern Cape. This approach completely abandoned any semblance of reform for South Africa.

The creativity and the solid organisation by all the organisations of the Eastern Cape stand out. The main coordinating force, the United Democratic Front (UDF), carried out a consumer boycott of white businesses which had the effect of pitting the

business community and the apartheid system's forces against each other.

In 1985, the ANC called on people to make black townships "ungovernable" and to eliminate the Black Local Authorities by means of rent boycotts and other actions. The UDF and its affiliates asked councillors and township police to resign their positions. Where this failed, municipal buildings and the homes of African councillors and collaborators were attacked. As the state's administrative system broke down, people established their own democratic structures, street committees and people's courts to govern their communities themselves.

What would have added to the book's description of the extent of human rights abuses of the apartheid regime and its terrible devastation of communities and people was how the various actions and strategies of the ANC's military wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe, and its units interacted with the UDF, street committees, trade unions and other social structures in this period.

All of the above bears testimony to the book's claim that just as the Soviet's grim defence that denied the Nazi regime the capture of Stalingrad showed that Hitler's armies could be beaten, it was the efforts of the Allied armies and navies and the great sacrifices made by men and women in various resistance movements that defeated Hitler's Nazi state.

The book provides evidence that it was the defiance of the people of the Eastern Cape that demonstrated that apartheid could not win and that the defeat of the apartheid state was carried out by multiple resistance movements, their allies and the historical balance of geopolitics of the time.

I recommend *Apartheid's Stalingrad* as a shocking and fascinating read. It provides a real feeling of what was happening at the time, and how the actions of people and organisations achieved crucial gains against a brutal system.

It also provides inspiration to act creatively against injustice today – which is another good reason to read this book. **NA**