

Liberation Routes and Safe/Transit Houses: Borderlands, Material Culture, and the Spatial Politics of Anti-Apartheid Resistance

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Introduction

The apartheid state in South Africa was characterised by a sophisticated system of surveillance, policing, and spatial control that aimed to suppress dissent before it could gain momentum. Under this regime, activists were subjected to constant monitoring, with their movements constrained by legislation, curfews, and the pervasive presence of informants. In this atmosphere of repression, safe houses emerged as essential nodes in the liberation struggle, serving as sites where secrecy and survival were architecturally integrated. Their physical ordinary homes, hostels, and even rural huts were transformed into clandestine infrastructures of resistance. These spaces were not isolated; they formed part of broader liberation routes that extended across South Africa's borders into Lesotho, Botswana, Swaziland, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Zambia, and beyond, linking local resistance to transnational networks of solidarity. Safe houses thus embodied both the intimacy of domestic life and the geopolitics of exile, serving as bridges between hidden interiors and expansive liberation geographies. This study seeks to uncover how the struggle against apartheid was sustained through the resourcefulness of activists who transformed ordinary spaces into extraordinary sites of defiance. The author was prompted to write this paper following research conducted over a decade aimed at understanding the hidden narratives and testimonies pertaining to the country's liberation struggle history.

With the banning of the liberation movements in the early 1960s, the only viable option was to operate underground. Consequently, reliance on underground networks in major cities and small towns (dorpies), where ordinary homes were converted into safe houses, became crucial for advancing the struggle for liberation. These houses, which later became known as safe houses or

transit houses, played a significant role in concealing political activists, storing banned literature, and coordinating sabotage campaigns. Often indistinguishable from everyday dwellings, the architecture and objects within these safe houses carried hidden functions. It is also important to note that beyond the country's urban centres, liberation routes extended across borders into neighbouring countries, reaching as far as Tanzania (then Tanganyika).¹ These cross-border pathways connected the discreet confidentiality of safe houses to extensive transnational networks, with the specific aim of isolating the apartheid regime.

What is the significance of safe houses in South Africa's liberation historiography?

Safe houses were intricately woven into the broader transformation of South Africa's liberation movements, functioning as both practical and symbolic infrastructures of resistance. As argued in this paper, these safe houses were not merely tactical instruments but epistemic sites of resistance that reconfigured notions of territoriality, citizenship, and liberation. Undoubtedly, their legacy challenged dominant historiographies that, to some extent, privileged domestic mobilization while marginalising the transnational architectures of struggle. Therefore, this paper provides critical and multiple perspectives on the continual evolution of the liberation struggle.

This study illuminates the spatial politics of liberation and the indispensable role of regional networks in dismantling apartheid's hegemonic order. Understanding the history and narrative of safe houses is crucial, as these spaces embody the hidden architecture of resistance that made liberation movements possible under apartheid. Far from being incidental shelters, safe houses were meticulously adapted environments where secrecy, survival, and political strategy converged. This reveals how ordinary households became extraordinary instruments of defiance against a surveillance state intent on erasing dissent. Moreover, this paper on safe houses situates women, families, and communities at the heart of liberation history, challenging dominant accounts that privilege public protest or armed campaigns. Families and communities who hosted safe houses risked persecution, illustrating how ordinary citizens became active participants in the liberation struggle. Women often played central roles in maintaining these spaces, embedding resistance in the domestic sphere and challenging patriarchal assumptions about political activism.

¹ For more information on this see D.T. McKinley, 'Umkhonto We Sizwe: A critical analysis of the armed struggle of the African National Congress', *South African Historical Journal*, 70(1), 2018, pp. 27-41; T. Lodge, 'State of Exile: The African National Congress of South Africa, 1976-86'. In: Frankel P., and Swilling M, (eds.), *State, Resistance and Change in South Africa* (London: Croom Helm, 1988).

Today, safe houses stand as powerful reminders that liberation was not only fought in public protests or armed campaigns, but also in the intimate, everyday spaces where courage and creativity quietly undermined oppression. Their narratives enrich our understanding of the spatial politics of struggle, demonstrating how resistance was mapped both within South Africa's borders and across the wider region. As Arianna Lissoni explains, these networks explore how the liberation movements reorganised in exile during the 1960s.²

Methodological considerations

Utilising the traditional method of historical inquiry, this study interrogates the significance of safe houses as spaces that facilitated the expedited attainment of the country's liberation. It frames how the national memory of the liberation struggle is constructed in the post-apartheid era. To understand this in detail, scholarly work on the underground armed struggle situates this paper within a broader liberation struggle paradigm. This is followed by a historical contextualisation of the struggle during the exile years of the liberation movements. This provides a backdrop for the analytical sections, which focus on how those involved as underground operatives of the liberation struggle articulated the use of safe houses during the struggle years.

It is noted in this section of the study that previous work on the history of the underground struggle has been voluminous; however, much of it has merely examined the general successes and failures of some of the underground operations. Little, if anything, focuses on the importance of safe houses as contributory factors to the liberation struggle. Research concerning safe houses necessarily involves examining their roles as utilised by both host families and those who sought political refuge within them. Recent studies regarding South Africa's liberation struggle treat the armed struggle, mass mobilization, the organisation and conduct of the underground, and the global anti-apartheid movement as separate phenomena, whereas they were mutually constitutive processes. The methodology integrates archival research, oral history, and geopolitical analysis to reconstruct the operational, symbolic, and strategic significance of these sites.

Safe houses as both practical and symbolic elements of resistance

The infrastructure of cross-border safe houses represents a critical yet under-theorised dimension of South Africa's liberation struggle against apartheid. predominantly in neighbouring

² A. Lissoni, 'The South African Liberation Movements in Exile, c.1945–1970', *PhD Thesis*, School of Oriental and African Studies, (SOAS), 2008.

states such as Botswana, Zambia, Mozambique, Swaziland, and Zimbabwe, these clandestine sites functioned as nodal points within a transnational resistance network that transcended the spatial and juridical constraints imposed by the apartheid regime. Host states, often themselves newly liberated or entangled in post-colonial nation-building, navigated a precarious balance between offering sanctuary to South African revolutionaries and mitigating retaliatory incursions from the apartheid state. Consequently, the safe houses operated within a liminal space, both physically and politically, where sovereignty, secrecy, and solidarity converged. They provided secure environments for activists to regroup, plan operations, and evade the extensive surveillance apparatus of the apartheid state. More than mere shelters, these clandestine sites functioned as nodes in a broader network of mobility and secrecy, facilitating the coordination of armed action and the survival of underground operatives. In this context, the role of safe houses was not incidental but central to sustaining the liberation struggle against apartheid.

As indicated above, these safe houses, far from serving merely as logistical shelters, represented a complex interplay of geopolitical solidarity, covert mobility, and insurgent praxis. They facilitated the strategic recalibration of anti-apartheid operations, enabling the exfiltration of political dissidents, the dissemination of subversive literature, and the orchestration of armed incursions into South African territory. Their spatial positioning reflected both the geography of apartheid repression and the tactical ingenuity of liberation movements.

Safe houses as indispensable infrastructures of resistance for MK and APLA

Safe houses were central to both Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) and the Azanian People's Liberation Army (APLA), yet their functions reflected the distinct strategies of each movement. Scholarly studies and oral testimonies affirm that these clandestine spaces were indispensable infrastructures of resistance, facilitating sabotage, guerrilla warfare, and underground networks. Initially, these houses concentrated on sabotage campaigns targeting infrastructure such as railways, power stations, and government facilities. Safe houses provided the logistical backbone for these operations, serving as secure sites for storing explosives, assembling devices, and planning missions. Oral testimonies collected by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) describe how MK operatives relied on ordinary homes in townships and sympathetic communities to evade police raids and regroup after attacks. These clandestine shelters permitted MK to maintain a presence within South Africa, even while much of its leadership operated from exile in Lusaka and other regional hubs.

Conversely, APLA, the armed wing of the PAC, pursued a more direct guerrilla warfare strategy, emphasising armed confrontation and targeting symbols of white authority, such as police stations and farms. Safe houses were critical to APLA's mobility, functioning as transit points for fighters infiltrating South Africa from bases in Lesotho, Mozambique, and other neighbouring states. Oral testimonies highlight how APLA cadres used these houses to rest, regroup, and prepare for incursions, often relying on trusted families who risked their lives to host them. Scholarly accounts note that while MK's safe houses were hubs for sabotage logistics, APLA's were more closely associated with sustaining guerrilla incursions and enabling cross-border infiltration.

Safe houses were not exclusively employed in exile; there were also houses within the country that served this purpose. Raymond Suttner's *The ANC Underground in South Africa* draws attention to the role of underground activists inside the country in establishing networks during periods of the banning of the movement throughout the 1970s and 1980s.³ In their chapter titled *The Turn to Armed Struggle*, published under the auspices of the South African Democracy Education Trust (SADET) Project, Bernard Magubane et al. elaborated on how South Africa's liberation movements shifted from peaceful protest to armed resistance in the early 1960s. After the Sharpeville massacre and the banning of the ANC and PAC, activists concluded that nonviolent methods had failed against the apartheid state's escalating repression. This led to the creation of Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) and Poqo, which adopted sabotage and guerrilla tactics to challenge apartheid power. The chapter emphasizes that armed struggle was not a first choice, but a forced response to state violence, marking a decisive turning point in the fight for freedom.⁴ Under the auspices of the SADET Project, Chitja Twala and Jeremy Seekings published a chapter concerning the activist networks in the Free State, in which there is minimal reference to safe houses. Notably, there is mention of Commandant Caleb Motshabi's residence in Thaba Nchu, as well as Dr James Moroka's properties on some of his farms in Thaba Nchu, which were utilised for transit purposes by individuals who fled the country into Lesotho.⁵

³ R. Suttner, *The ANC's Underground in South Africa* (Auckland Park: Jacana, 2008).

⁴ B. Magubane, P. Bonner, J. Sithole, P. Delius, J. Cherry, P. Gibbs and T. April, 'The turn to armed struggle', in B. Magubane (ed.), *The Road to Democracy in South Africa*, Volume 1, 1960-1970, (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2004).

⁵ C. Twala and J. Seekings, 'Activist networks and political protest in the Free State, 1983-1990'. In: Ndlovu S.M. (ed.), *The Road to Democracy in South Africa*, (1980-1990), Volume 4, Part 1, (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2010), pp. 765-813.

Safe houses inside the country: Grassroot networks

Oral testimonies from activists who lived and operated in these environments reveal the courage of communities that transformed ordinary homes into sanctuaries of resistance, embodying both the practical and symbolic dimensions of the anti-apartheid struggle. Ronnie Kasrils, a young activist at the time, recalls that his first meeting with Nelson Mandela occurred in July 1962 within a modest safe house in Durban, which belonged to a worker in the area. This exemplifies how ordinary residences became vital sanctuaries for the underground struggle. The worker's bravery in opening his home to Kasrils and Mandela symbolised the grassroots support networks that underpinned the liberation movement amidst apartheid repression. Kasrils notes that this inconspicuous house was deliberately selected for its anonymity, reflecting the strategic utilisation of safe houses to shield leaders from the apartheid security apparatus. This moment illustrates how safe houses were integral to the broader evolution of liberation movements, facilitating secure meetings, strategic planning, and recruitment.⁶

In his book *Child of this soil: My life as a freedom fighter*, Letlapa Mphahlele dedicates a paragraph to Sigqibo Mpendulo's house in Umtata. He explains:

... I had several hideouts in Umtata, organised by people like Charge-in Mabaso and Tyilana. One of the hideouts was the stately house of 'Fidel Castro' Komsana, which was once the home of former Bantustan leader, George Matanzima. Komsana's domestic helper, Mambhele, cooked a lot of *mgqusho* – samp because she believed an army must march on full stomachs... Because Apla operations were increasing, I thought the Boers would raid the Transkei. I called a meeting of commanders based in Umtata to discuss this possibility. We agreed that Apla members shouldn't stay in large groups in their hideouts and should find accommodation in the rural areas. We also closed the Apla office in Sigqibo Mpendulo's house. We advised him to avoid sleeping in the house for fear of attack.⁷

Mphahlele further alludes:

⁶ R. Kasrils, *Armed and Dangerous: From undercover struggle to freedom* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 1993).

⁷ L. Mphahlele, *Child of this soil: My life as a freedom fighter* (Wandseck: Reach Publishers, 2021), pp. 233-234.

I asked Gilbert Sineke to find me another hideout outside Umtata, and that's how I became a member of the Mjali family in Misty Mount in Libode. Mama Nothembile Mjali named me Vuyani Mzazi, and I was introduced to neighbours as her new nephew from Gauteng... Her five daughters; Lulama, Tozama, Tandeka, Zanele and Andiswa, and her son, Kadephi, called me Mzala, cousin. The whole family, even Lulama's son, Kutu, ended up calling me Mzala.⁸

From the above, it is ironic that Mambhele possessed knowledge regarding these operatives of APLA. In most instances, only the host or owner of the residence would have access to such information. For a larger number of individuals to be aware of the safe house(s) could present a security risk. In this book, Mphahlele does not provide a comprehensive account of Mambhele's involvement, only indicating her role in the preparation of *mgqusho*.

In discussing the establishment of networks in the Eastern Cape, Patrick Mangashe asserted that the initial task was to create a structure that divided the region into three manageable parts or zones. The division was as follows: Zone 1 encompassed the areas from East London to Dimbaza, representing the southernmost regions of the area. The central region, extending from Alice through Fort Beaufort to Cathcart, was designated as Zone 2. The remaining area, stretching from Whittlesea through Queenstown to Molteno in the north, constituted Zone 3.⁹ These zones were subsequently subdivided into sub-units based on the skills and circumstances of the individuals residing in these areas. This analysis focuses specifically on sub-unit 1, which pertains to House Keepers (*Abazali*). Mangashe notes that the *Abazali* were responsible for maintaining safe houses for both personnel and equipment. The proprietors of these houses would not disclose the clandestine political activities occurring within their confines. The true identities of the 'visitors' were to be safeguarded at all costs. Mangashe writes: 'We recruited a fair number of people who fitted well into this category, resulting in the situation that we were never without a place for either personnel or our hardware material. Furthermore, at no point were our personnel or hardware ever compromised in these safe houses during the duration of our operations in the region... One such housekeeper was Phila Myoli, who bore a significantly greater burden than others, as we utilised

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 234.

⁹ P. Mangashe, 'Operation Zikomo: The Armed Struggle, the Underground and Mass Mobilisation in South Africa's Border Region, 1986-1990, through the experiences of MK cadres', *South African Historical Journal*, 70(1), 2018, pp. 44-45.

her house for additional purposes as well.’ However, Mangashe does not elaborate on the supplementary role that Myoli was required to fulfil.

Safe houses outside the country: Regional networks

As previously stated, small towns situated along the borders of South Africa and its neighbouring countries, as well as rural villages within those countries, served as sanctuaries for individuals who fled the country. John Aerni-Flessner published an article recognising the contributions made by Malesaka Kena.¹⁰ As previously mentioned, small towns situated along the borders of South Africa and neighbouring countries, as well as rural villages within those countries, served as sanctuaries for individuals fleeing the country. John Aerni-Flessner published an article recognising the significant role played by Malesaka Kena and her husband, Jacob Kena, in facilitating the smuggling of anti-apartheid activists into Lesotho. The Kenas resided in the small village of Tsoelike in the Qacha’s Nek District. Jacob Kena was an influential member of the Communist Party of Lesotho and collaborated with activists from South Africa. Both Malesaka and Jacob utilised their home as a haven for South African political activists entering the area. Although Malesaka was not actively involved in politics, she expressed sympathy for the cause of ANC liberation movement. Aerni-Flessner notes the following about her:

Me Kena raised seven children in Auplas, while also helping to smuggle political refugees from apartheid South Africa into Lesotho, an enclave country completely surrounded by its larger neighbour. These individuals came looking to escape arrest and detention, and to move onward to more hospitable locations, both within Lesotho and beyond the borders of this small land-locked country. She did much of this with the intermittent physical presence and economic support of her husband, who was often engaged in clandestine work in South Africa, spent two years in jail in Lesotho for his political work, and then fled into exile in the 1970s because of a crackdown in Lesotho on political opposition.¹¹

¹⁰ Malesaka Kena was born Malesaka Letsie in a township outside Matatiele in what was then the Cape Province of South Africa but is in today’s Eastern Cape Province. Her parents were ethnically Basotho and related to the royal lineage in Lesotho, but they resided in South Africa. For more information, see J. Aerni-Flessner, ‘Homemarkers, Communists, and Refugees: Smuggling Anti-Apartheid Refugees in Rural Lesotho in the 1960s and 1970s’, *Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women’s and Gender Studies*, 13(1), 2015, p. 186.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 184-185.

Kena's experiences in rural Lesotho underscore the extent to which apartheid's influence extended beyond the borders of South Africa, informing everyday strategies of survival and resistance. As Aerni-Flessner elucidates, Kena's involvement in smuggling refugees across the Lesotho/South Africa border complicates conventional notions of citizenship and belonging, demonstrating how ordinary women reframed domestic and community roles into acts of political defiance.¹² It is through the lived experiences of women such as Kena that the liberation struggle emerged not only through formal organisations but also through their clandestine activities to sustain resistance against apartheid. Belinda Bozzoli observed that women's lives were not confined to the private sphere; their strategies of survival and resistance were deeply political, shaping the contours of community life and contributing to broader struggles against apartheid.¹³ Khachungla Chahang's work analyses how black women were pushed into political action by apartheid's discriminatory policies, highlighting their role in clandestine networks and safe houses.¹⁴

Kena exemplified the description by Bozzoli and Nkotsoe, highlighting how women's political work was not confined to domestic spheres but became an integral part of the broader struggle for liberation. This work was crucial in sustaining transnational networks of resistance. Therefore, the interplay of gender, politics, and space during this period became central to the liberation struggle.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ B. Bozzoli and M. Nkotsoe, *Women of Phokeng: Consciousness, Life Strategy, and Migrancy in South Africa, 1990-1983* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 1991), p. 12.

¹⁴ K. Chahang, 'An assessment of women's involvement in the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa', *International Journal of Political Science and Governance*, 3(1), 2021, pp. 32-36.



Source: Picture of Malesaka Kena's in front of his house in Lesotho: Courtesy from John Aerni-Flessner

During the early 1960s, the Zeerust–Dinokana–Bechuanaland (later Botswana) liberation route was identified. Zeerust should be acknowledged in this paper because it became an exit area for ANC activists going into exile during this period. The main contact in Zeerust was Simon Senna. The ANC established operational structures in Zeerust, turning the area into a crucial gateway for activists leaving South Africa, including those travelling from as far as the Cape and Natal. Senna would shelter those who crossed at his home, while his father played a central role in organising and maintaining the networks. Using only a bicycle or travelling on foot, Senna's father connected activists with contacts in Botswana and personally guided them to the crossing points.

In Botswana, a key figure in accommodating political activists crossing into the country from South Africa was Ntwaesele Thathayone 'Fish' Keitsing, along with his wife Joyce Keemenao (née Masibi).¹⁵ Their house in the Peleng location of Lobatse became a shelter for numerous activists. He was a Botswana-born ANC activist responsible for establishing what

¹⁵ Fish Keitseng (1919–2005) was a Botswanan-born trade unionist and political activist who played a crucial role in the South African liberation struggle, particularly through the African National Congress (ANC) and the African Mineworkers' Union. He later became a key figure in organizing safe routes for ANC activists after being expelled from South Africa. For more information see A. Manson, B. Mbenga and A. Lissoni, *Khongolose: A Short History of the ANC in the North-West Province from 1909* (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2016), p. 40.

became known as The Road to Freedom. He came to South Africa at the age of 23 as a migrant worker and joined the ANC in 1949, later becoming the leader of the Newclare Congress Branch and serving as its volunteer-in-chief during the 1952 Defiance Campaign. He was charged, along with others, in the Treason Trial of 1959-1961 and was later deported to Botswana, where he originally came from. Before he left South Africa, Walter Sisulu asked him to set up a safe house in Lobatse. Assisting him in his task of controlling the Road to Freedom were other ANC activists, including Free State-born Dan Tloome, Michael Dingake, Mack Mosepeli, and Mpho Motsamai.

In the late 1960 Joe Modise approached Keitsing in Lobatse and told him on behalf of the ANC:

Now we're going to give you another job. We are bringing the boys from that side [South Africa], and now you must work with these chaps. When the Boers kicked you out [of South Africa], they didn't know that you were going to help us here [in Botswana]. You are going to fix up where we stay at night and eat when we come here.¹⁶

Between 1963 and 1964, successive small groups of young men, typically consisting of about four individuals, crossed from Lehurutshe into Botswana. With a few exceptions, they left without their families' knowledge. In Lobatse, their first point of contact was Keitsing and his wife. Upon arrival in Lobatse, they all had to report to the police station to apply for refugee status, thereby avoiding the risk of arrest and deportation to South Africa for having entered the country illegally.¹⁷ From Lobatse, they would continue their journey by train to Francistown, where they would stay in a safe house known as the White House. In this house, recruits from the PAC and the South West African People's Organisation stayed together.¹⁸

Sifiso Ndlovu highlights an important cultural aspect of many South Africans being easily accommodated in neighbouring countries. He argues that the journeys to exile undertaken by South Africans through Botswana and Southern Rhodesia (later Zimbabwe) were facilitated by

¹⁶ B. Morton and J. Ramsay, F. Keitsing, *Comrade Fish: Memoirs of a Motswana in the ANC underground* (Gaborone: Pula Press, 1999), p. 51.

¹⁷ Manson, Mbenga and Lissoni, *Khongolose ...*, p. 45.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

the shared language, traditions, and customs of both Nguni and Setswana speakers.¹⁹ Attesting to this, Bethuel Setai, one of the October 1960 group of students from Bloemfontein who fled the country for exile, recalls that:

... for most of us, exile started in the dead night, and perhaps that was a foreboding for how we would be travelling for many years that lay ahead. It was 1960, and the countries we were going to be passing through on our way to Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania (still under its colonial name of Tanganyika) were all still under colonial rule. We would be passing through Botswana (Bechuanaland), Malawi (Nyasaland), and Zimbabwe (Rhodesia). We were all aware that the journey was going to be difficult and dangerous... People were not necessarily prepared for us and everywhere we arrived we had to explain ourselves and prepare them for the people who would follow us without necessarily revealing names.²⁰

Setai indicated that their route to exile had to be via Botswana. They arrived in Mahalapye, where they were welcomed by Chief Manyaphiri, who allocated them two rondavels. The chief also provided them with cutlery, pots, blankets, and traditional mats for sleeping. Furthermore, he ensured their security and protection. It is noteworthy that when the chief introduced them to his people, he referred to them as his children. Upon their arrival at Chief Manyaphiri's village, they encountered several South Africans, including Manyanyata and Max Mlonyeni. The latter, like Setai and the group, lacked legal permits to be in Botswana. Detailing his experiences with Manyanyata, Setai notes:

We had our meals at Manyanyata's house. He was our benefactor, as no one paid him for feeding us. Sometimes we used our own resources to supplement his household. As with most of rural Botswana, there was no fridge at his house. He did have a goat which was tied to a shrub. Whenever we needed tea, someone milked the goat, boiled the milk, and

¹⁹ S.M. Ndlovu, 'Heritage routes for the liberated South Africans: Using oral history to reconstruct unsung heroes and heroines' routes into exile in the 1960s', *Historia*, 47(2), November 2002, p. 481.

²⁰ B. Setai, *A Circle is Closed: A lifetime in exile* (Bloemfontein: Phokeng Press, 2013), p. 53.

mixed it with tea. The tea was tasty, but to us it was strange, as we did not grow up around goats.²¹

State violence, the politics of fear and attacks

With the apartheid regime's realisation that the banned liberation movements operated from safe houses, it responded by intensifying its repression and targeting these houses to destabilise the underground activities of the movements. In counteraction to the regime's efforts, the liberation movements implemented tighter security measures for those using safe houses. These measures included the fact that political cross-border activities were managed by a few individuals within specific 'cells'. The leaders of these 'cells' were responsible for orchestrating the exile routes for those fleeing the country. Papi Kganare recalls that the ANC underground was organised into small cells, whose members generally had contact only with each other and with their commanding officers (mostly in Lesotho). In an exclusive interview with him for the SADET Project, he explained that his cell consisted of himself, Steve Bogacu, and Max Makhubalo, who interacted with Caleb Motshabi. The latter was familiar with all the cells in the Free State province. Kganare connected to the ANC through Botswana while living in Pretoria. Due to the Free State's proximity to Lesotho, the province's underground networks were oriented towards Lesotho.²²

Second, for security reasons, the owners of these houses and host families were not identified. The houses were mainly known only to the 'cell' leaders. The duration of stay in these safe houses was also determined by those in leadership. Thirdly, in most cases, the political activists who used these houses were not familiar with the territory; thus, tracking their location was not an easy task. Furthermore, the apartheid agents also struggled to track their routes into exile due to the limited information about how and where they stayed in transit in the north of the continent. On many occasions, the safe houses were in towns near the border of South Africa and the intended host country.

As mentioned previously, the apartheid regime launched raids and attacks on some of the safe houses. For example, on 30 January 1981, the South African Defence Force (SADF) raided safe houses in Matola, a suburb on the outskirts of Maputo (Mozambique). These safe houses

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

²² Interview with Diratsagae Alfred 'Papi' Kganare, conducted by B.M. Makhubalo, Bloemfontein, 3 February 2006, SADET Oral History Project.

served as transit points for uMkhonto WeSizwe (MK) cadres. During the raid, 12 MK members and one Mozambican citizen were killed. Another MK member, Mduduzi Sibanyoni, later died from injuries sustained during the raid. On 9 December 1982, the SADF launched another attack in Maseru (Lesotho). The ‘Moscow House’, which was used as a transit camp in Lesotho, became a target of the SADF. This raid was unofficially referred to as ‘Operation Blanket’. In this raid, 12 Lesotho nationals and 30 South Africans were killed. Attacks on safe houses in neighbouring states demonstrated the apartheid regime’s disregard for their sovereignty. This was intended to instil fear in the governments of neighbouring countries, discouraging them from supporting the liberation movements. The raid in Lesotho was condemned by the Commonwealth as an infringement of the territorial integrity of sovereign states. Not only were the safe houses or camps targets, but also offices belonging to the liberation movements.

The raid in Gaborone (Botswana) on 14 June 1985 targeted the office of MK. This raid was dubbed ‘Operation Plecksy’. During this raid, 12 people were killed, of whom only five were members of the ANC. Kasrils recalls that on the eve of the 1985 Kabwe conference, which was held in Zambia, the South African commandos attacked 10 houses in Gaborone, killing nine people in their beds, including three women, a child, and an old man.²³ This raid must be understood as a pivotal moment in the spatial politics of anti-apartheid resistance. The raid exposed the precariousness of these networks, illustrating how the apartheid regime extended its violence into neighbouring states to disrupt the material culture of resistance. In doing so, the SADF militarised the borderlands, transforming them into contested spaces where sovereignty, security, and solidarity were continuously negotiated. In this context, Operation Plecksy reveals both the vulnerability and the enduring strength of liberation routes and safe houses, positioning them as indispensable elements in the broader struggle against apartheid.

In his article *The Role of ‘Freelance’ Underground Operatives in the Struggle for Liberation in South Africa: The Case of Eastern Transvaal, 1980-1990*, Tshepo Moloi sheds light on the clandestine activities carried out by women in the pursuit of the liberation movement. Focused on the Eastern Transvaal (now Mpumalanga Province), the research delves into oral testimonies to chronicle the experiences of these operatives. Moloi contends that the region held strategic significance due to its geographical proximity to various key locations in the Lowveld that shared borders with

²³ Kasrils, *Armed and Dangerous* ..., p. 231.

Swaziland and Mozambique.²⁴ As noted by Moloï, the Eastern Transvaal's significance in the anti-apartheid struggle was not solely attributed to its geographical location, but also to the social and cultural characteristics of its residents. These attributes rendered the region particularly well-suited for clandestine activities. The strong familial and cross-border relationships that inhabitants maintained with communities in Swaziland and Mozambique established a network of trust and solidarity, which facilitated underground operations. Furthermore, the linguistic proficiency of Eastern Transvaal residents in IsiSwati and Xitsonga, the predominant languages of Swaziland and Mozambique, was crucial. This multilingualism provided activists with a strategic advantage, enabling them to seamlessly integrate into local populations across borders and thus minimising the risk of detection by apartheid's Special Branch or its informant network. These distinctive features set the Lowveld region apart from other areas in South Africa, positioning its residents as key players in sustaining liberation networks and covert activities.²⁵ In essence, the Eastern Transvaal was not simply a peripheral area but a strategically crucial frontier where cultural familiarity and social networks became tools of resistance. These enabled activists to navigate repression with a certain level of invisibility.

Safe houses in Mbabane, Swaziland, played a vital role in the ANC's underground operations. They acted as transit points for cadres moving between South Africa and Mozambique. Several houses in Mbabane and Manzini were utilised as safe houses and sanctuaries for activists. In Manzini, house number 43 Trelawney Park, a four-bedroom house owned by Buthongo and Rebecca Makgomo Masilela²⁶ The home provided sanctuary for ANC members. Masilela's residence, known as KwaMagogo, was frequented by prominent figures such as Jacob Zuma during their clandestine activities in Swaziland. Other notable individuals who utilised the premises for

²⁴ T. Moloï, 'The role of 'freelance' underground operatives in the struggle for liberation in South Africa: The case of Eastern Transvaal, 1980-1990', *Oral History Journal of South Africa*, 4(1), 2016, pp. 82-91.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

²⁶ Rebecca Makgomo Masilela (nee Kekana) was born on 12 December 1928 in Hammanskraal, north of Pretoria, Transvaal Province (now Gauteng), previously Farm 396, Leeuwkraal. Her father, Abraham Jambo Kekana, who was acting Chief of the Ndebele on three occasions until his death on 6 June 1964, bought Leeuwkraal on behalf of the Ndebele people and later renamed it Kekanastad. In 1945, soon after the Second World War, Masilela met Solomon Buthongo Masilela (popularly known as 'Thongo') who had just returned from the war. The two met at the Lutheran church they both attended in Kekanastad and married six years later in 1951. Because of the injustices brought on by apartheid, Masilela and her husband decided to leave South Africa for Swaziland (now Eswatini) in the early 1960s. Once in Eswatini, it was there that Masilela would come to play a crucial role in the liberation struggle, aiding the African National Congress (ANC) from her home (which would later be known as 'KwaMagogo', meaning 'grandmother's place'). In 2009, she was posthumously bestowed the Government's National Order of Luthuli in Silver for her commitment to the liberation movement by providing a place of refuge for exiled cadres. The Order is awarded to individuals who have made a meaningful contribution to the struggle for human rights, democracy, nation-building, conflict resolution, as well as justice and peace. She died on 30 September 2007.

their operations included Thabo Mbeki and Glory September. Near was the ‘White House’, founded by John Nkadimeng upon his arrival in the country in 1976. Another secure location in Swaziland was ‘Come Again’ in Fairview. Masilela emerged as an emblem of bravery, unity, and the amalgamation of personal life with the political strife. The residence and Masilela’s enduring legacy are acknowledged as integral components of the liberation heritage in both South Africa and Swaziland (Eswatini). Kasrils articulates:

Then on the night of Saturday 2 June [1986], two of our operatives and a young Swazi woman were shot dead in a house outside Mbabane. They were Pansu Smith, Sipho Dlamini and Busi Majola. They were found by comrades on Monday morning lying in pools of blood. They had been shot at close range by weapons with silencers. The neighbours had not heard any gunfire. Apart from head wounds Busi, who was Pansu’s girlfriend, had bullet holes through the palms of her hands from attempting to ward-off the gunshots. Three white men had been seen going into the house on the Saturday night. They must have been let in by a fourth man, a contact of the comrades from South Africa, who had arrived in Swaziland for consultations with them that Saturday.²⁷



²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

Picture of Rebecca Masilela

Several points could be drawn from the above quotation. One obvious conclusion is that by attacking these houses, the apartheid regime wanted to thwart any attempts to challenge it. Another house targeted was the Dlamini family house in Mbabane. It was known to have sheltered ANC operatives en route to Mozambique. Oral histories suggest it was used for short stays and meetings, with family members risking arrest by hosting activists. The Nxumalo House, situated on the outskirts of Mbabane, served as a refuge for MK operatives following missions conducted within South Africa. According to oral testimonies, it functioned as a temporary storage site for weapons and documents prior to their transportation across the border. Families who owned these houses often lived under constant threat of persecution.

The apartheid regime grew alarmed by the rapid spread of political activism in the previously peaceful Lowveld. It attributed this surge to the influence of ANC members operating from Swaziland. In response, the regime applied significant pressure on Swaziland's leadership, using intimidation tactics to limit the activities of South African activists in exile. Facing this pressure, the Swazi government took a more hostile approach towards the ANC, eventually compelling its members to depart the country. Through these measures, the regime aimed to destabilise these regional sanctuaries and disrupt the transnational networks supporting the liberation struggle.²⁸

The destabilisation of Swaziland also affected Mozambique. The regime used the same tactics to infiltrate Mozambique and put pressure on the country's government. At some point, the Mozambican government allowed the ANC to maintain its office with only a small staff, but the ANC operated under extremely difficult conditions. This inevitably weakened its ability to mobilise with ease. The situation deteriorated further when the regime intensified its pressure for Mozambique to expel the remaining ANC leaders. As a result, Jacob Zuma, Sue Rabkin, and several others were forced to leave. These individuals had built dependable underground networks inside South Africa, particularly in Mpumalanga. Their departure compelled those who stayed behind in Mozambique to establish new networks of operatives under extremely difficult conditions and constant surveillance from the apartheid regime.²⁹

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 86-87.

Conclusion

This study on liberation routes and safe houses emphasises how the spatial politics of anti-apartheid resistance were deeply rooted in the material and geographic realities of borderlands. As discussed, these routes were not merely logistical pathways; they served as symbolic infrastructures of defiance, transforming ordinary spaces, such as individual homes, villages, and crossing points, into nodes of political struggle. The reliance on bicycles, footpaths, and improvised shelters illustrates how resistance was sustained through everyday objects and practices, turning the mundane into instruments of liberation. This material culture demonstrates that the fight against apartheid was not limited to formal political arenas but was enacted in the lived geographies of ordinary people who reconfigured space to challenge state power.

Moreover, the existence of these clandestine networks highlights the interplay between state repression and popular ingenuity. By forcing activists to operate in liminal spaces, the apartheid regime inadvertently fostered new forms of solidarity and resilience that transcended national boundaries. Safe houses and transit routes became sites of both vulnerability and empowerment, where trust, secrecy, and improvisation were as crucial as ideology. To dismiss these spaces as peripheral would be to overlook their central role in sustaining the anti-apartheid movement. Ultimately, liberation routes and safe houses reveal that resistance encompassed not only political leadership or armed struggle but also the spatial reimagining of everyday life, where geography itself became a weapon against oppression.