

Bloodier than black and white: liberation history seen through detective sergeant Donald Card's narrative of his investigations of Congo and Poqo activities, 1960-1965

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Abstract

By 1950 the African National Congress and the Natal and Transvaal Indian congresses, had already embarked on an activist road to free Africans, Coloureds and Indians from unfair discrimination, injustices big and petty, and oppression.

Over the next ten years, the liberation struggle quickened into a multi-fronted thrust against the apartheid state, including civil disobedience, strikes and boycotts, and the transition to violent struggle. From the pioneering works such as Edward Roux's *Time Longer than Rope* (1964) through a host of treatises to the latest study by the South African Democracy Education Trust, *The Road to Democracy Volume 1 (1960-1970)* (2004) the liberation struggle has, with few exceptions, been sketched in black and white. Scholars generally sing the praises of the seekers of the public good (the liberation movement) and excoriate the perpetrators of evil (the apartheid state and its functionaries).¹ The liberation struggle did indeed involve the efforts of those aspiring to freedom, opportunity and republican virtue against those who oppressed African, Coloured and Indian people and held them hostage through legislation and denial of opportunity and who appropriated the best fruits of society for white South Africans.

Political struggle, and indeed political combat, as it played out in South Africa, however, made for a messy picture that often defies the hero-and-villain narratives that had invariably been produced and which seeped into our national consciousness.

This article will explore the evasions, omissions, and twists that made possible the black and white liberation history that are currently consumed. To do so the activities of the Congo or iKongo movement, will be probed into as well as

¹ The exception is E Feit, *Urban Revolt in South African 1960-64* (Evanston, Ill., Northwestern University Press, 1971).

that of and Poqo.² It will be done through the story of police detective Donald Card who had been involved in almost every significant event in South African history the past five decades.³

The why of certain events and developments, including crime under the cloak of politics, are often ignored or romanticised. This included charges of torture and brutality, push so readily into the public domain – as in *Red Dust*, the latest drama on torture in South Africa.⁴

Introduction

In the course of the 1990s, former police officer and former East London mayor Donald Card typed up a manuscript telling his life story. Methodologically, this paper takes much of its information and insights from this unpublished document, which I call his “Autobiographical Notes”⁵ It also calls on interviews with him, traces this narrative by calling on other sources also, and then tries to proffer scenarios for the questions being probed. While this approach does not satisfy the requirements of historical method it is employed here for a number of salient reasons. In the first instance, it offers an insight from the point of view of the police. Secondly, in the context of a period when “nothing” was written down and much documentary evidence was destroyed, it poses provocative questions that could flesh out historical imagination and indeed the South African liberation story. Finally, it may suggest colour for the grey areas our in history, and so nuance our black and white narratives.

Congo

The Pondoland uprising in 1960-61, also known as “the Congo movement” (or iKongo), captured the imagination of South Africa watchers everywhere.

2 The Congo movement spread through the Transkei as a nascent agrarian protest movement from about 1947 through 1962. C Crais, “The men of the mountain”, *The politics of evil: Magic state power, and political imagination in South Africa* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 182-198. Poqo is generally considered the military wing of the Pan Africanist Congress.

3 D Card’s high profile career started with him investigating the brutal murder of Sister Aidan Quinlan in 1952. It stretches through pursuing MK and Poqo, giving evidence in the Rivonia Trial, befriending black consciousness leader Steve Biko, meeting with the ANC in Lusaka in 1989, among others, and ends with him personally returning the long “lost” Nelson Mandela letter books in 2004.

4 In this docu-dramatic feature film the protagonist, Alex Mpondo, claims he identified his comrade, Steve Sizela, as an MK cadre to the police only because he wanted the torture (of Sizela) to stop. The viewer however cannot be sure if this public confession (before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission) of an office-holding politician constituted truth or a face-saving cover-up.

5 D Card, “Autobiographical Notes,” Donald Card Private Papers (DCPP hereafter).

In the wake of 1950s Maoism it seemed a typical peasants' revolt, open to be romanticized. It was the first time the Pondos took up arms, albeit indirectly, against "colonial" authority. On the one hand the revolt unfolded as an organised insurgency under the leadership of "the Hill committee",⁶ on the other it saw kith and kin visiting heinous violence on one another.

All histories to date neglect an important factor: the role of the chief investigating officer in the Flagstaff area, Detective Sergeant Donald Card.

Donald Card was born July 14, 1928, in Port St Johns, Pondoland, South Africa. Because his parents could not send him to university, Card (who initially dreamed of becoming an engineer) opted to a police college and he qualified as an officer in 1947. A physical man, he became Border 400m hurdles champion and also played first team club rugby (eventually until age 43).⁷ As an athlete, he rippled with muscles and carried himself with balance and steadiness. This young policeman made his name in 1952-53 (as a 24-year old) with the successful investigation of the brutal murder of Sister Aidan Quinlan in Bantu Square on November 9, 1952, and the conviction of the murders.

Over the next eight years, working in the Criminal Investigation Department at the Fleet Street police station in East London, Card combated crime locally and wherever the police brass sent him, including several criminal cases in the greater Border and Transkei regions, where he arrested scores of suspects.⁸ Yet, he kept his finger on the political pulse of the region also. Over time Card built up a network of informers.⁹ This enabled him to solve a particular burglary case – that of the East London gun dealer Cymots. The perpetrators made off with a load of rifles and ammunition. The case took Card into Pondoland, and with the help of informers and *dagga* (marijuana) dealers, he managed to recover all the fire-arms.¹⁰ He got to know central Pondoland better in the process.

6 S Matoti and L Ntsebeza, "Rural Resistance in Mpondoland and Thembuland 1960-1963," South African Democracy Education Trust (Ed.), *The road to democracy in South Africa, Volume 1, 1960-1970*, (Cape Town, Zebra Press, 2004), pp. 185-87.

7 Biographical Notes on D Card, Biographical Folder, Daily Dispatch library.

8 D Card, "Autobiographical Notes," DCP. See also H Holland, *The Struggle: A history of the African National Congress* (London: Grafton Books, 1989), p. 146.

9 Interview with M Mkunqwana, September 17, 2002.

10 D Card, Autobiographical Notes, 42, DCP.

The latest scholarly work on the advent to “liberation” in the 1960s, for instance, does not mention Card at all.¹¹ The authors of the chapter on the Pondoland insurrection interviewed African activists in East London – where Card is a famous if controversial figure. He was available to be interviewed, but no-one bothered to approach him.

Clifton Crais in his *The Politics of Evil: Magic State Power, and Political Imagination in South Africa* also does not mention Card.¹² It is true that Crais’s work addresses “evil” in African society at the time, but why the omission of Card who at the time of such “evil” (or “liberation”) activities loomed larger over the investigations than any other public figure. Perhaps the Pondoland revolt itself holds the answer.

The revolt unfolded as a response to government’s land reform policies provided for in the Betterment Act of 1939. By the late 1950s government stood ready to consolidate the trust lands provided for by 1939 legislation, and to combat erosion it planned to cull stock and “villagize” the amaPondo.

Some of the Pondo people argued that the government used villagization as an instrument for the recruitment of labour for the mining and manufacturing industries. Others considered the scheme a rational reorganization of rural life. This process had started as early as 1945 in the cis-Kei region in the Eastern Cape. By the late-1950s, villagization touched the Pundos.

During 1960 resistance flared into violence as mounted tribesmen and “foot soldiers” – the Congo, or the men of the mountain (Intaba) – attacked government appointed chiefs and headmen who had agreed to betterment and villagization.

The government initially ignored the situation.

But reports, graphic in their detail, of tribesmen butchering those who collaborated with chiefs in the new scheme soon reached the authorities. In some cases, the tribesmen even attacked women.¹³ Here the amaPondo departed from the ethics of war of the Bantu”, which novelist and scholar AC

11 The standard work on the Pondoland revolt remains Govan Mbeki, *South Africa: The peasants’ revolt* (London, International Defence and Aid Fund, 1984 [1964]). The most recent treatise is by Sukude Matoti and Lungisile Ntsebeza, “Rural Resistance in Mpondoland and Thembuland 1960-1963,” in South African Democracy Education Trust (ed.), *The road to democracy...*

12 C Crais, “The men of the mountain,” *The politics of evil...*, pp. 178-208.

13 F Meer, *Higher than hope: Rolihlahla we love you* (Johannesburg, Skotaville, 1988), p. 135.

Jordan (1906-1968) had so eloquently described in a “Wednesday Lecture” at the University of Fort Hare.¹⁴

In one event in the Imizi location a mob of over a thousand rebels attacked and murdered Chief Stanford Nomagqwatekana and three other tribesmen. An attacker struck Nomagqwatekana with an axe, so hard the weapon cut into his skull and remained lodged in the bone.¹⁵ This gruesome death emanated not from government policies but from an internal succession dispute. On account of his father’s health failing the tribal authority of the amaZizi had appointed Nomagqwatekana chief of the tribe. But, according to Bizana magistrate Eric Warren, Nomagqwatekana “was not well-liked by the majority of the Mzizi tribe” and he was said to be arrogant and dismissive of the advice of the elders of the tribe. So they killed him.

With regard to this revolt the government would not allow murderous violence to go unchecked, and it gazetted Emergency Proclamation 400 of 1960. Initially government sent in the uniformed police and army. They harassed and terrorised the people and arrested tribesmen. This approach however did not staunch the insurrection.

Major “Lang” Hendrik van der Bergh, chief of South African Police, at end 1960 instructed Card to proceed to Flagstaff, where a number of killings had occurred. Card took over all the murder dockets. He soon sensed the intensity with which the Pondos hated the new system being imposed on them. But he also understood the flipside, that the chiefs and headmen had “a duty” to implement policy and that that made them the “enemies” of the people.¹⁶

Card found that horsemen and associated rebels met at Nqgindilile hill, which looked down on Flagstaff. Its summit formed a flat top where hundreds of insurgents met at the height of the insurrection.

It was at Nqgindilile hill, on November 19, 1960, Card then heard, that Chief Vukayibambe Sigcau, brother of Paramount Chief Botha Sigcau, and the police had opened fire on the rebels, killing one and wounding four. The tribesmen retaliated with massive violence against the chief. Leonard Mdingi, an eye-witness, described the subsequent killing of Vukayibambe as follows:

14 AC Jordan, “The war ethics of the Bantu,” AC Jordan Collection (Box 51, Liberation Archives, University of Fort Hare).

15 C Crais, “The men of the mountain,” in *The Politics of Evil*, p. 196.

16 D Card, “Autobiographical Notes,” 42, DCP.

On the day Vukayibambe was killed, the people saw the police van as it was leaving his place, and they went for him. He fired shots from within the house, but was not effective against the mob that was advancing. On reaching his house they asked him to get out or they would burn the house. When they began to set it alight, he came out. They bludgeoned him to death and cut him to pieces.¹⁷

Card had heard the story too, and he saw the police pictures. “When the huts started burning the chief and his *indunas* came running out and they were chopped to pieces. When I say chopped to pieces I mean that the bodies were chopped up into pieces [so] that they were unrecognisable. Once the person was dead the first thing they did was to chop out the eyes because they believed that when the police took photographs of the bodies they [would be] able to see who was responsible for the killing as the images of the last people seen are captured in the photograph of the eyes.”¹⁸

In another case, the rebels killed a messenger of Botha Sigcau. Card recalled that this man, a Sotho, had lived with his “big fat wife and six children” in a hut near the Holy Cross mission station in Flagstaff.

Card went to work and “interviewed hundreds of people”.

The army had failed to break the rebels’ resistance, everyone knew. But now, the amaPondo realised, a man with a red peak cap, Card, negotiated their ancestral hills, looking for the suspects. This sight became so familiar the locals eventually called him Sigqoko si Bomvu (Red Hat). Still, he made no headway and asked for the army to be removed from Pondoland. Lang Hendrik acceded.

But even with the army gone, Card still had difficulty making an arrest. Chaos reigned and people either trembled with fear or seethed defiantly. The cop now called a meeting “in the mountains where it was impossible to drive a vehicle”. He recalled that he visited a retired teacher, Dodd Mzozayana, and told him he was hoping to hold a meeting with the people of the area. He asked the old-timer to spread the word. Card promised he would not carry a fire-arm and would leave his vehicle far from the meeting place – which was to be held on the flat summit of the hill.

¹⁷ L Mdingi quoted in Matoti and Ntsebeza, “Rural Resistance in Mpondoland and Thembuland 1960-1963” South African Democracy Edition Trust (Ed.), *The road to democracy...* p. 187

¹⁸ D Card, “Autobiographical Notes,” 44, DCP.

Mzozayana participated in the meetings of the Congo, and paid his “dues”. It is conceivable though that he abhorred the butchery visited on the supporters of the chiefs and headmen. He agreed to help Card.

The morning of the meeting Card parked his Land Rover five miles from the hill. With whip in hand – to keep dogs away – the solitary white man sporting a pair shorts, shirt, boots, and a red peak cap headed for the summit.

“Siggoko si Bomvu,” one can imagine, the locals whispered as he passed.

Red Hat arrived at the top of the hill-mountain and found a disappointing 20-odd people there. He waited half an hour and then commenced with the business of his visit.

By now about 100 people had gathered. Card spoke slowly in the deep Xhosa he had picked up as a boy in Port St Johns, Umtata and Butterworth, repeating himself at salient points.¹⁹

I had been sent here to investigate crimes, especially murder of headmen and tribesmen. I shall remain here until I have solved all these crimes. For this reason, I had arranged for the army to be removed. While the army was here you lived in fear; they shot at you. I have put a stop to that. But people are still afraid; they do not know who to trust. I am concerned about the elderly who had fled their homes and now live in the bushes, fearing for their lives. I have to solve the crimes and bring stability to this region, so that everyone can sleep in peace. I understand why some people are rebelling against government imposing headmen and new policies on them. They want to order their own lives. But believe me, that the problem will not be solved by killing people only because you differ with them.

The sun blazed, but atop the hill a breeze cooled the crowd which had by now grown to about 200. So Card estimated. The late-comers must have waited to see if it were safe to attend before they joined. Card continued his speech on the mount.

If you continue attacking those with whom you disagree, you're isolating yourself and you're going to end up in jail. I am here to solve crimes committed, crimes that include murder, hacking people to death. Everyone who is a suspect must report to me. I have a list of names of suspects here.

Card paused, showing the gathered people a piece of creased foolscap paper. All around him had now fallen quiet.

¹⁹ D Card, Interview, Gonubie, July 23, 2005.

If you know the person whose name I read out, please stand. I ask you to tell that person to come to me and to bring his fire-arm with him if he has one. Tell him Sigqoko si Bomvu wants to see him. Tell him I am not leaving this area until I have solved all the crimes committed here. I'll be waiting at the Flagstaff police station. The army tent there is my office.²⁰

The detective read the names slowly, pronouncing them perfectly. One by one, neighbours of the men mentioned rose. One man stood up and said he was the man Card was looking for. When the roll call ended Card asked those standing to tell their neighbours to come and see Sigqoko si Bomvu.

The next day, a Friday, back in Flagstaff, Card waited. Nothing! Saturday came and went but also yielded no volunteers. By Sunday mid-afternoon the charge office received a call from the magistrate saying twenty-three Pondo men, some of them armed with guns, had been spotted approaching Flagstaff.

Card had only a couple of colleagues at the station. If the twenty-three men had murder on the mind they could wipe out the police contingent. While the others made arrangements for flight, Card kept his head and waited. Just after four that afternoon the dusty twenty-three reached the police tent.

“We are some of the people Sigqoko si Bomvu is looking for,” one of them declared. Card first took the fire-arms – which the men voluntarily handed him, verified the identity of each man, questioned him about his involvement, and then arrested him.

Lest this sequence of events is construed as incredible, a precedent should be cited here (even if it will leave the historical question of “Why?” unanswered).

In similar but less fierce disturbances in Mount Ayliff in 1947 law officials had summoned the “offenders” to court. They failed to appear. In fact, tension ran so high they stoned the police contingent sent out to apprehend them. The official word however remained that they had to turn themselves in. When the police presence did not wane, though, the leader of the resistance, Ntlatati Kwalukwalu and twenty-one others voluntarily surrendered. All were tried the same day and twenty-one were convicted.²¹

²⁰ This “speech” has been reconstructed from interviews with Card and from his “Autobiographical Notes”.

²¹ C Crais, “The men of the mountain”, *The politics of evil...*, pp. 182-83.

In an uncanny twist of the Transkei tale, Mount Ayliff 1947 repeated itself in Flagstaff in 1961. The courts tried the Flagstaff Congo-ites for murder or complicity to murder. Card later noted that this sequence of events resulted in the execution of a number of rebels. Among them were Wilson Ncgobe, Shadrack George, Cenjulwa Hlongwe, Masipalati Nkomo, Samani Mpanbaniso, Maduse Sandlobe, and Voxwana Mapamela whom the state hanged for their role in Congo atrocities.

“When some of them were sentenced to death,” Card later said, “I felt very sorry for them because they had surrendered of their own free will.”²²

This saga constitutes a curious case in South African history; one never probed or admitted – that twenty-three of the murder suspects in the Pondoland rebellion surrendered voluntarily. It calls for further research into what actually happened in Pondoland in 1960-61.

These curious surrenders, of both 1947 and 1961, need to be probed. We do not know what was involved, what motivated these men to voluntarily surrender. Within the “politics of evil”, to borrow from Crais, strange motivations may have been at work. For instance, in the course of a previous case – the Three Crowns murder mystery, 1957 – villagers near Queenstown thought Card practiced witchcraft, or black magic, when, after he had warned two girls whom he thought might have been eyewitnesses to the murder that they had to tell the truth or lightning would strike them, lightning struck their village, setting a few huts alight. When Card visited the village the day after, villagers old and young scattered before his approach. When he asked them what was what, they explained they thought he was a white witchdoctor.²³

It is not known for sure, but word about Card might have circulated, as the Cymots case suggests.

Card was also known in East London as Nobomvu, as in “red”, for danger, (and later on, in 1962, as Goba Iqindi or Clenched Fist for the way he flattened his adversaries.)²⁴ It may well be that the Card legend enjoyed currency in Pondoland also.

22 D Card, “Autobiographical Notes,” 47.

23 C Thomas, Unpublished manuscript, “A Man Called Card – Living South African History 1945-2005”. For detail of the investigation see colonel AJ van Zyl, “Tragedie te Drie Krone,” *Justitia*, 2.(8) November 1962.

24 Erstwhile *Daily Dispatch* editor, the late Donald Woods, gave Card this nickname.

The Pondoland rebellion captured the imagination of scholars as an example of a prototypical peasants' revolt. But this notion is more the imagination of historians and activists than the reality of what transpired during those bloody months.

The picture usually painted of the rebellion is that of a military state brutally suppressing a people united against apartheid-appointed chiefs. While the army did in fact play a role in trying to quash the uprising, chasing tribesmen through the countryside and arresting suspects willy-nilly, in Flagstaff, as in Mount Ayliff before, the rebellion expired in a self-induced whimper. In the first instance, the army withdrew well before Card arrested his suspects. Therefore the army had nothing to do with the success of Card's investigation and his arrest of 23 suspects.

Secondly, many Pondos, including the father of Winnie Mandela, CK Madikizela, supported the chiefs.²⁵

Then, despite the fact that some chiefs had been apartheid appointees, many people, sickened by the butchery of chiefly supporters, informed on the perpetrators. This helped the police to apprehend 4,769 suspects and to bring more than 2,067 to trial.²⁶ While it is true that the differential between the number arrested and the number brought to trial suggests indiscriminate arrests, clearly, as shown in Card's Flagstaff case, many had been named by their fellow villagers. One can thus conclude that tribesmen as much as the police brought the uprising to an end.

The shadow of Sigqoko si Bomvu fell large over the Flagstaff area; and informers at the same time suffused that society. So if one were to look for causes for the collapse of the Pondoland revolt, they are found equally in persistent police work, among the informing African people, and in the fears that led to surrender.

²⁵ F Meer, *Higher than hope*, pp. 134-35.

²⁶ Republic of South Africa. Hansard, House of Assembly debates, 27 January 1961, C226.

Pogo plots

Starting with the formation of the African Congress Youth League in 1944, the seeds of Africanism grew rapidly inside the ANC. Led by Anton Lembede, Robert Sobukwe, and Potlako Kitchener “PK” Leballo, among others, the Africanists rejected alliances with and the influence of communists and non-Africans, saying “they are, one and all, opposed to African nationalism.”²⁷ This sub-textual schism in the ANC widened with the adoption of the Freedom Charter by the Congress Alliance, a development which Africanists viewed as a case of communists and non-Africans hijacking the African struggle for freedom.

The Africanists rejected a class analysis of South African society. To them Africans suffered oppression as a people rather than as an exploited class.²⁸

Their participation in Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah’s All African People’s Conference in 1959 persuaded them to break with the ANC and that year they formed the Pan Africanist Congress.

The next year, when the ANC called an anti-pass strike for March 31, 1960, the PAC called one for March 21. On the latter day police opened fire on anti-pass protesters in Sharpeville near Vereeniging in the Transvaal province. Sixty-nine people were shot dead, 176 wounded. Most were shot in the back. The PAC claimed, and it still claims, this massacre as its signal achievement – they started the revolution through Sharpeville.

The government panicked and banned both the ANC and PAC, but they reconvened underground and spawned military wings – Umkhonto we Sizwe and Poqo respectively.

Poqo is a Xhosa expression which means “alone” or “pure”. “The word was sometimes used in the Western Cape in 1960 by PAC spokesmen to describe the character of their organisation – contrasting it to the multiracialism of the Congress (ANC) alliance.”²⁹ This pure and alone position of course contradicted its non-racial claim, its assertion that Africans were those people, black, brown or white, who offered Africa their first allegiance.

27 R Sobukwe, “Political thought – talker,” *Drum*, May 1959, p. 44.

28 T Lodge, “Pan Africanist Congress,” C Hill and P Warwick (eds), *Collected Papers*, Volume 2 (York, Centre for Southern African Studies, c1977), p. 95.

29 T Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1987), p. 241.

And under cover of dark, pure and alone, Poqo went to work with deadly intent.

Mau-Mau-like, the spectre of Poqo struck terror in the hearts of South Africans as they killed white civilians, mostly – in Paarl (November 1962), where this army of the night, using pangas, hacked several civilians to death; at a roadside camp at the Bashee River bridge (February 1963) the Poqos murdered five whites, including two girls; and in Langa (February 1963).

As the police dragnet closed in on PAC-Poqo arresting scores of foot soldiers, the leadership slipped into exile in Basutoland. And on March 24, 1963, PK Leballo, who had claimed control of the PAC in the wake of the jailing of PAC president Robert Sobukwe, issued a statement in Maseru, announcing that Poqo consisted of an army of 150,000 members and was preparing for a final assault on white supremacy in South Africa during 1963. Leballo urged the Poqo cells to prepare to rise as one on a particular date.

And yes, they would kill as many whites as possible. Journalist Benjamin Pogrund, who enjoyed the confidence of PAC-Poqo, related the “Poqo’s aims were frankly murderous. I knew of them because, from an early stage, a member of Poqo provided me with a flow of information, giving me an update after each secret meeting he attended. According to the details I was getting, during the weekend of 7 and 8 April, members were to rise up and set about slaughtering as many whites as possible; the killing was to start in city streets.”³⁰

At this time, early 1963, Card received attention-grabbing news from Ladybrand, an Orange Free State[?] hamlet near the Basutoland border. Two African woman, Cynthia Lichaba, 18, and Thabisa Lethala, 19, travelling from Maseru to Ladybrand aroused suspicion. Police searched them and found some seventy letters in their possession.³¹ The letters had names and addresses and the women intended mailing them in Ladybrand. The names were nom de plumes and the addresses those of friends and neighbours. The letters however were for PAC members all over the country, informing them the rivers were full and they should wait.³² Card figured out that the Poqos

30 B Pogrund, *Sobukwe and Apartheid* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), pp. 180-182. Interview with Zolile Hamilton Keke, February 1, 2006 confirmed the intended killing of whites.

31 B Pogrund, *Sobukwe and Apartheid*, p. 182.

32 D Card, “Autobiographical Notes,” p. 54.

were being told to wait until the set date on which they should attack and kill as many white South Africans as possible.

Within a day or two after this, Card knew through his informers that important meeting would take place in the bush near Duncan Village near East London on the night of April 8, 1963. The police had made a contingency plan: in case this was to be the attack Leballo had talked of, they would be ready.

On April 8, a full moon rose over East London. Card had smeared himself black and joined the Poqo meeting in the bush near Duncan Village. He sat on his haunches at the back of the outer ring of cadres, well in the dark thrown by a sheer embankment. He found a gathering of Poqos bent on attacking white East London. He saw Washington Sigxhesi towering over the hunched multitude – he estimated there were about 300 Poqos – motivating his comrades, dividing them into groups and issuing instructions. When this exercise approached Card, he got up, unzipped and made as if he was going to take a leak. Then he merged with the black of the night. Said Card, “I ran; I don’t think I ever ran that fast in my life.”³³

Card promptly returned with a team of 100 officers armed with guns and walkie talkies. While surreptitiously surrounding the group, the Poqo scouts spotted some of the officers and fired shots at them. It was not, as one researcher would have it, that the police opened fire on the group after having surrounded them.³⁴ In this regard Card quizzed: why would they, the police, do that if such an action would alert and scatter the plotters? When the police took cover, the cadres fled, wading hip-deep through a stream that had not been covered by the cops. They disappeared into the bush on the other side and into the mazes of the township.³⁵

Against the order of his commanding officer, Card pursued on foot and he and his colleagues arrested three Poqos that night – Malcolm Kettleidas, China Koloti, and Malcolm Dyani, not eleven, as one researcher asserts³⁶.

If the police had in fact completed surrounding the Poqos, one hundred of them would surely have arrested more than three suspects. The fact is that

33 D Card Interview, July 12, 2004.

34 B Maaba, “The PAC’s War against the State, 1960-63”. South African Democracy Education Trust, *The road to democracy in South Africa*, 1(1960-70)(Cape Town, Zebra Press, 2004), pp. 291-92.

35 D Card Interview, May 31, 2005.

36 D Card Interview, July 12, 2004; Maaba, “The PAC’s War against the State, 1960-63”, p. 291.

they had not yet fully surrounded the PAC cadres when shots were fired at them. And as a consequence almost all of the Poqos escaped that night.

Over the next two months Card and his colleagues arrested about 300 suspects. However, the police released most of them after they had made statements (that's code for informing on their comrades).³⁷ Seventy-two faced the Supreme Court sitting in Butterworth in April 1964. The Judge President of the Eastern Cape AG Jennett presided.

Judge Jennett sentenced Sixghesi to 25 years imprisonment and others to various lesser terms. In passing judgement, Judge Jennett said that had it not been for the four policemen whose investigative work led to the thwarting the Poqo attack, many innocent people in East London may have been killed, and that in fact they owed their lives to the four officers – Card, Coen Scheepers, Hansie Mynhardt and Thompson Tshikila.

Card and his colleagues had made a major contribution towards the state's success. Without a host of informers however they could not have done this. And Card had many informers serving him. He said he had an informer on every Duncan street.³⁸

“A lot of people thought we had saved the city.”³⁹

East London's white elite regaled the four in a champagne, white wine and whisky affair at city hall.

A few years on, in 1972, Card campaigned for a seat on the city council without making a single public appearance and without posting a poster. He simply left a playing card, on which he had koki-ed VOTE FOR ME, under the door of voters. Well, white East Londoners remembered April 8, 1963, and voted him into city hall. “Only Mayor Joe Yazbek polled more votes,” Card said, “because he is Catholic, and the Catholics stand together”.⁴⁰

According to Card, the “last” of the plans of the PAC in exile involved a plot which sought to have all political prisoners released. Taking it from informer

37 D Card, “Autobiographical Notes,” 58, DCPD.

38 D Card Interview, October 15, 2002; Corroborated in Monde Mkunqwana Interview, September 17, 2002, East London; G Vakala Interview, September 18, 2002, East London.

39 D Card Interview, July 12, 2004.

40 Conversation with D Card, July 30, 2005.

reports, the police suspected the organisation planned to send a number of Basutoland-based cadres into the Orange Free State to kidnap white children whom they would hold hostage in a cave in the mountains in the Quithing area, southern Basutoland.

Card called this operation Operation Ransom.

I could not establish if the PAC ever named it so. However, there were indeed Poqo cadres in and around Quithing. ZB Molete related in a 1970 interview said the PAC had soldiers in the mountains in Lesotho.⁴¹ It is possible that these could have been the cadres for the alleged kidnapping operation.

Through informers, the police soon knew everything about “Operation Ransom”. Indeed, they had a photocopy of the plan.⁴² The operation, a police document averred, “entailed the kidnapping of European children in the Republic and demanding the release of PAC leaders who were in gaol, for the return of these youngsters.” It asserted that “A full-scale guerrilla attack on the Republic was also planned.”⁴³

The apartheid government had set up counter-insurgency measures in Basutoland and Swaziland in 1963, to wit, police mobile units (PMUs). These PMUs served to alert the SA police of PAC and ANC activity in those countries. PMUs and informers (“a few good contacts”) worked closely with Card. In addition, Card had befriended the second in command of the Basutoland police. They regularly discussed cases in the forest near the border town of Ladybrand. That was how Card knew of the plan to kidnap white children, he said.

The nationwide attack on white South Africa, of course, was publicly announced.

However, the PAC did not have the manpower to give effect to these plans and decided to slip cadres back into South Africa to recruit men for training in Basutoland.

41 GM Gerhart Interview with ZB Molete, Nairobi, July 1970, PAC Interviews, Box 2, Liberation Archives University of Fort Hare.

42 In several interviews, conversations, and in a taped narration D Card indicates that he had seen the plan. This author however could not locate a copy of the plan.

43 Pan Africanist Military Trainees, East London RCA 742/11/65, DCPP.

By 1965, the police document asserts, “a trained saboteur by the name of Gasson Ndlovu, alias Forward Tusso, [had] returned to Basutoland and it was then decided that the men [recruits] be sent to him for training.”

Meanwhile the PAC had been warned not to engage in or plan illegal activities on Basutoland soil. The British officials still controlled the “protectorate”. And with preparation for independence well advanced, the mountain kingdom leadership could not afford political embarrassment of caught out aiding and abetting violence against an independent state. Also, South Africa could invade Basutoland in a punitive raid.

Armed with knowledge about Forward Tusso’s moves, Card forthwith placed policemen at all bus stops and train stations near the Basutoland border to check on all people arriving or leaving. At the Marseilles railway station near Bloemfontein, a railway policeman, Constable Frans Mokhele, arrested Jabulani Mkuzo, Zolile Pityana, Ernest Tshazibane, and Velile Soyizwapi when they could produce neither their reference (pass) books nor any other form of identification. They turned out to be PAC men slipping back into the country. A number of other suspects were also arrested, including Siphso Beja, a former post office employee from Port Elizabeth. He had with him a recruit, known only as Budaza, who was also arrested. They made “full statements” and arrests swiftly followed.

But the picture was messier than these arrests suggest. With informers, PMUs and “good contacts” purveying information to Card in particular and the police in general, the PAC project rapidly unravelled. The PAC-Poqo seethed at these betrayals and PAC had to take action. And just as the ANC-MK took action in the cases of Inkie Hoyi (Chief Sandile’s representative in Duncan Village), Victor Ntonjeni, and Symington Dukade, a known informer, the PAC acted against those who betrayed the organisation. As Gqobose darkly put it in an interview – there was “only one way” of dealing with traitors.⁴⁴

In the course of homing in on PAC-Poqo, Card recalled that he brought a Port Elizabeth-based “roving informer”, who was known to him only as Duke, to East London to assist him. PAC-Poqo cadres had been picked up countrywide and this influx kept police photographers busy. But somebody had to finger the suspects if Card were to win convictions. Duke, among others, played this role. After helping out, Duke went back to Port Elizabeth

⁴⁴ Interview MPI Gqobose, New Brighton, Port Elizabeth, March 31, 2005.

and then proceeded to Johannesburg and from there to Maseru. When he arrived in the capital of Lesotho, the PAC questioned him, so Card heard from another informer. Duke seemed to have been careless because the PAC interrogators found a Johannesburg telephone number on him. When he stuttered that he did not know how the number got there, the PAC men dialled it, and from the accented and guttural voice answering they inferred it was a security police man.⁴⁵

This “other” informer told Card what happened next.

Duke admitted he worked for the police; he was sorry; he pleaded forgiveness, one can imagine. But to no avail. PAC men reportedly took him to the Basutoland side of the Caledon River, and there a rope was thrown through the crook of a tree and the noose put around his neck. The team pulled Duke clean from the ground and held the rope until he stopped kicking. They let him down, dug a grave and buried him. On Robben Island, Zolile Hamilton Keke related, a new arrival to the island reported the killing of Duke to the PAC group of prisoners.

Card thought he could solve this case if he talked to Zolile Pityana, who had meantime been charged and tried in Port Elizabeth, and sentenced to 15 years’ imprisonment on Robben Island.

Card requested the temporary release of Pityana and one of his comrades. The name of the comrade escaped Card. The authorities duly released them to Pollsmoor Prison. Interviewing the pair there, Card heard the same story as to why and how Duke was killed, but the inmates did not give him names. They agreed though to take Card to where they thought the body had been buried.

With the blessing of the prison authorities, the trio headed for Ladybrand, near where the Caledon River formed the South Africa-Basutoland border.

The night was dark, inviting an escape. Yet Card slept in the local hotel while the two prisoners slept in the car. And miraculously the two convicts did not flee. Keke explained that this was understandably as escape would mean that they did not have the courage of their convictions, and, any case, they believed they would soon be free, what with independence coming so readily to African states.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ D Card Interview, Gonubie, July 23, 2005. See also “Autobiographical Notes, 67, DCCP.

⁴⁶ Interview ZH Keke, East London, February 1, 2006.

The next morning the trio, a white legend and two African convicts, armed with shovels, drove to the Caledon, stripped to their underpants, waded waist-deep through the river, and started digging for Duke's body

The inmates were not sure of the location of the grave so they dug all morning and only missed. To exacerbate their random diggings, people approached the river from time to time and they then scampered for cover. At one point Basutoland police approached the area, and Card and company crossed the river before they could be detected. A day's digging produced nothing and Card accepted that either the body had been dug up and removed or it had been washed away in the flood that had recently swept this area.⁴⁷

The identity of Duke is yet to be established, and his death at the hands of comrades remains unsolved.

The veracity of this story can of course be questioned. But Card, a participant in the digging for Duke, is of course a primary witness to this particular activity. On the other hand, what he heard from his informers can only be regarded as hearsay and is therefore inadmissible as historical evidence. However, this must be balanced with the fact that Card's informers had always been reliable, as is suggested by his excellent conviction rate – from the murder of Sister Aidan Quinlan in 1952 to cases in Queenstown, Butterworth, Grahamstown and Aliwal North in 1963 and in the Rivonia Trial in 1964.⁴⁸ Also, top PAC-man Keke confirmed that the killing had been reported to the organisation on Robben Island.

Meanwhile, Detective Warrant Officer Piet Compion at Aliwal North and also the security police in Bloemfontein retained a string of informers in Basutoland. As the South African Police received more information they relayed this to their colleagues across the border. And shortly after the arrests on South African soil, Basutoland police raided the PAC office in Maseru and the Quithing area. The latter raid involved the South African police, albeit unofficially, with Card directing the proceedings.⁴⁹ The Basutoland police arrested a number of PAC men, including TT Letlaka and Mfanasekaya Gqobose. With these arrests the plot, according to Card, fell apart.

47 D Card told this story with unwavering consistency in various conversations and interviews with the author, as well as in his "Autobiographical Notes," DCPP, and on an audio-taped narration, in the author's possession.

48 G Vakala was one of a very few cadres whose conviction Card's detective work could not secure.

49 "Autobiographical Notes," DCPP, and Card, Audio-taped narration.

In July 1965 a Maseru court tried Letlaka on “a charge of conspiracy to kidnap white children, throw bombs, etc.”⁵⁰ Johannesburg-based liberal lawyer Jack Unterhalter defended him. As the state could not with the available evidence link Letlaka to the plot, he walked free. Others in the PAC leadership also escaped arrest or jail as no tangible evidence could be mustered against them. One must remember that at this time “nothing was written down”.

“Eyewitness” evidence however sundered Gqobose and in October 1965 the court slapped him with a three-year jail sentence under the Promotion of Violence Abroad Act.

When I interviewed Gqobose, he could recall neither “Operation Ransom” nor that Letlaka had been tried for plotting to kidnap white children.⁵¹ After the interview, however, Gqobose told me that he could tell many more stories, but they were politically and personally too sensitive.

Conclusion

The cases delineated above show that neat black and white dramas do not exist in this period in South African history. When evidence proffered by players other than those in the liberation movement is considered, a more complex story emerges. The South African narrative then begins to look bloodier than black and white.

Liberation history has limits, of course, because “nothing was written down”, but as this paper suggests, there are oral histories to be tapped still – those stories residing in the memories of informers, the police, and peaceful people who just happened to disagree with movement people.

Both the police and freedom fighters destroyed documentary evidence. And this loss cannot be recouped. Here too, one would have to rely on the oral testimony of the last living people from that period.

Even here historians would have to be careful, because people had either developed historical amnesia or they can easily imagine histories removed from past reality.

50 G Gerhart, Typed notes on interview with J Unterhalter, December 24, 1969, PAC Interviews, Box 1, Liberation Archives University of Fort Hare.

51 Interview MPL Gqobose, New Brighton, Port Elizabeth, March 31, 2005.

The honeymoon of celebratory, non-critical history should expire. This paper suggests that the silences, evasions, and omission obscure or even bury some of what happened on the road to South African democracy. The empty spaces in the paper calls for organizations and persons to release the documents in their possession – such as was the case when Donald Card handed Nelson Mandela the Mandela letter books in 2004.

It further suggests that it is incumbent on historians to visit the other side of the fray also. After all, without input of oppressors and apolitical functionaries the national narrative remains a one-sided say-so. Historians should visit the unexplored areas of our national life – the world of informers on the one hand and police on the other.

In reconstructing the past, historians require as many voices as they can capture to flesh out their own re-imagined narratives. Only this way will they win confidence beyond political correctness. They must surely be mindful of Joseph Conrad's caution that "Words, as is well known, are the great foes of reality." And in this context the trick is to tease probable truth out of outright denial, fear-filled silence, and from the vigorous assertion. If Card's testimony, his voice, constitutes a one-sided say-so, it nevertheless deserves to be heard, for it is a new, countervailing and provocative voice.

Finally the article, for me at least, highlights the caution with which we should approach liberation history. Part of South Africa's liberation history still waits in the memory of fearful or embarrassed persons. Indeed, part of it still languishes in the dark cupboards and in the minds of the police and informers of this nation.