

Chapter 1 Why Did They Do It?

Randolph Vigne is both typical and rather exceptional from the other members. For one thing he was quite a bit older than the others. He was born in 1928 and was 31 when the NCL was formed. He was a businessman [publishing]. He was married with children. He had been quite active in the Liberal Party, indeed, becoming one of its vice presidents. He had considered not coming back to South Africa at all after a leave in Britain in 1956.

His political thinking had been powerfully affected by Arthur Koestler's *THE GOD THAT FAILED*. The book content essays by Ignazio Silone, Andre Gide, Richard Wright, Louis Fischer, Stephen Spender and Koestler as editor and contributor.

[Section needed here on what the book said about Communist Parties]

Like many of the younger members, later on, he became quite disillusioned with the Liberal Party which in Cape Town at least was dominated by a conservative element which was not only cautious about endorsing a colorblind, universal franchise but was also extremely hesitant about involvement in extraparliamentary but legal activities. He hated the "ghastly political talk" of the provincial committee meetings. While he worked hard for the candidate that the Liberal Party had put up in the 1958 general election he concluded that the effort had been futile. The next few years he spent as a very active member of the Liberal Party, mostly on extraparliamentary activities.

[Insert a section here on what extraparliamentary activities Vigne was then involved in in the next few years. See for instance his discussion of the post Sharpeville demonstrations in Cape Town]

The turning point, the crucial turning point as it was for all the NCL members, was the Sharpeville massacre on March 21st, 1960, a South African police attachment fired into a massed crowd of Africans who had come to the Sharpeville police station to turn in their passports at the behest of the newly formed Pan Africanist Congress [PAC]. Some 79 people were shot down most with bullets in the backs as they were running away. The event, as it turned out, was the beginning of the end for the apartheid regime but it was to be another 34 years before that inevitable and was realized. South Africa was shocked and shaken to its core. International horror was followed by international condemnation. The Stock Exchange plunged. One cabinet minister predicted that South Africa would never be the same and that change was mandatory. However, Dr. Verwoerd, the prime minister quickly restored cabinet resolve at it became clear that change would be change for the worse. Shortly there after the two major African political opposition groups, the ANC and the PAC were banned. A line had been drawn in the sand. The government had in effect said that peaceful opposition would no longer be tolerated and that peaceful change was impossible.

As this happened in so many other similar situations planning to meet the new exigency, in effect, planning for the new revolutionary situation occurred in prison. A number of white liberals, Communists and others had been imprisoned under the Emergency Regulations declared after Sharpeville. It was in prison that the NCL was conceived [and in prison it was to end].

Curiously, the Cape Town Liberal Party members who had been vigorously supportive of massive marches and that the PAC had organized from the townships to the center of town and which at one point threatened to overwhelm the police, but not touched by the arrests. So Vigne was not in at the beginning. But he was more than ready when approached by John Lang to join at anti-apartheid sabotage organization. As he says, after the emergency, "... And the policy of crushing absolutely everything that moved – it became clear that political activity of that sort, extraparliamentary, political worked like that was giving respectability to the system and the only way we could get what of the system was by attacking it head-on".