

# Coming to terms with the past

**penguin forum series**

the ANC's armed struggle



**penguin forum series**

apartheid's secret weapon



**MK: The ANC's armed struggle**  
*By Howard Barrell (Penguin Books)*  
**Death Squads: Apartheid's secret weapon**  
*By Patrick Laurence (Penguin Books)*

THESE are the first two titles in Penguin's new 'Forum Series', which 'offers alternative perspectives on critical social issues to enhance democratic participation'.

The release of short, accessible and relatively cheap books on contemporary issues is to be welcomed, especially as South Africans begin grappling with the past, trying to make sense of how it has given rise to the present, and ponder what sort of future will be created out of the battles to conserve, transform or eradicate apartheid society.

Superficially, Howard Barrell and Patrick Laurence's contributions deal with some of the same issues from different sides of a single conflict.

Barrell analyses the growth and development of ANC military activities, while Laurence describes the state's military and police initiatives to destroy organised forces opposed to apartheid through destabilisation, assassination and physical attack.

But that is where the similarities end. *MK* is a deeply thoughtful book, which frankly analyses the successes and failures of the ANC's armed struggle.

Barrell argues that neither Umkhonto we Sizwe nor the ANC ever succeeded in mounting an armed or insurrectionary struggle which could seriously contend for state power. He acknowledges that *MK* faced some of the most difficult and inhospitable conditions ever to confront a revolutionary movement, and traces the attempts of *MK* leaders and soldiers to overcome these objective impediments over three decades.

The first sabotage campaigns of the early 1960s; the fascinating story of the ANC military link-up with Zapu and engagement with Rhodesian forces in the Wankie campaign; the slow rebuilding of decimated ANC and *MK* structures in the early 1970s; the rush of militant and politicised youngsters to join *MK* after the 1976 uprisings; the armed propaganda of the late 1970s and insurrectionary moments of the mid-1980s - all involved shifts in *MK*'s strategic thinking, organisational tactics, and structures of implementation and co-ordination.

But, at core, Barrell's argument is that *MK* - and the ANC - failed as a revolutionary movement aiming for the seizure



of state power.

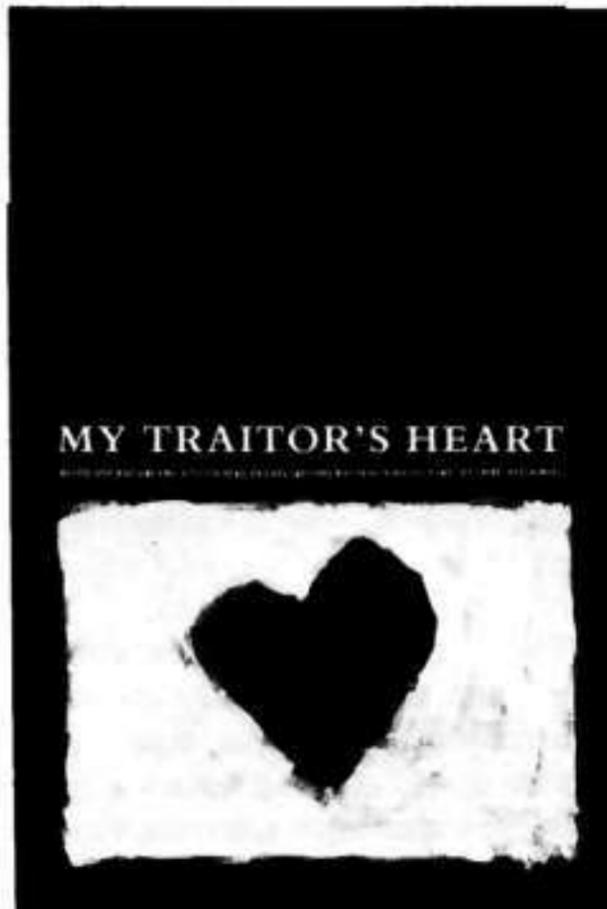
This failure was in part the result of the difficult objective conditions: but at the same time, according to Barrell, the major reason for the failure of the ANC and *MK* to achieve their aim of the revolutionary seizure of state power was 'their inability - despite opportunities to do so - to develop internal underground leaderships, at both regional and national level, exercising day-by-day, hands-on command and control over all aspects of political and military work'.

Much of Barrell's book is devoted to various ANC and *MK* attempts to resolve the contradictions between military and political struggle and organisation, exiled leadership and internal activists, central direction and local initiative. Barrell argues that Operation Vula - currently the subject of a major trial involving high-level ANC and *MK* leaders - was by far the most successful attempt to achieve a synthesis of these tensions.

Despite these failures, Barrell notes that there is a sense in which *MK* also succeeded - not as a revolutionary movement, but in the light of its 1961 claim that it was going to war not only to 'create the conditions for a credible peace ... but in order to avoid war'.

Barrell suggests that *MK*'s main achievement was essentially propagandistic: it played a vital role in 'bringing South Africa to the verge of a negotiated end to white minority political domination'. If this happens, *MK* will have 'miraculously accomplished the movement's initial political objective: They would have gone to war to avoid war ...

# This isn't going to be an easy review



**My Traitor's Heart**  
By Rian Malan (*The Bodley Head*)

To Rian Malan

This isn't going to be an easy review. Not for the usual, unstated reason: the yawning reviewer battled to finish the book.

I have just read *My Traitor's Heart* hungrily, lured on and on. One breathtaking, lovingly crafted, always aching narrative flows into the next.

So how do I begin? Let me tell a small story of my own, or rather the bones of a story, the details have long since washed away. Some time in the course of a prison sentence I was abused verbally by a particularly nasty prison officer - Kaptein Arend Schnetler. It was for something irrelevant that I have long since forgotten. Later when the officer and his entou-

rage had disappeared, one of the warders (Basson? Badenhorst? or perhaps it was even a Malan) glancing over his shoulder, came down to me, clucking under his breath, whispering in sympathy: 'I don't care if a person is a warder, or a prisoner, or what. You just don't speak to a white man like that'.

You see, reading your book has brought this now fading anecdote back to me. But why?

I am not really sure. Maybe it has something to do with being lured into an unwanted complicity. This isn't going to be an easy review.

Your book is written dangerously, looking over your shoulder. I don't mean in the sense that the person with the by-line 'Rian Malan' goes into dangerous, front-line situations to bring us these despatches. I mean that you invite us into your heart. There is considerable honesty in your book. It would be rather crass if I now rolled on to this terrain like a good old Soviet T64 tank and blasted away something like this:

- You tell us: 'Even the Communist Party deferred to Dawid Malan's legacy and organised under the slogan 'workers of the world unite and fight for a white South Africa'. Nonsense! You pride yourself in being a hard-nosed, researching journalist, and here you are repeating a long debunked distortion which even the SATV did not quite manage to purvey in its recent 'documentary' on the Communist Party.
- 'There are no classes in the United States?' No Rockefellers, no working stiffs, no unemployed blacks, no migrants, Latinos? ... Come on!
- 'Black democrats like Gatsha Buthelezi', you write. Without a trace of irony?
- Dealing with the 1985-6 period which saw, amongst other things, bitter UDF/AZAPO clashes, you speak of 'Bishop Tutu's UDF'. At this time Tutu was a patron of both the UDF and the National Forum of Azapo and CAL. But that doesn't quite suit the symmetry of your argument.
- For the same period - you give only the barest hint that 40 000 people were detained under the State of Emergency, and the overwhelming majority were from UDF structures. The resulting and massive dislocation to organisational discipline and political strategy, likewise, doesn't quite fit your argument.
- Etc., etc...

I could go on, but I don't want to be this sort of T64 tank.

and won'.

*Death Squads* describes the emergence and activities of assassination and 'dirty tricks' squads linked to police and military structures. The book is a useful compilation of material which has already emerged through evidence in the Harms Commission, investigative reports largely undertaken by journalists of the *Vrye Weekblad*, and research by lawyers, the Human Rights Commission and David Webster Trust.

All the major actors and incidents which were revealed during 1989 and the first half of 1990 are present: police death squad members like Dirk Coetzee and Almond Nofamela; the Vlakplaas farm near Pretoria where 'Askaris' - ex-guerilla fighters working for the police - were housed; the limited evidence on the SADF's shadowy Civil Co-operation Bureau (CCB) which emerged through the Harms Commission; the Johannesburg City Council spy ring.

But ultimately Laurence's work falls a bit flat: there is little information in his book which was not already known to regular newspaper readers. And his final chapter, which attempts to explain rather than describe death squad activity, lacks nuance and depth.

This is partially a result of writing without the benefit of original research and interviews with participants - an area in which Barrell's work is much stronger.

*Death Squads* adds little in knowledge and texture to what is already known, or could have been gleaned from a careful reading of newspaper reports. The actors and their motivations in these sordid episodes remain one-dimensional, and at the end of the book one is left with a very limited understanding of how the death squads came to be, and the nature of those who staffed them.

Barrell, by contrast, knows his subject well. *MK* includes extracts from interviews, anecdotes, some original material. The author is clearly sympathetic to MK, the ANC and their objectives. But his is a critical voice, acknowledging bravery and sacrifice, but distanced from the terrain of moral judgement.

Perhaps this is asking too much of *Death Squads*, especially given the difficulties in researching the squads in detail. But as a centralisation of material, Laurence's book is useful, and will hopefully be read by many ordinary white South Africans coming to terms with the past, and needing to know what the government was doing in their name. - Glenn Moss •