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South Africa's Forgotten Freedom Fighters

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SOUTH AFRICA’S FORGOTTEN FREEDOM FIGHTERS

What Xola Tyamzashe remembers most about his sixteenth birthday is the sound of the gun – a deafening crack slicing through the hot afternoon air.

It was 1988, and Tyamzashe was at a guerilla training camp on the outskirts of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania’s largest city. He gripped the semi-automatic rifle he’d been issued and fixed his gaze on the inky silhouette of a paper target.

Nearby, rows of fighters marched in time to the staccato cries of a drill instructor. Salty sweat dripped from every brow and yellow dirt crunched under every boot. Tyamzashe was hundreds of miles from his native South Africa, the farthest he’d ever been from home.

Most of the soldiers at the camp were young men – the youngest just 11-years-old – and they’d come from different regions of South Africa: some from the urban sprawl of Johannesburg, some from the wild north and others from the sea-kissed cape. But whether young or old, city-dweller or bushman, they were united by their shared purpose, their shared dream – a free South Africa.

Although he had never held a gun before, Tyamzashe learned quickly. Unlike many of his young comrades, Tyamzashe was naturally gifted, with the stereotypical build of a soldier – tall, broad-shouldered, with long muscular arms. Only the smoothness of his face betrayed his tender age. As he squeezed off rounds, Tyamzashe imagined that each paper target was the sneering face of an apartheid regime officer. He rarely missed.

Like hundreds of young men and women, Tyamzashe fled his South African homeland in order to fight the apartheid regime that had oppressed black South Africans through institutionalized racism since 1948. In Tanzania, he joined the Azanian People’s Liberation Army (APLA), a militarized wing of the Pan African Congress (PAC), with one goal in mind: destroy the system that treated black South Africans as less than human. The movement attracted a flood of idealistic youth.

Over the next four years, Tyamzashe set foot on his native soil only during military strikes orchestrated by APLA. He had no contact with family or friends. He didn’t even know if they were alive.

“I was willing to sacrifice my life for my people,” said Tyamzashe. “We were fighting an unjust system.”

But more than two decades after the fall of apartheid, Tyamzashe still feels that he is fighting an unjust system, one that refuses to compensate him for the sacrifices he made.
Tyamzashe, now 43, lives alone in Bronkhorstspruit, South Africa, a sleepy town with a population of just over 3,000. Although his face has lost its youthful smoothness over the years, he still carries his muscular frame with a militant confidence and alertness.

Tyamzashe’s home is a thatched-roof rondavel, a round hut made of local materials, on another man’s farmland. The rondavel has no running water or electricity. The nearest shop or gas station is more than a 30-minute walk away, across a small bridge that spans a dry riverbed.

The small amount of money Tyamzashe has to his name he gets from odd jobs, which rarely earn him enough for the 75 rand ($6) it costs to take a bus into the city. He gets just enough to buy meager meals for a meager table. And yet, Tyamzashe considers himself one of the lucky ones.

“We were young and idealistic,” he says. Tyamzashe speaks slowly and expressively, but his eyes have a strange intensity that is, at times, unsettling. “I thought ending apartheid would end our suffering – it just changed it.”

Tyamzashe says veterans like him who took part in the anti-apartheid struggle are suffering because the ANC-led government failed to deliver on services it promised. There are 16,000 military veterans residing in South Africa, according to the Department of Military Veterans. Many of the young men Tyamzashe trained with in Tanzania are now unemployed, homeless, incarcerated or dead.

“Promises have been made that we’re going to be given housing,” says Tyamzashe. “We’re not asking for double-story houses, triple story houses – just basic housing, basic education and a basic livelihood.”

Apartheid is an Afrikaans word meaning “the state of being apart.” In practice, it was institutionalized racism in South Africa, enforced by the ruling National Party (NP), which oppressed the majority non-white population from 1948 to 1994.

Apartheid legislation classified citizens according to four main racial groups – black, white, colored and Indian – with the latter two being broken into smaller subgroups. Residential areas, medical facilities, beaches, restaurants, schools and other public places were racially segregated. The facilities reserved for non-white South Africans were inferior to those for whites. Anyone violating segregation laws could be arrested.

Inter-racial relationships were also illegal under apartheid rule. Trevor Noah, popular South African comedian and new host of the The Daily Show, often jokes about the fact that his birth was the result of an illicit coupling between his black Xhosa mother and his white Swiss-German father. He’s said that, when walking down the street with his mother in South Africa, she would drop his hand as they passed by police, making him feel “like a bag of weed.” Nonetheless, Noah’s mother was jailed and fined multiple times by the apartheid government for her relationship with a white man.
Between 1960 and 1983, 3.5 million non-white South Africans were forcibly removed from their homes and moved into segregated neighborhoods. This remains one of the largest mass removals in modern history. In 1970, non-white government leadership was banned.

Non-white South Africans were required to carry passbooks with them, an internal passport system aimed at segregating and constraining the population. The passbooks were widely used as tools for threatening non-whites.

Tyamzashe, whose parents were anti-apartheid activists, once saw an elderly black woman harassed and beaten by regime officers who claimed she had the wrong passbook for that area. Tyamzashe had witnessed countless incidents like this, but says there was something about the way the old woman passively accepted the abuse that profoundly affected him.

“A white officer put her over his knee and spanked her like a child in front of everyone, laughing the whole time,” said Tyamzashe. “That humiliation – that was my breaking point. I knew I had to fight no matter what the cost.”

Internal resistance to the apartheid regime grew as outside forces, including the U.S., placed pressure on the South African government through arms and trade embargos. Segregation of black and white schools meant that facilities for black students were vastly inferior, leaving those students with dismal educational prospects and fueling the outflow of youth joining the resistance. Widespread civil unrest evolved, becoming militarized. Around 21,000 people died as a result of political violence in South Africa during apartheid, according to the country’s Human Rights Commission.

The two main military factions that rallied to fight the apartheid regime were the Azanian People’s Liberation Army (APLA) and Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK). Each of these militant groups was affiliated with a different political party – APLA with the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) and MK with the African National Congress (ANC). Although these two groups had different political ideologies, they were united in the struggle against the apartheid regime, a struggle they eventually won.

In 1994, Nelson Mandela, a member of the ANC, was elected president of South Africa in the country’s first universal suffrage election. Mandela’s newly established democratic government immediately began laying the groundwork for the institution of a system of “integration” for ex-combatants who had fought in the struggle against apartheid.

Initially, the goal was to bring together former apartheid soldiers and fighters from the various resistance groups to create a new South African National Defense Force (SANDF). This was logistically difficult on several levels. First, the sheer number of soldiers involved was arguably too large for the new government to handle. The former regime brought in some 90,000 personnel, MK contributed 22,000 and ALPA brought in around 6,000 soldiers. In addition, there was the matter of conflicting philosophies and
lingering resentment – these soldiers had been on opposite sides of the battle over South Africa. This meant that many veterans weren’t integrated into the SANDF either by choice or exclusion.

To help mend the country, the Truth and Reconciliation Committee, a court-like restorative justice body, was assembled in 1996 to restore relations between blacks and whites. Those who had suffered human rights violations during apartheid were invited to give public testimony. The emphasis of the rulings of the committee was reconciliation rather than punishment. Combatants on both sides of the apartheid struggle were granted amnesty as long as their actions had been politically motivated. Not everyone agreed with the TRC’s rulings.

“There are former apartheid regime officers walking free in the streets,” said Tyamzashe. “How is that justice?”

Tyamzashe says he knew early on that the newly established ANC government was not the ideal he had fought for. Freedom fighters living in exile in nearby countries like Tanzania, Kenya and Mozambique were flown back into the country for government-organized integration. Like many of his fellow soldiers, Tyamzashe was nervous, but hopeful.

Tyamzashe, then 22, boarded a plane along with dozens of his comrades bound for their homeland. The newly established government paid for the trip. He watched out the window as Tanzania’s sun-scorched savannah melted into South Africa’s dusty grasslands. After six years of struggle, he was home.

As they stepped off the plane, four white South African Defense Force generals greeted them – some of the same generals Tyamzashe and his comrades had fought against. Tyamzashe doesn’t recall their names, but their words are seared into his memory. “They told us, ‘gentlemen, let’s forget about the past,’” said Tyamzashe, spitting the words bitterly. “I knew then that it was inevitable many of us would end up in prison or worse.”

Tyamzashe says he felt this dread because, like many of the returned freedom fighters, he had no friends, no family and no support system to speak of in this new South Africa. Many of the fighters had joined the struggle at a young age, trading pencils and school uniforms for pistols and military fatigues.

An only child, both of Tyamzashe’s parents died before he went into exile. Although he won’t provide details of the circumstances surrounding their death, Tyamzashe is convinced they were killed by the regime as a result of their anti-apartheid activism. In his words, he was “like a lost child – we were a nation of boys and girls.” Tyamzashe felt that by telling returned freedom fighters to forget about the past, the government was essentially washing its hands of anything that might remind people of the ugliness of apartheid – including veterans.
Some of South Africa’s freedom fighters weren’t coming from exile in neighboring countries, but rather being released from prisons across the country, including the infamous Robben Island facility, off the coast of Cape Town, where Mandela was held for 18 of his 27 years of confinement. South Africa’s current president, Jacob Zuma, served 10 years on the island.

One of those prisoners was Isaac Mthiunye, 73, who joined APLA in 1957 when he was 18 years old. After being captured by the regime during a guerilla warfare operation, he was sent to Robben Island. He lived behind its cold concrete walls for more than two decades.

When apartheid fell, prison officers wordlessly loaded Mthiunye and other prisoners onto a truck and drove them from the complex. The officers dumped him and the others on the side of an unfamiliar street in a nearby township. They were given no money, no supplies and no explanation. After decades spent confined to a tiny cell, Mthiunye was shocked and frightened.

The last time Mthiunye had walked the streets as a free man was 21. When he was dropped on the side of the road that day he was nearly 40. “I had never seen so many people for the past 25 years or so,” he said. “To see so many people just at that moment was so frightening – it was like I could request a policeman to take me back to prison.”

Mthiunye and the others were left to fend for themselves. There was never any follow-up from the government.

“We never received any form of counseling after our release,” said Mthiunye. “And I don’t think any form of counseling would help today – it is too late. The damage is done.”

The Special Pensions Act of 1996 was established by the South African government to provide a monthly pension – an average of 3,500 rand, or $291 US – to veterans of the apartheid struggle. However, there was a caveat: veterans had to be at least 30 years old in 1996 to qualify for the pension.

Government spokespeople said the age threshold was set because younger men and women should have been able to find gainful employment and pick up where they’d left off before joining the fight. The reality proved quite different. Many freedom fighters suffered lasting social and psychological effects of their trauma, which made picking up the pieces of their shattered lives challenging, if not impossible.

Tyamzashe says he’s still haunted by images of the past. He vividly recalls a time when he contracted malaria in Tanzania. The soldier in the next bed also had malaria, but the parasite had travelled to his brain, choking blood vessels and causing life-threatening swelling. At one point, Tyamzashe says, the soldier sat up abruptly, stared blankly into
the distance for a few minutes and then began screaming and moaning. No amount of painkillers administered by the hospital staff would silence him. He died soon after.

Later that same night, Tyamzashe’s camp received orders to move its base. Still too weak from malarial infection to walk, he was loaded onto the bed of a pickup truck. The body of the soldier who had died was stretched out right alongside him. As the truck jostled over miles of dust and dirt, Tyamzashe could feel the dead man’s skin growing cold against his own feverish flesh.

Although veterans protested the lack of government support for years, it wasn’t until 2009 that the Department of Military Veterans was created. Another two years of administrative foot shuffling would pass before the Military Veterans Act of 2011 was established. The act promised, among other things, monthly military pensions, subsidized housing, comprehensive health services, public transport, educational support, job placement, burial support, entrepreneurial support and counseling for South African veterans. But the rollout of those benefits has been agonizingly slow. New questions have also been raised about the fairness of benefit distribution under the ANC government.

APLA veterans, who are politically tied to the minority party PAC, have made accusations of political favoritism in benefit rollouts. “I’m from the wrong party,” says Tyamzashe.

The 2013/2014 annual report from the Department of Military Veterans itself seems to lend credence to those claims. The report shows MK veterans were more than twice as likely to be verified for veteran status and thus qualify for benefits when compared with APLA veterans.

Mbulelo Musi, director of communications at the Department of Military Veterans vehemently denies accusations of political favoritism. “Our mandate is to service to the best of our ability everyone equally,” said Musi. “I come from MK; my death is not less than a death of an APLA cadre.”

In March, the South African government released a statement about what they consider recent successes in terms of the delivery of military benefits. According to the report, Department Director Tsepe Motumi distributed 5,000 medical cards to veterans for free healthcare.

What the report fails to mention, however, is that if the department’s database is accurate and there are indeed around 16,000 veterans in South Africa, that means more than 10,000 veterans are still without those long-awaited cards. Motumi also said in the statement that the department helped 1,200 veterans secure jobs – little consolation for people like Tyamzashe who have been unemployed for years and received no help from the government.
Several times a week, or as often as he manages to scrounge up the 75 rand round-trip bus fare, Tyamzashe makes the 47-mile trek to Pretoria to seek employment and financial assistance at the Department of Military Veterans.

On a warm day in early July, Tyamzashe walks through the sliding automatic doors, exchanging friendly banter with the guards. They ask him in Zulu what he’s doing there, but they already know. Once inside, Tyamzashe walks from office to office, zigzagging across stark white hallways to talk to people from various departments. None seem surprised to see him. Tyamzashe doesn’t ask for anything directly, but reminds them with a smile and a firm handshake that he is still there, still unemployed, still a veteran in need.

Tyamzashe walks away empty-handed, just as he’s done dozens of times before.

The job hunt unsuccessful, Tyamzashe then visits fellow veteran Thabo Bodibe who lives in Atteridgeville, a squatter camp just outside Pretoria. Bodibe, 56, greets Tyamzashe wearing a faded and lightly stained yellow sweater, its edges fraying. He is short – only around 5 foot 3, but moves with such energy and sureness that he seems to occupy more than his share of space. His clothes, like the dilapidated metal shack he calls home, smell of cigarettes, beer and damp soil. Bodibe has lived in the squatter camp for nearly a decade after repeatedly trying and failing to hold down a steady job. The shack has no electricity and the only water source is a communal pump in the yard. He makes a few rand selling the avocados and sugar cane that grow in his yard.

Tyamzashe and Bodibe stand for a long time under the trees near Bodibe’s shack, speaking quietly in Xhosa. It isn’t until the sun begins to set, bathing the trees and grass around them in warm, golden light that Bodibe realizes he hasn’t fed his guests. “Do you like avocados?” he asks, disappearing around the corner of the shack before Tyamzashe can respond. Bodibe reemerges a few minutes later holding half a dozen large avocados, their skin a glossy dark green. He juggles the fruit playfully, laughing and flashing a smile that is warm despite the cigarette-yellowed teeth and wide gaps. With his beanie hat slightly askew, he looks almost clownish.

Bodibe hands over the avocados then dashes off again, this time uprooting a nearby sugar cane. He breaks the massive root with his bare hands and gnaws on the sweet, fleshy inside. He then uses his teeth to break off a large section for his friend. “Thabo is a good man,” says Tyamzashe, biting into the sugar cane.

With their feast of avocado and sugar cane, the veterans continue talking. Tyamzashe addresses Bodibe using the term “brativo,” a word reserved for a respected elder and military leader.

Bodibe wasn’t always homeless and unemployed. He discovered he had a knack for chemistry when he was a high school student. Much to his teachers’ alarm, he was particularly adept at “incendiaries.” Because of his skills, he was recruited by APLA when he was 18-years-old. He worked his way up the ranks quickly, becoming an expert
bomb-maker for the resistance, making dozens of Malotov cocktails and other explosives used to fight the apartheid regime. Bodibe spent nearly two decades living in exile in Tanzania training APLA recruits.

During that time, apartheid officers continually harassed Thabo’s mother, Johanna Bodibe, who remained in South Africa. Johanna once received a note from Thabo by mail. The letter didn’t contain any vital information and there was no return address. But it was enough for regime officers to burst into Johanna’s home, hold her at gunpoint, and demand that she divulge the location of Thabo’s training camp.

“They were pointing their guns at me and saying ‘praat praat praat’ – talk talk talk,” said Johanna. But there was nothing for her to reveal. When she saw the officers coming she’d chewed and swallowed the letter whole.

Although APLA veterans claim there were no formal ranks within their military group, Bodibe was highly respected as a leader.

Sitting in the sun’s fading glow, Bodibe glances behind him at the rusted metal walls of his shack. “This is how I’m living after fighting for this liberation,” he says.

This cycle of oppression, struggle, liberation and subsequent oppression by the new leadership has run its course in many African countries.

Between 1952 and 1960, a bloody conflict called the Mau Mau Uprising or Mau Mau Revolt enveloped Kenya. The Mau Mau, or Kenya Land and Freedom Army (KLFA), was composed of several different tribal groups but was heavily dominated by members of the Kikuyu tribe – Kenya’s largest ethnic group.

Following the struggle against British colonialism that cost the lives of an estimated 12,000 Mau Mau, the British Governor-General of Kenya offered amnesty to Mau Mau fighters. In 1956, a program of land reform specifically granted the Kikuyu increased land holdings.

The land reform however, failed to extend the same benefits to other ethnic groups who had played a part in the Mau Mau Uprising. This left lingering resentment and tension amongst Kenya’s tribes, especially since, in terms of acreage lost, the Maasai and Nandi tribes suffered the most under British colonial rule.

In the same way, APLA veterans in South Africa feel preferential treatment has been given to fighters from the ANC.

“I’ve been an assistant director for 13 years,” said Nontsikelelo Nqikashe, a military human resource assistant director and APLA veteran. “Because in anything we do where the defense force is concerned, your ex-force has to be there – and with that your name will be taken out.”
Although Nqikashe acknowledges she is one of the lucky few to have a steady income, she says that her association with APLA ensures she will never advance in her career. Nqikashe doesn’t regret joining the struggle as an APLA combatant, but says she can’t help but question why there’s been no tangible reward for her sacrifice.

“Was it really worth it? Did I have to go through all that?” Nqikashe asks.

The unification of different groups to fight a common enemy – such as the apartheid regime – does not guarantee cohesion will last after the conflict is resolved. In fact, that’s rarely the case, according to Modiegi Merafe, community facilitator at the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation in Johannesburg.

“After the common enemy is defeated, priorities change,” said Merafe. “Then you have different groups with different ideologies and they all want to forward their beliefs.” The transition of power is also complicated by the fact that many of these former fighters assuming leadership positions may also experience lingering physical and psychological effects of battle.

Merafe is himself an APLA veteran and says that he agrees that the ANC government marginalizes his former comrades. Many veterans approach his organization complaining of untreated PTSD, inability to hold down a job, financial woes – shattered lives and shattered psyches.

“Mandela said ‘free at last,’” said Tyamzashe. “So who’s free?”

Not far from Thabo’s shack in Atteridgeville, Tyamzashe and a handful of other veterans sit and drink beer in a friend’s front yard. Some of the men sit on plastic chairs, others on overturned buckets and crates while the rest recline on the grass. It’s not a weekly occurrence, or even monthly. It happens organically, whenever a few of them happen to be in the same neighborhood and someone has a few rand to spare for beer. They call this informal gathering “Camp 32.”

When there’s a lull in the conversation, Solomon Seabi, an APLA veteran and former spy for the SANDF, pulls a small book out of his bag. The book is clearly old, the hard cover worn and faded from years of handling, its pages beyond yellowed – a sickly brown. Seabi tells the group that it’s a grade-school history book printed in 1986, during apartheid. It was the last textbook he received before dropping out of school to join APLA. The first few chapters in the book describe how European colonists arrived in South Africa to find “primitive” African tribal cultures living in “a wild and desolate country.” There is a large crimson stamp from the Department of Education and Training.

“You see that word?” asks Seabi, pointing to the seal. “Training – why did they use that word? You can only train an animal.”
The cover of the history book indicates it is intended for Standard 5 – the equivalent of middle school in the U.S. Most of the men assembled dropped out of school around that point in their education to join the fight against apartheid. While their classmates back in South Africa were reading about the colonization of the country by white settlers, Tyamzashe, Bodibe, Seabi and others were learning to shoot rifles and make petrol bombs. Despite its clear bias, or perhaps because of it, Seabi has kept his last school textbook all these years.

Tyamzashe picks up the textbook, shaking his head. He narrows his eyes at it, like he’s staring down the barrel of a gun. “Until the lions have their own historians, the story of the hunt will always glorify the hunter,” says Tyamzashe, quoting an African proverb.

In an instant, and with no obvious impetus, the atmosphere at “Camp 32” turns hostile. Seabi stands to collect his book, but instead winds up nose-to-nose with another veteran, yelling in Xhosa. The man, empty beer bottle clenched in one hand, uses the other hand to grab Seabi by the shirt collar. More veterans stand in response. Meanwhile, Seabi’s book lies in the grass, forgotten.

The argument ends as quickly as it began. The instigator is escorted to the steps leading to a nearby house and told to cool his heels. Seabi and the other veterans are back to lounging in a semi-circle, joking and smoking. Someone offers to go get more beer.

The conversation turns to current events and growing discontent with the ANC-led government. They laugh darkly about the recent media fiasco that ensued after it was revealed that South Africa’s President Zuma had spent more than 3.9 million rand – around $325,000 US – on an indoor pool at his sprawling private residence. Zuma defended the splurge by saying the structure is a “fire pool” required for safety reasons. Meanwhile, around 54 percent of South Africa’s population lives below the poverty line. Tyamzashe is among them.

“I still don’t have a house, I don’t earn a salary,” says Tyamzashe. “I survive. I just survive.”

As the light fades, the men stand to say their goodbyes. It’s winter in South Africa and the sun sets surprisingly quickly. Soon, it’s difficult to make out the men’s faces, only the dusky outlines of their heads and shoulders – like paper targets.

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