

# 4 THE CLASS OF '44

The Second World War — a period of accelerated industrialization and urbanization in South Africa — gave rise to a new generation of militant political leaders. These impatient young Africans were distanced from their rural roots, for they had grown up in the new urban ghettos or, at least, gone to school in town. Though most were not workers themselves, the popular struggles of the emergent industrialized working class had made them respect that motor force for change. The young militants sought the unity of all Africans — not only across ethnic lines, but across class lines, too. This generation was known as 'The Class of '44', for the year that they founded the ANC Youth League. The first assertion of this broad African nationalism also repudiated the liberalism of their predecessors — or, as it was known then, 'Trusteeship'.

To mislead the world and make it believe that the Whiteman in South Africa is helping the African on the road to civilized life, the Whiteman has arrogated to himself the title and role of Trustee for the African people. The effects of Trusteeship alone have made the African realize that Trusteeship has meant, as it still means, the consolidation by the Whiteman of his position at the expense of the African people, so that by the time national awakening opens the eyes of the African people to the bluff they live under, White domination should be secure and unassailable...

...These conditions have made the African lose all faith in all talk of Trusteeship. He now elects to determine his future by his own efforts. He has realized that to trust to the mere good grace of the Whiteman will not free him, as no nation can free an oppressed group other than that group itself. Self-determination is the philosophy of life which will save him from the disaster he clearly sees on his way, disasters to which Discrimination, Segregation, Pass Laws and Trusteeship are all ruthlessly and inevitably driving him...

...The formation of the African National Congress Youth League is an answer and assurance to the critics of the national movement that African Youth will not allow the struggles and sacrifices of their fathers to have been in vain... The Congress Youth League must be the brains-trust and power-station of the spirit of African nationalism, the spirit of African self-determination, the spirit that is so discernible in the thinking of our Youth.

ANC YOUTH LEAGUE MANIFESTO, 1944



OLIVER TAMBO AND NELSON MANDELA WERE BOTH FOUNDER MEMBERS AND LEADERS OF THE ANC YOUTH LEAGUE. TAMBO WENT ON TO BECOME ANC SECRETARY-GENERAL, THEN ANC PRESIDENT AFTER HE LEFT SOUTH AFRICA IN 1960, WHILE MANDELA'S LEADERSHIP OF THE ANC CULMINATED IN HIS IMPRISONMENT UNDER A LIFE SENTENCE IN 1964. THEY ARE SHOWN HERE TOGETHER AT A CONFERENCE IN ADDIS ABABA IN 1962.

(PHOTOGRAPHER: UNKNOWN. SOURCE: UWC - ROBBER ISLAND MUSEUM MAYIBUYE ARCHIVES)

When those people came into the - into the ANC there was transformation insofar as, you know, the ideology is concerned and so on - there was quite a big transformation - because in the past, you know, the - the elderly people believed in demonstrations, you know, reconciliation with the powers that be and so on - they weren't very much interested in action - you know, action against the government and so on.



FRONT PAGE OF THE *GUARDIAN*, 9 MARCH 1950, A PROGRESSIVE WEEKLY NEWSPAPER FOUNDED IN 1936 WHICH PLAYED AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN MOBILIZING ANTI-FASCIST OPINION AND SUPPORT FOR THE ANC. BANNED IN 1952, IT REAPPEARED AS THE *CLARION*, THE *ADVANCE*, *NEW AGE* AND *SPARK*, BEFORE THE BANNING OF ITS STAFF LED TO ITS DEMISE IN 1963. (SOURCE: UWC - ROBBEN ISLAND MUSEUM MAYIBUYE ARCHIVES)

“I found that at the time I first joined, the ANC was an organization of teachers, intellectuals, clergymen — all the elite of African society. Young people were not very much interested in the ANC. They felt it was an organization of elderly people. As a result, the ANC never became progressive until it was joined by younger people: the Tambos, Mandelas and so on. Those were members of the Youth League of the ANC. It was when those young people came into the ANC that there was transformation in so far as the ideology was concerned, because in the past the elderly people believed in demonstrations, reconciliation with the powers that be and so on. They weren't very much interested in action against the government.

*Yet it seems that while you supported the Youth League's militancy, you were also critical of their definition of the enemy.*

Their outlook was that our fight is against the white people. 'We are nationalist here, and these white people took away our land' — that was the type of approach. Then I would get up and say, 'You can't take the white man and throw him into the sea. He was born in South Africa and we will have to stay with them here.' There was too much focus on the white people: 'White people are oppressing us, they have taken our land,' and so on and so forth.

I felt that it was not really the question of white people that was the point. The point was exploitation of people, irrespective of whether they are white or black. I came to understand that what we are fighting against is not a white man — we are fighting against exploitation of the working people.

My concept of non-racialism is quite different from what many people think about it being an issue between white and black. My approach is that this whole thing means a question of profits. It is the economic motive of it which one should take into account. People talk about racism, but I'm not so much bothered about it — I'm bothered about the motive of it.

Look, these were not my enemies — they were my friends. We used to sit together, have a drink and discuss these things, you know. They were very, very hostile against the CP. Their cardinal point was that communism is a foreign ideology and that we shouldn't follow it because it's not applicable to South Africa. It's the question of colour bar in South Africa, therefore we should just restrict ourselves to the question of segregation and apartheid and things of that kind in our struggle.”

And what did they teach you about parachutes, just how to use the parachutes?

No, they taught the parachute when it comes you have to shoot it when it's this angle (?) - they just show you, not actually (Laugh) teach you - you must shoot the parachute before it lands - you shoot here - they just tell you that.

So why weren't they teaching you to shoot a gun?

You - you see, in 1940 I was very much close to reading the newspaper about the wars and so on - Dr. Malan was saying that whatever differences they have with the United Party they should - they must come together in the question of arming the African people, because the Afrikaners they didn't want to go to fight - they - most of them they said they had German blood - they can't go and fight their own blood - and people like Vorster they were detained, and many of this Cabinet they were detained for refusing, and they organised what they called Ossewabrandwag, which is a military wing - it was a military wing - and actually they come together when it comes to our question of not arming us in South Africa.

African militancy was further spurred by the raising and dashing of expectations for progressive change in South Africa during and after the Second World War.

“ In 1941 I joined the army. We handled a gun, but never to shoot. We were only carrying assegais [spears]. We didn't like it. We were demobilized in 1945. I was given a khaki suit, a blanket and a lot of certificates and some medals and nothing else but five pounds pocket money,<sup>2</sup> and promised that we'll get something when we're at home: we won't carry passes, and we'll be given houses which we are not going to rent for so much. But all those things never happened.

Then I started to say, 'Now I'm going to join the ANC and fight against this government which has robbed me and told me a lot of lies.' At that time, too, the ANC was very small, it was an organization of rich people and intellectuals — although in 1944 it changed. That's when they formed the ANC Youth League and it went militant, but that time I was in the army myself. Then I had army friends who were ANC members, but I was not much interested because I was interested in sports. But I usually went to public meetings.

In Sophiatown<sup>3</sup> the youth was very strong during that time of '45, '46, and then I started to see what the ANC is because of the mine strike and other strikes that were going on, public meetings and so on. So in 1950, when the shooting went on in the strike of May Day, then I joined the ANC. I got fed up and I said, 'But how can they just shoot a person who's unarmed? I'm going to join the ANC and we are going to beat the whites.' I was committed from that time.

#### *So were you anti-white then?*

When I was in the ANC, then I started to see whites, then I definitely accepted them. They were addressing meetings and so on. I saw them myself, personally, and other people explained to me our struggle, that we are not a racist group, we are fighting apartheid, we can't have another apartheid — although at first I said no, because I thought that we are fighting the white people, you see. But now I accept it.

When I saw all these whites now in the struggle, then I started to see that it's a correct thing, we must unite ourselves. Because even the government is using the blacks to come and arrest us, to come and get information from us, so why should we say the whites should not be with us? So that's how I accepted the whites, although there were groups, like what we call 'Africanise, which were advocating that we should have nothing to do with other racial groups.

#### *Why didn't you support the Africanists?*

Because I felt their line was wrong — it supports apartheid. It's not a matter of removing a white person and replacing him with a black. I thought a non-racial society, where everybody lives together and enjoys the wealth of the country, is better because it ends hatred among people.

The Africanists within the ANC were rejecting any non-African racial group to be associated with the ANC. They were very much anticommunist. I'm not a communist but I don't hate communists. I think that at present we are fighting the same enemy against racialism and fascism, and I think we can be allies with the communists because they are prepared to fight. The idea is to push the fascists out with all forces that are interested.

I worked with J. B. Marks,<sup>4</sup> I worked with Moses Kotane, I've worked with many, many other communist leaders. But Kotane always said, when he addressed the ANC cadres, Those who think they are communist here in the ANC, they should not discuss their communist politics with the ANC — they must discuss ANC politics, or else they must get out from the ANC.”

editors that we don't agree with the policy, but they took pains - this is a topic which is handled so many times during the course of the year that gradually you get to understand the reasoning behind it, that first and foremost whites in South Africa came over three hundred years ago - they (who) (433) have nowhere to go.

Secondly, and this is the most important thing about - this is the most important - this is the most stressed point in the A.N.C. - that whites are first and foremost human beings like ourselves, except that they have got the wrong ideology in their heads, and with time they will change, and we will stay with them as brothers and sisters as our fellow human beings, and this is stressed in the A.N.C. even up till today - the humanity of the whites is completely recognised.

It takes time, but with development - political development - you come round to accept this, and in turn you begin to preach it to the lower and up-coming youngsters that are in the movement.

With its adoption of the militant 'Programme of Action' in 1949 and the election of Youth Leaguers to the national executive, the bold new ANC gained confidence. Resistance to cooperation with non-Africans lessened, as did its anti-communism.

“ We did query the policy of non-racialism. We were young and we said, 'Why can't we fight and drive the whites away?' But our elders in the organization were very patient people. They told us the history of the ANC and took pains to explain why the ANC must be non-racial. It was something which was not very easy to accept at the beginning, because of immaturity, because of youthfulness.

We would tell our seniors that we don't agree with the policy, but this was a topic which was handled so many times that gradually you got to understand the reasoning behind it: that first and foremost, whites in South Africa came over three hundred years ago and they now have nowhere to go. Secondly — and this is the stressed point in the ANC — whites are human beings like ourselves, except that they have got the wrong ideology in their heads. And with time they will change and we will stay with them as brothers and sisters, as our fellow human beings.

***As a practising Catholic, how do you regard the ANC's working relationship with the Communist Party?***

I have worked with communists and I have never had any problems with them. I've worked under Govan Mbeki<sup>5</sup> and I admire him. He never tried to interfere with the fact that I'm a religious man. He always respected that between such and such an hour I would be in church. Communists are in the ANC as members of the ANC, not as members of the South African Communist Party.

No one is allowed to criticize or to be vindictive to me simply because I'm a Christian, no one's allowed to be vindictive to another simply because he has discovered that the other one is a member of the Communist Party. We are all members of the ANC. Just as you will not be allowed to be vindictive to another person simply on tribal grounds, so that has been the position between me and the communists in the ANC. Together we've been in the thick of things. They've never reneged, they've never sold us out.”

**STANLEY MABIZELA**, who joined the ANC's 'Masupatsela' (Young Pioneers), as a child in the 1940s, then entered the ANC Youth League, and became a fully-fledged member of the Eastern Cape regional ANC in 1952

#### NOTES:

<sup>1</sup>'Whiteman' as a single word, the capitalization of 'Trustee' and Segregation', etc. are in keeping with the usage of that time. In later eras, 'Black' and 'White' were capitalized with less consistency, thus in subsequent chapters such words are not capitalized, in keeping with the most common usage in South Africa today.

<sup>2</sup>The South African monetary system was based on pounds, shillings and pence until 1961, when the decimal system of rands and cents was adopted.

<sup>3</sup>A black freehold area of Johannesburg where the mingling of races and classes inspired a vibrant non-racial culture. The government began demolishing it in 1955 and by 1960, despite resistance organized by the ANC, Sophiatown's residents had been forcibly removed to racially segregated areas. Most Africans were dumped in the South Western Townships, known as 'Soweto' (where they were further segregated according to specific ethnic background, e.g. Zulus to the Meadowlands section, Sothos to Diepkloof), while coloureds, Indians, whites and even Chinese were each relocated in separate living areas.

<sup>4</sup>A trade unionist who led the 1946 mine strike, and an ANC and CP member, Marks was classified coloured but chose to align himself with the black workers.

<sup>5</sup>An ANC and CP leader sentenced to life imprisonment in 1964 for his activities in the ANC's armed wing, Mbeki was released by the government in response to domestic and international pressure in late 1987.