RURAL REVOLT IN SOUTH AFRICA: 1937-1951*

by

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> The peasant rebellions of the twentieth century are no longer simple responses to local problems, if indeed they ever were. They are but the parochial reactions to major social dislocations, set in motion by overwhelming societal change.
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> Eric R. Wolf: On Peasant Rebellions

The three hundred year struggle of the African people to regain their land has altered appreciably over the years. Bitter wars were fought through the nineteenth century to prevent annexation and displacement, and even after the last battles were fought there were continued revolts against land dispossession or against regulations imposed upon the rural population.

In the twentieth century, the South African peasant (1) struggle did not altogether conform to the above quoted extract from Eric Wolf's well known essay. The revolts were never "simple responses to local problems" but reactions against labour controls, and against nationwide legislation and proclamations. On the other hand, they were "reactions to major social dislocations ...",and it is the major dislocations introduced by the Native Land and Trust Act of 1936 that will concern us below.

To discuss the struggles in the Reserves without reference to events in the rest of the country, however, would be artificial. Campaigns in the large towns not only had echoes in the rural areas, but were at times superseded by the struggles in one or other Reserve. This was a natural consequence of the inter-connection of land and labour issues and the continuous movement, at least of menfolk, from country to town and back. More than this, the reaction was so often against legislation which

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aimed to tighten the control on labour, and on its movement, that the same problem appeared at both ends of the labour market - in the Reserves and in the towns.

There were, furthermore, landschaft organizations in at least the large towns, which provided a link for men from a particular Reserve (or region) between town and "home". There are records of some of their activities, at least in secondary sources. The Zoutpansberg Cultural Association in Johannesburg and its associated Zoutpansberg Balemi [Ploughmen] Association in the Northern Transvaal played a prominent part in the 1941-44 revolt. The Witzieshoek Vigilance Association in Johannesburg and in Harrismith (the closest town to the area) was in close contact with the Leihlo la Sechaba (Guardian of the Nation) in the Reserve, and consultations took place between these organizations throughout the crisis situation of 1940-1951. Much less is known of other similar organizations, although there is sufficient evidence to show that they were active and acted as urban "guardians" of migratory workers. They obviously kept close contact with "home-town" developments, and in at least one later event (the Bafurutse revolt of 1957) the Association in Johannesburg and Pretoria dispatched a bus load of men into the area to intervene in the local dispute. (2) But there has been no systematic investigation of these associations, and we still know far too little about their activities.

The Legislation of 1936

Two laws were passed by Parliament in 1936 - the Natives Land and Trust Act and the Representation of Natives Act. This legislation had been discussed for over a decade, and the first draft, published in 1926, was directed against African farm squatters. Under the proposed legislation of 1926, squatters were to be converted into full-time servants for a minimum of 90-180 days every calendar year. The legislation was delayed, but in 1929 a draft Native Service Control Registration Bill was introduced by the Minister of Justice. Once again, the aim was to force squatters to work for a minimum of three months per year. A heavy penalty was to be imposed on any male between 18 and 60 years of age who did not render such service.

When the Bills were finally passed, the fourth (and last) chapter of the Natives Land and Trust Act laid down conditions for controlling labour-tenants and for ending squatting. The labour-tenants were to be made to work for 180 days (in effect nearly seven calendar months) in any district, after consultations between the farmers and the Minister. Squatters were to be registered and then licensed, the licensing fees increasing yearly until all squatting was ended within a 30-year period.

A series of proclamations in December 1937 gave notice that chapter 4 of the Act would be applied to the Lydenburg district. Labour-tenants would thenceforth be required to work for 180 days. The reaction of the African population was immediate. There were large-scale demonstrations in and around Lydenburg, followed by demands for trek-passes (i.e. permits to leave the area). Many left, and Lydenberg farmers demanded that the proclamation be extended to the rest of the Province in order to prevent other farmers absorbing the displaced population.

The reaction of the labour tenants, at the time, made the provision unworkable. The Act required that alternative accommodation be available on the Trust Lands. And the extension of the proclamation to the rest of the Transvaal would only have exacerbated the situation. The proclamation was allowed to lapse and was later withdrawn. (3) It was more than a decade before squatters were forcibly removed and dumped in open camps inside the Reserves. But by that time large-scale capitalist farming had made many labour-tenants "redundant", and had made squatters an "encumbrance".

The attempts to force squatters off the land and to convert labour-tenants into farm workers were part of the overall plan to force Africans off the land and into the labour market. In 1926, the government aimed to direct the labour force

primarily into service on the farms. By 1936 the economy of the country was changed and there was increasing demand for labour in commerce and industry. As a result a third bill was added to the 1936 legislation in the shape of the Native Laws Amendment Act, 1937. This was aimed at regulating labour and controlling movement in the towns.

The three "Hertzog Bills" were immediately condemned by African politicians, and the proposed disenfranchisement of the 16,000 Cape African voters was the rallying point around which a new organization, the All-African Convention, was summoned in 1935 and again in 1936. (4)

Without doubting the importance of protecting and of extending the existing vote, it seems, in retrospect, that the existing African leadership either misunderstood the new Land legislation or they were deceived. Whatever the reason, accounts of the deliberations of the AAC in those days do not mention any discussion on the land. A few of the comments made by African leaders at the time indicate a serious lack of understanding of the plight the peasant would face when the legislation was put into effect. D. D. T. Jabavu, first president of the Convention and its nominal head for a decade, said:

> The Native Trust & Land Bill is a step in the right direction ... That is the bright side of the proposal. (5)

The Rev. J. L. Dube, an early leader of the ANC, was reported as attacking the removal of the vote, but as saying on the land question:

> ... they should be glad because one thing every Native wanted was much more than the vote - LAND! But land had been promised in the past; but they had never got it! How do we know that the 14 million acres will be given to us? (6)

Indeed, Dube was correct. The 14 million acres still have not been completely "given". But if they had been "given", apparently Dube would have been "glad". At least moderately "glad". He could not have realized that all land subsequently "given" to the Reserves was already fully settled by Africans - in fact over-populated!

The same journal also quotes the Rev. A. S. Mtimkulu as saying much the same:

> The locations are overcrowded. The natives are greatly pleased with the provision of more land. (7)

Levi K. E. Sitebe is even more enthusiastic, and writes: "the principle of the bill is to encourage Natives to build themselves agriculturally ..." (8), and, presumably, Champion, erstwhile leader of the ICU in Natal, agreed. The above comments, printed in his journal, were culled from newspapers, and reports of meetings - and the editor obviously concurred.

Only a detailed survey would unravel the factors that led these men to speak this way. Some, no doubt, sought personal gain; others were moved to speak out disinterestedly. But motives were of little interest to the peasants. These leaders stayed away from the peasants, and were nowhere in evidence when the provisions of the Land Act were applied and the peasants rose in revolt.

The Native Trust in action in the Reserves

The Africans in the Reserves in 1936 do not seem to have shown much interest in the vote, and there are no reports during the next decade that this was a live issue in the rural areas. They were completely absorbed in the need to raise food under the

most difficult conditions - and the implementation of the 1936 Act did not make life any easier.

In the Northern Transvaal the conditions of the farms did not allow for easy farming. W. M. McMillan describes the situation in 1930 as follows:

> The Transvaal, on the whole, knows chiefly the scattered 'location' type of Reserve. Here, however, there are also two remote and inaccessible blocks of Native land - one known as Secoecoeniland, in the bush-veld between the Pretoria-Pietersburg line and the railway through Lydenberg, the other in the Sibasa country, the remote and in parts malaria-stricken area towards the Limpopo and the Portuguese border in the North-East. Elsewhere the Reserves, fertile in parts, but not so healthy ... are too much scattered among European farms, without roads, bridges, and railways, to be anything much more than the home residences of farm and other labourers. (9)

The land was also over-populated, the terrain was hilly, and through the early thirties was dessicated after prolonged droughts. Such lands as were purchased by the Native Trust in this area in order to "consolidate" the Reserves were already densely populated. The land itself proved to be rocky and infertile and generally land which whites did not want. (10)

Conditions were already bad, and those who were not forced to leave the land and seek work elsewhere eked out a bare living. But Proclamation 31 of 1939 led to a rapid deterioration. This proclamation was gazetted under a provision of the 1936 Land Act which stipulated that any district could be declared a "betterment area" after the Africans had been consulted. In such areas a limit could be placed on stock holdings and the extent of land any individual would be allowed to plough. This area was initially restricted in many Reserves to 5 morgen (17 acres), and in many instances was considerably smaller.

In Witzieshoek, the land was restricted to 3 morgen per man, and in Zoutpansberg the area was more usually 2 morgen. Yet, previously, the same men might have ploughed 20 to 30 morgen in the Northern Transvaal (11), and it was estimated that the new small strips could not possibly yield half the required mealie (maize) crop under optimum conditions (given the farming methods available at the time).

Nor were these lands allocated on the basis of previous holdings. The division in Witzieshoek, for example, was decided by chiefs, indunas or members of the Board of Management: those favoured friends or compliant followers who received the best (and largest) plots; others were removed from their land and given smaller plots on poor soil. (12)

Alpheus Maliba, unsung hero of rural resistance in the Northern Transvaal, and a man of remarkable bravery, leader of the Zoutpansberg Cultural Association in Johannesburg, and of the associated Zoutpansberg Balemi Association in the Reserves, described the situation in the Northern Transvaal in an interview. Prior to 1936, there had been no regulation limiting the area an individual could plough. After the Land Act new tribes were moved into the Reserves, and each family was initially allotted 4-5 morgen. In 1940, however, the families were all uprooted and moved on to farms purchased by the Native Trust from white farmers. This land was hilly and stony and often unsuitable for cultivation; in many cases ploughs could not be used. None the less, taxpayers were given 2 morgen of land, and non-taxpayers (i.e. old men, widows, and unmarried women) 1½ morgen each. In 1941 the land was once again redivided: taxpayers got 1½ morgen but non-taxpayers received no land at all. (13) This, said Maliba, was where the trouble began. The peasants, starving, harassed, and pushed off their land, had until now shown a remarkable patience. Perhaps they were too patient

and long suffering. A new element was added in the new Trust Lands. Many of the Native Commissioners and agricultural officers were themselves dispossessed farmers, and they saw these appointments as golden means of recouping their lost wealth. They were open to bribery when land was allocated, and they resorted to force in handling "hostile elements". Basner is reported as saying in the Senate that the "Northern Transvaal was a seething cauldron of discontent" owing to the actions of Emmett, a Native Commissioner in the Pietersberg area. (14)

Accounts of this area, stretching back over the decades, show that the population faced disaster after disaster. The region suffered periodic drought or disease. Yet no government relief ever came. Other disasters followed inevitably on new government regulations, and the population, worn out in the battle to feed themselves, were moved to revolt when new regulations destroyed any hope of regaining even the tenuous equilibrium they hoped to achieve.

In 1937 the Transvaal newspapers carried news of 40,000 writs served in the Pietersburg district for non-payment of poll tax. Given an official population in the town and country districts of 194,834, the number of poll tax payers must have been just about that number! These came after an extended period of agricultural disasters. An article in Spark in 1937 describes the situation (15): After extended droughts in 1932-33, the Africans in the area had need of urgent assistance, but all pleas for the release of maize at subsidized export prices were rejected by the government. Few could afford to buy this staple at inflationary local prices - and still fewer could find the cash for the annual tax. The drought was followed by the death of many of the weakened cattle who ate fodder contaminated with anti-locust poison. And these depleted herds faced culling under the betterment scheme! The population was destitute, and in many cases were four years in arrears with tax payment. It was estimated that paying these taxes in 1937 together with the inevitable court fine would be equivalent to one year's pay! The Spark article concluded that the issuing of writs and the attachment of property could have only one effect. More men would be driven off the land onto the labour market.

The enforcement of regulations under the betterment scheme made it impossible for many of the peasants to continue working the land. Ploughs, where these existed, had to be abandoned on very stony plots, or on strips where it was forbidden to uproot bushes or trees. There were new tight controls on tax payments after the 1937 writs, and late payment led to a fine of 2s.6d. At that time this was equivalent to half a month's wages for local farm labourers.

There was bound to be an explosion, and it seems to have occurred first in the Louis Trichardt district. In this region, as elsewhere, the land allocation had been restricted to 2 morgen, and the local population, driven beyond endurance, pulled out the survey pins. For this some 60-80 were arrested and taken to Louis Trichardt to be tried. As in Lydenburg, the reaction was immediate. It is estimated that some 6-10,000 Africans marched on the courts and that only the withdrawal of the charge stopped bloodshed. The Secretary of Native Affairs quashed the charges and the peasants went home.

The incident has a sinister aspect that needs comment. There was no report of the matter in the South African press, and nobody outside the district was aware of the event.

Basner, called into the Pietersburg district at the end of 1941 to defend 80 men accused of ploughing more than the regulation 5 morgen, was informed about the march for the first time. He, in turn, was able to secure some publicity only after he entered the Senate and raised the matter at a debate in 1943. (16) Throughout the war years local disturbances remained unreported to an even greater extent than usual. African complaints were not "newsworthy", and under war conditions an additional self-censorship prevented such events being reported or printed. Many other disturbances, of which only stray and circumstantial clues are available, were not reported. None

the less, there may prove to be many stories behind the men who were banished or arrested at the time (17) which will give us new insight into the nature of the struggles in the 1940s.

From the time of the march through to the end of 1944, the Northern Transvaal was in a state of near rebellion. It was a period of protest, and of defiance; of meetings and of action. There was activity in the Reserves, action in the rural towns, and an active group in Johannesburg that supported and helped organize the protest movement. It was also a period of intense repression. The police were rushed into the area and men were arrested, detained and charged. There are also indications of even greater violence, but only as hearsay or as rumour. According to the Guardian of 16.12.43:

> It is rumoured that bombers at Pietersburg Aerodrome were told to stand by in case of trouble.
>
> One hundred Africans were arrested.

As late as March 1945, James Z. Ndatyulwa, chief organizer of the African Democratic Party (ADP), and president of the Transvaal Advisory Boards Association, was quoted as referring to a series of repressive measures in the Transvaal. He linked these with:

> the disturbances at Pietersburg where the police, military and aeroplanes were used to intimidate people ...

Ndatyulwa was warned by the magistrate of Klerksdorp that he would be interned if he did not stop his revolutionary and inciting attitude. (18) Finally, Basner, who was closely associated with the ADP, maintains that:

> I was involved with scores of struggles on Trust farms and tribal locations about the operation of the Native Trust & Land Act, 1936. Cattle calling, squatters, ploughing allotments, chiefly powers versus trust officials were the main issues. Most of the struggles were in the Northern Transvaal, and some were even fiercer and crueller than Witzieshoek, but unreported because only Africans and no police were killed. I received constant reports of bombed villages and had no reason to doubt the reports. (19)

The Struggle Intensifies

The progress of the struggle in the Transvaal depended on the involvement of men and women in the Reserve areas and in Johannesburg.

The peasant population was largely united. The clashes between chiefs and their people - which was to come to the fore in other areas - are not obvious from the available evidence. Vella Pillay, at that time a member of the CPSA, was asked to drive Maliba through the Pietersburg area. In a recent interview he stated that Maliba's strength lay in his ability to speak in the local idiom, and also in his accessibility to the chiefs. On entering a reserve he first visited the chief, and often this ended with the slaughtering of an ox. Thereafter, he would meet the peasants, and there was never any hint of a conflict of interests between the chiefs or indunas (headmen) and their people. (20)

The unity of the population, and the determination to oppose the new regulations is illustrated in one of the news items of the time. On 20th November 1941, the Guardian reported Paramount Chief Mpefa as saying at Louis Trichardt:

> Arrest me! - but let my people go!
> What they are doing is right. I am prepared
> to suffer for them.

The Africans were not prepared to accept the new land divisions and responded readily to Maliba's message. 2,000 peasants met on 20th October 1941 near Piesanghoek and declared, after a meeting addressed by him:

> We, people of the Northern Transvaal, have come together to save ourselves from starvation. We now solemnly decide that each and everyone of us will plough the land which we were accustomed to plough in past years. We will remove the sticks which the Government has set up, and plough our own land. Any person who breaks this resolution is an enemy of the people.
>
> We will send a copy of this resolution to the Native Commissioner and to the Minister for Native Affairs in Pretoria. (21)

This was not an idle threat. Twenty peasants subsequently ploughed their original land (as distinct from the land that had been allocated to them in the redivision). For Maliba it meant inevitable arrest, and for the years to come he seemed to leave one prison only in order to face fresh restrictions, until eventually forced to leave the area or face deportation in June 1944.

Alpheus Maliba never stopped in any one district for long. There was far too much to be done, and he was conscious of the need to weld the people together and to extend and widen the struggle. In Louis Trichardt he formed a General Workers Union which was associated with the Balemi Association. Inevitably, there was a strike (October 1943) at Messina and a clash in which troops were called in. They held the workers at gun point and confronted them with the choice of returning to work or being arrested. Seventy-five were imprisoned but the remainder either returned to work or left the town. Their demand had been for an extra 6d. (3p.) per day, and they had rejected the offer of 2d. made by the Native Commissioner. (22) Eighty men were charged and received sentences which ranged from three weeks to three months plus a £9 fine.

Maliba was indefatigable, and was back in Louis Trichardt the following April when he organized a May Day procession. He had failed to get permission for the demonstration and was once again charged. At this stage he went underground and was, according to H. Basner, hunted for months.

None of this could have happened without the Zoutpansberg Cultural Association centred in Johannesburg. It had close links with the Communist Party, and had offices at Progress Buildings, where the CPSA offices were situated. Maliba was obviously its most outstanding publicist and its main activist, but he could not have achieved as much as he did without his committee. The ZCA advised and supported the peasants, and provided leadership for the struggle. It took up the immediate complaints in the Reserves, through the ZBA, and it reached out towards the workers in the rural towns. Nor did it neglect the teachers in the district towns, and the ZBA had the full backing of M. K. Molepo, president of the Transvaal African Teachers Association (TATA) and resident in the Northern Transvaal.

Through the ZBA, the entire population was brought into the struggle. The women at Piesanghoek, all members of the ZBA, marched to the Native Commissioner in protest against being forced to do men's work, in December 1943. (23) Undoubtedly, there would have been resistance without the ZCA-ZBA, but it would have been reduced to isolated action and crushed. Organization in town, backed by the CPSA newspapers, transport to Johannesburg and back for men like Maliba, and active support from at least some sections in the CPSA, were crucial for the continued resistance in the area.

In the early years of the war there was little doubt that Maliba was the acknowledged leader of the area, that the ZBA had the support of the population, and that the CPSA had established a political base in the countryside. By 1945 the struggle had been suppressed, the organization was shattered, and the Communist presence was all but extinguished. The reasons for this do not appear to have been discussed in any account of CPSA activity, and the ZCA has not been described in any of that party's recent publications. In view of this dearth of information, it is possible only to offer some tentative suggestions for the collapse of the war-time organization.

A major factor, undoubtedly, was police action. The harassment of the population, and the leaders in particular, helped destroy formal organization, and eventually silenced the discontented. But there were other factors - and these contributed to the eventual defeat of the ZBA and its associated organizations.

In the early 1940s members of the Johannesburg district of the CPSA apparently debated the feasibility of concentrating activity on work in the countryside. There are no available documents on the positions taken by disputants inside the CPSA, but it seems that the majority opinion was that such activity would divert attention from work amongst urban workers. The debates were acrimonious and some members were either expelled or left the party. (24) On the other hand, the programme published by Maliba (see appendix) does not indicate that members of the CPSA spent much time in working out a strategy for the peasants. None the less, Alpheus Maliba and the ZCA in Johannesburg did get support; but, in view of the meagre resources in the CP at the time, this was not extensive, particularly after 1941 when party members joined the armed forces, and others were deeply involved in supporting military projects.

There was another factor which also played a part in ending militant action. The CPSA, and indeed all left organizations, had turned to the law in defence of its members against arbitrary officialdom, and against repressive legislation. Working as they did inside a strictly legal framework, this was an integral part of the political approach of most organizations. As long as such channels could be used, no party could easily forego the opportunity to argue its case before the courts. None the less, there was an excessive reliance on the use of the law, and Maliba had been trained in this tradition. Basner, intent on building a new following after resigning from the CPSA, and either campaigning for (or elected as member of) the Senate for the Transvaal and Orange Free State, offered his legal services. The legalism of the CPSA was reinforced by Basner, by M. K. Molepo (Basner's translator, and member of the ADP), and by Self Mampuru (leading member of the ADP and African adviser to the Society of the Friends of Africa). They advised, they spoke, and they produced memoranda (25); but they did not encourage direct action.

Militant mass action did not cease, but the attentions of the people were increasingly turned to legal processes, and to the urgent need to raise funds for lawyers' fees. Reports printed in the Guardian in 1944 were about court cases rather than of direct action: cases against the deportation of Molepo, cases against Maliba, and cases against local militants. Few, if any, were successful, and at best only delayed deportations - and the population was left to find the money. (26)

The ZBA had never had a formal organizational structure, and in the aftermath of the legal cases and the enforcement of the division of land it just ceased to exist. Maliba, forced out of the region by the police, could not switch his activities to work in Johannesburg with any great success. He was unable to use his considerable talents in Johannesburg, and ceased to play an active role in the few years before the CPSA was dissolved. (27)

Witzieshoek

The events of Witzieshoek have been more widely discussed than these in the Northern Transvaal, owing to the publication of the government's Report of the Commission of Enquiry into the Disturbances in the Witzieshoek Native Reserve (UG 26/51)

and the availability of the judgement in the trial that followed the shootings in 1950. Because two policemen were killed - the 14 Africans shot dead received less publicity - there was widespread press coverage of the final confrontation, and the name Witzieshoek is joined to that of Bulhoek, Marasbastad, and Sharpville in the saga of resistance to tyranny.

The sequence of events in Witzieshoek was not dissimilar to that in the Zoutpansberg: there was the same redistribution of land, and the reduction of area that could be ploughed; the same form of resistance and co-operation with a parallel urban organization; and the same confrontations with police. In addition, there was repeated culling of cattle, and this exacerbated the peasants' bitterness.

The leadership was, however, different, and brave as the leader, Paulus Howell Mopeli, was, his status as a sub-chief and relation of Chief Charles Mopeli added an extra dimension to the local struggle. His local organization, the Leihlo la Sechaba, which led the campaign against the Board of Management of the Reserve, also campaigned against Chief Charles. They were both descendants of Mosheshoe, and Paulus's fight against Charles was complex. On the one hand, it involved a struggle against the Betterment Scheme, and at the same time it was concerned with claims to the chieftainship. His bravery and his sincerity in opposing the government administration are not in doubt - but there were also personal issues which intruded. Paulus was fighting for his own privileged position, his own herds of cattle - and his leadership could not be as disinterested as that of Maliba, in the north. (28)

The Betterment scheme was applied from early 1939 in Witzieshoek, when grazing controls, fencing, and removal of population from grazing areas were enforced. Later the same year, regulations were promulgated to limit control and improve the herds of livestock, and the first estimate made of the maximum stock "units" the Reserve could carry. (29) The first cull was ordered in February 1942, and the Regent of the Bathlokoa (one of the smaller tribes in the area) refused to co-operate, and was fined. In the years to come the carrying load of stock in the Reserves was re-estimated and further culls were ordered. Opposition mounted and Paulus's following increased. The culling had become intolerable, and, as one speaker in Witzieshoek said in 1947,

> In 1942 it was announced that only inferior cattle would be culled. New stock was being culled in order to reduce it. The tribe had been deceived. It did not accept the limitation of the stock. (30)

The arbitrariness of the culling process was confirmed by G. A. Brand, a white storekeeper of the region. In evidence in 1951 he said:

> Much of the soil conservation work in the area was a scandal and a waste of money. The culling of stock was carried out haphazardly and many of the poorer Natives were prejudiced by it ... (31)

Although the Commission of Enquiry outlined the history of culling and the reactions of the peasants to the reduction of stock, they were silent on the issue of land reallocation. Edwin Mofutsanyana had, however, drawn attention to this problem in May 1945. (32) As in Zoutpansberg, the size of land holdings was reduced to 2-3 morgen, but widows received only 1 morgen, independent of the number of their dependants. As stated above, the allocation in this area was organized by the Chief and his indunas, and they took the best and largest lands. This also made the position in Witzieshoek very different from that in the Zoutpansberg.

It was the reallocation of land, together with fencing and control of grazing that led to the revival in 1940 of the Witzieshoek Vililance Association. This proved to be a less powerful organization than the ZCA, mainly because the

main body of migrant workers were in Harrismith, which was a small village with no tradition of workers' struggle. The Witzieshoek migrants in Johannesburg were few in number, and this might have been a restraining factor on Mofutsanyana, who came from the region. There is also the possibility that Mofutsanyana, leading member of the CPSA in the Transvaal and one time editor of Inkululeko, was bound by the earlier decision of his party to concentrate on urban activities. Whatever the reason, his description of the people as "terribly backward in this reserve [Witzieshoek]" would have been alien to Maliba and to Mopeli.

The inner tribal struggle was far from simple. The Chief and his headmen did have the largest herds and they were no more reconciled to culling than the rest of the population. On the other hand, they participated in the allocation of land, and had to work with the administration. In the end they chose to side with the administration - where their class interests were best represented. Initially, however, Chief Charles sent a delegation to Cape Town to see Basner (then a Senator) to secure his intercession with the Minister. The delegation was chosen by the assembled tribe and was led by Paulus Mopeli.

The delegation did see Basner, and on return announced that the Minister would not change policy in the Reserve, and that Basner had advised them to cut the fences in order to bring their complaints to public notice. The Commission of Enquiry was told that Basner had not suggested the use of sabotage, and that the delegation had used his name in order to back their own plan. The population split on the issue: the Chief sided with the administration, but large sections of the population joined the three envoys in their plan to nullify the betterment scheme.

There were several outbreaks of fire and three plantations were partially destroyed. Fences were destroyed,and cattle impounded for being in prohibited areas were rescued by peasants. Government attempts to cull the herds in February 1950 were stopped by "active and passive" resistance. The few men who allowed their herds to be culled did so reluctantly. In March there was a mass handing in of land certificates and stock cards to the administration, and the Native Trust was asked to remove the fences, the stud bulls, and all the belongings of the administration.

Throughout the period of disturbance the Leihlo la Sechaba called for a Commission of Enquiry, but this was refused. Only continued clashes with the administration, increased sabotage, and threats to workers engaged in construction work forced the Government to set up a Commission to enquire into events in the district.

The situation, however, deteriorated beyond repair. The split inside the tribe widened and the two factions were irreconcilable. Chief Charles and some of the headmen depended on the protection of the magistrate of Harrismith and the local administration. Internal skirmishes between the factions became a permanent feature of Reserve life, and the Chief's men prevented members of the opposition from ploughing.

The Commission was seen by the aggrieved peasants to be unsympathetic to their demands - as indeed it was bound to be. The peasants first demonstrated outside the Court, and then the 1,300-strong crowd withdrew to the Reserve. They resisted the demand that they appear to give evidence, and while the Enquiry was adjourned sought assistance from the Vigilance Association. Paulus travelled to Johannesburg and discussed the people's complaints with Mofutsanyana and James Mojoro (one-time organizer of the African Mine Workers' Union). Both these men had travelled to the Free State to give evidence for the Vigilance Association before the Commission, and were in close touch with Reserve affairs. Paulus also met Dr Dadoo and other members of the CPSA. This was seen by the Commission as part of a "conspiracy" by Paulus to oust Charles and assume, in some indescribable way, the "functions of the Native Commissioner".

During the adjournment of the Enquiry all meetings of more than three persons were declared illegal in the Reserve, under proclamation No. 31 of 1945. An act of defiance of this prohibition led to a clash with armed police and the inevitable shooting.

The crowd refused to disperse, and sang hymns, said one witness to the events, when sten guns were discharged into the assembled crowd. (34) The estimate of fatalities indicated that 14 were dead and just fewer than 100 injured. Search planes and columns of police scoured the countryside and arrested everyone found in the surrounding area. Eventually 75 were brought to trial, and sent to prison for periods ranging from three months to five years. Witzieshoek was quelled, another labour force controlled, and chief Charles's rule was upheld.

"Betterment" becomes "Rehabilitation"

In 1945, D. L. Smit, Secretary for Native Affairs, set out plans for the "rehabilitation" of the Reserves at special sessions of Native General Councils in the Transkei and Ciskei. The scheme, as Smit explained, involved the demarcation of sites inside the Reserves for cultivation, for rotational grazing, and for land to lie fallow. At the same time rural villages were to be established for the families of Africans regularly employed in industry. No stock would be allowed in these villages but vegetable plots would, where possible, be made available. All surplus population would be settled in these villages, or removed to sites where rural villages could be established. In exchange, the Government would provide afforestation of the Reserves, the erection of fencing and soil conservation, stock limitation and preservation of water supplies. In reporting this, Govan Mbeki concluded:

> This means that the government has definitely set its face against the urbanisation of the African workers, that it is determined ... to maintain its policy of migratory labour ... (35)

The Transkei and Ciskei Councils rejected the scheme, saying that the deterioration of the land was due to the big increase of population without a corresponding increase in stock to supply the needs of the people.

Yet six months later the Ciskeian General Council accepted the scheme by 18 votes to 3. The Guardian report of 11th October says, inexplicably:

> No doubt the plain facts given by the Secretary for Native Affairs [by now this was G. Mears] had a lot to do with the reversed decision. Pointing out the barren nature of the Ciskei as a result of bad farming, Mr Mears warned the Bunga (or Council) that even when all the available land had been acquired by the Native Trust there would still not be enough arable land available in South Africa for the African people. Consequently they must regenerate what land they had through proper farming practice.

This reversal took place after considerable pressure had been put on many of the Chiefs who sat on the Council. But it also took place while the people were under considerable duress. A catastrophic drought had ravaged all South Africa (with the exception of the Western Cape). Every Reserve was affected, and up to 40% of the cattle had died, particularly in the Ciskei, Northern Transvaal and Zululand. Malnutrition had become endemic in these areas. (36)

There was an immediate reaction, and local committees emerged to lead a struggle against the new scheme throughout the Eastern Cape. There was even talk of taking up arms in the Transkei at Mt Ayliff, and a secret movement, the Kongo (37), was formed with the object of replacing the local chief. It was said that he had betrayed the people by accepting the scheme, and furthermore that the incumbent owed his position to an irregular election. The Kongo then, as later in the 1960 Pondo revolt, met in the hills. (38)

The Kongo was affiliated to the All-African Convention (AAC) in 1948, and two representatives to the December conference reported on the activities of their group. A further report was given of an attack on surveyors in the Glen Grey district which led to a Court appearance of the "ringleaders". The entire village arrived at Court to answer the case, and the charge was eventually dropped.

Throughout the region there were protests: protests against the use of government branding of cattle in Peddie, against culling, and against "rural villages". People were arrested and "people's committees" were formed to organize their defence, and there were threats of a resort to arms to protect the cattle.

There was also resistance to the Rehabilitation Scheme in the towns. Much of this came from the ranks of the All-African Convention, and Tabata, its leading theoretician at the time, toured the Eastern Cape Reserves, campaigning against the Scheme. He was arrested as a result of his agitation, and local teachers affiliated to the AAC through the Cape African Teachers' Association carried on the propaganda campaign. (39)

There were also other signs of organized protest groups, as indicated by a "manifesto" produced by migratory workers in Port Elizabeth and East London, and sent to the Native Representatives in Parliament. The document supported the anti-Rehabilitation campaign in the Transkei and listed as reasons for opposing the scheme: the shortage of land, the failure of the Native Trust to buy land, the pulling down of kraals, and the limiting of essential stock. They conclude:

> The scheme seems to be another Cattle Killing Episode modernised.
>
> The scheme is designed to impoverish, suppress the economic and social growth of the African in the Native Reserves. It is a means of preserving white superiority ...
>
> For these and many reasons which we cannot at present think out clearly we complain of the unjust treatment meted out by our rulers under the cloak of Divine Trusteeship. (40)

Their modesty was hardly necessary. They had thought the matter out more clearly than the Native Representatives (who supported the Rehabilitation Scheme for "scientific agricultural" reasons) and many of their leaders.

Reports from the Eastern Cape in the early 1950s were fragmentary, and from the rest of the country the black-out was almost complete. Occasionally the silence would be broken and the Guardian would print an account of resistance to culling, and more rarely the Torch, organ of the Non-European Unity Movement (which included the AAC) printed reports of struggles in the countryside. I have included some of these reports below, even though it may give the impression of "random jottings". Only further research will bring to light some of the struggles which were never reported (even in the opposition press of the time), and provide a better understanding of rural resistance.

On 11th January and 8th March 1951 there was news of some resistance and much protest in Thaba N'chu against culling. Men were arrested and held under proclamations 293 of 1950 and 32-33 of 1951.

For over six months there was also a bitter campaign at Nqutu in northern Natal. On 18th January 1951 six thousand peasants told the Native Commissioner that they would resist culling. The resistance spread till it embraced all stock owners. By June leading tribesmen were arrested and fined, but the people were not intimidated.

For the first time in the history of this resistance the African National Congress played an active role. The Congress Youth League (CYL) declared its full support for the people of Nqutu, but a meeting called by them in the district was banned. The struggle continued through October as culling was opposed and the reduction of land allotments resisted. Officials who came to allocate reduced lots were threatened with violence and left.

In the middle of the campaign famine again left the population without food, and few could afford to buy maize, which was sold at £2 per bag. (41)

In 1951 the Government announced its plans to implement Bantu Authorities in the Reserves, and a new phase of the struggle was about to unfold. The older struggle against culling and the reduction of plots never came to an end. The campaigns, often conducted in isolation (even when news was available), merged into the struggles against the new plans for the Reserves - and these in turn were combined with resistance against women's passes, closer settlement schemes, and so on. The campaigns of the late 1950s will be described elsewhere.

Conclusion

The struggles in the Pietersburg area and Witzieshoek, as well as those which emerged in other Reserves after 1945, were all sparked off by the promulgation of "betterment" or "rehabilitation" schemes. These were, however, measures which only exacerbated intolerable living conditions. The land could not provide a living for most of the peasants, and in fact was not meant to. W. Gemmill, one time general manager of the Chamber of Mines, and later head of the mines recruiting agency, Wanela (Witwatersrand Native Labour Association), speaking of the Reserves, is reported as saying:

> The improvement of the productivity in the Reserves should be compulsory and land should be allocated on the basis of providing a partial living, not a full living. The migrant labour system ... was a good one and should be continued. (42)
>
> (my stress)

Other commentators were perhaps cruder in the way they spoke of the Reserves. As far back as 1916, Free State farmers told the Native Land Commission:

> Witzieshoek is not too full yet. The natives are quite content to live and remain there, and will not come out to work. (43)

Or, as another witness put it:

> If Witzieshoek had a larger population of course we would have more servants. (44)

In 1913 the population was approximately 5,000, and by 1940 was in the region of 10,000. More men did go out to work, but the demand had also increased, and from all sections of the economy there was a demand for still more labour. The condition of the Reserves had deteriorated still further, and there were members of the administration who realized that some improvement was necessary in order to reduce the high infant mortality and the general debilitation of the population. The need to make some improvement ("to provide a partial living", as Mr Gemmill suggested), together with the need to force more men into the labour market, were combined in the betterment schemes. As such, the problem affected those who clung desperately to the land as well as the migrants who saw their dependants reduced to ever more desperate straits. The men in the towns joined with kin in the Reserves to combat the new division and redivision of the land; they combined their forces in opposing the culling of cattle.

However much the rural and migrant populations were in accord - and men did rush back to their home areas in time of stress - the focus of the struggle was in the countryside. It was the men and women who were called on to produce the cattle for culling, or to accept reduced plots, who had to take action. In Witzieshoek the growing gulf between the large cattle holders and those with tiny herds, coupled with rivalry for the chieftainship, introduced an internal fight that divided the forces. This was avoided in the Transvaal because the gulf had not yet grown to such dimensions. The nature of the land, plus the long series of recurrent droughts, had hit every section of the village community. The area was also fortunate in finding a leader of Maliba's calibre, and he was more than usually aware of the need to maintain village solidarity. He was also fully aware of the need to c-ordinate the struggle on the land with that of the workers in the rural towns.

Yet in the final analysis it would seem that there was little that the organizations could achieve. The problem lay not in culling, or redivision, or the 5 morgen rule, but the Land Act itself. To break the system of land apportionment would require a liberation movement which did not exist in the early 1940s, and had barely begun to organize in 1950. It required a movement which would send its organizers out into the countryside - with a programme of action and the means to organize the peasantry. It would also require an organization that had set itself the task of changing the system of land holding.

Maliba and his co-workers in Pietersberg, Paulus Mopeli and his collaborators in Witzieshoek, and those who worked in the same direction in other Reserves, could not stand idly by waiting for such a movement to appear. They reacted as they had to in the situation - and their struggles were long and protracted and inevitably crushed.

In one sense their struggle proved to be tragic. Their courage and resourcefulness cannot be doubted. There were even some who recognized it at the time. But the liberation movement did not, or could not, learn from these men and women. They were unable to build the lessons of the rural struggle into their organization and were consequently unable to respond in time to the rural struggles when they burst into the open again in the late 1950s. The initiative taken by the Durban ANC Youth League in Nqutu was not often repeated, and even in this case there is little evidence from subsequent programmatic statements that the liberation movement had a programme to offer the peasants. The AAC offered words but little action; the other movements were too absorbed in their urban work to seize the initiative until the 1960 Pondo revolt. The reborn Kongo movement produced the fiercest resistance. Born in resistance to the "rehabilitation scheme", tempered in the fight against small allotments and cattle-culling, it led the fight against Bantu Authorities and called for armed insurrection. That story has still to be told.

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Notes

(1) I have used the word "peasant" as a loose designation for describing the rural population. They are, in the period under description, not easy to designate. Some were migratory labourers at home to rest; some were subsistence farmers, who produced little for the cash-market; some had large herds of (possibly "scrub") cattle, others had no stock at all; and many were landless. The composition varied from region to region.

(2) The fullest available account of this action is in Charles Hooper, Brief Authority (Collins, 1960), passim.

(3) "From Our South African Swamp", Spark, Vol. 4, No. 8 (Cape Town, August 1938); South African Outlook editorial on Lydenberg, January 1939.

(4) There is no history of the All-African Convention, except for a highly contentious account by I. B. Tabata, The Awakening of a People (Johannesburg, People's Press, 1960), and an account of the proceedings of the first conferences by D. D. T. Jabavu. An examination of this movement - at least in the pre-war period - is long overdue.

(5) Quoted in Spark, Vol. 1, No. 7 (October 1935), from Criticisms of the Native Bills by D. D. T. Jabavu and others.

(6) Quoted in U - Sihlanganisile, a journal published by W. G. Champion (Durban, c.1935).

(7) Ibid.

(8) Ibid.

(9) Complex South Africa (Faber, 1930), p. 137.

(10) H. M. Basner, Senate Debates, 26th March 1943, C.1021.

(11) Ibid. C.1022-1023.

(12) E. Mofutsanyana, "Conditions at Witzieshoek", Inkululeko, No. 77 (28th May 1945).

(13) An interview with Alpheus Maliba by Moses Kotane for the Guardian, 18th December 1941.

(14) Senate of South Africa Debates, 1943, C.1821. H. Basner drew my attention to the role of the displaced farmers (and poor whites) who were engaged as officials on the Trust Lands (personal communication).

(15) The account of conditions in the area is taken from the Spark, Vol. 3, No. 3 (March 1937). Further details can be found in the pamphlet The Conditions of the Venda People by A. M. Maliba (Communist party pamphlet, Johannesburg, c.1938). Maliba estimates the population of the region as nearer 300,000, and this is probably more accurate. He also states that the 300,000 people owned 223,000 head of cattle. This gives an average of two head to every three people. In fact, ownership of most of the cattle tended to be in a few hands.

(16) H. M. Basner, Senate Debates, 5th April 1943, C.1466; and 12th April 1943, C.1821.

(17) Brief accounts of some of the banished people (mainly involved in rural resistance) are given by Helen Joseph in Tomorrow's Sun: a Smuggled Journal from South Africa (Hutchinson, 1966). Short news items did appear from time to time in Communist Party newspapers which indicate that there were widespread arrests. They are tantalisingly brief and are rarely followed up. In December 1943 Inkululeko (No. 45) carried a short report stating that on 11th May 1938 three men had been detailed in Sekhukuneland and held without charge. They had managed to get a message out of jail, and this had been recently received by the CPSA. The names of the three were given.

(18) Guardian, 22nd March 1945. The report also appeared in Inkundla ya Bantu, 17th April 1945.

(19) Letter to the author, 27th May 1975. An earlier version of this letter was not meant for publication, and is altered here to conform with Hyman Basner's more considered version. Mary Klopper, whose family lived in the area, also reports having heard these reports at the time. I have still not been able to get any confirmation from members of the CPSA who knew Maliba. Some of those interviewed, however, were away on active service in North Africa during the period under discussion. G. Carr, who taught in the Pietersberg area, states that he was aware of troop movements in Louis Trichardt, and records that the peasants were too afraid to speak. But he cannot confirm the reports. (Interview, July 1977)

(20) Interview with author, April 1976. (21) Guardian, 30th October 1941.

(22) Inkululeko, No. 43, 20th November 1943. Maliba also contributed an article (in Venda) on the General Workers Union in this issue. It is only these reports by Maliba that have made it possible for me to reconstruct part of the struggle. I have not, to date, found any reference to these events in any newspaper or journal in South Africa, except for the two papers associated with the CPSA.

(23) Inkululeko, No. 45, 18th December 1943.

(24) I have not been able to find any documents referring to this debate, and am indebted to G.G., a member of the CPSA at the time, for information on this subject.

(25) Mamparu and Basner drew up a report on events in the Northern Transvaal, drawing attention to 200 people arrested for violating the restrictions on ploughing more than 5 morgen. This was supplied to members of the Native Representative Council in December 1942, and was the basis of a resolution put to the NRC. (Half-yearly report of the Society of Friends of Africa, July-December 1943.) The minutes of that NRC meeting (UG 10, 1943) contain no reference to this report, or to events in the Northern Transvaal. Once again, it would seem, news about events in the north was being suppressed.

(26) Thus a letter to the Guardian of 17th May 1945 appeals to the readers for £136 to pay the balance of an account of £275. Letters were also sent to Dr A. B. Xuma, President of the ANC.

(27) His death in a prison cell in Pretoria, 1967, is noted in H. J. & R. E. Simons, Colour and Class in South Africa, 1850-1950 (Penguin, 1969), p. 538. But there is no indication of why he was arrested. There is no record of his having been politically active after 1950.

(28) H. Basner, who knew and defended both men, first drew my attention to the difference between Mopeli and Maliba, and the fact that one was fighting for his position inside the chiefly hierarchy while the other was the leader of landless people.

(29) A stock unit consisted of one head of cattle, or an equivalent number of goats or sheep.

(30) Report of Commission of Enquiry into the Disturbances in the Witzieshoek Native Reserve, UG 26/51, p. 4.

(31) Quoted in S. Moroney, "1950 Witzieshoek Rebellion", in Africa Perspective, No. 3 (Johannesburg, February 1976).

(32) E. Mofutsanyana, op. cit.

(33) Commission of Enquiry. Much of the description of the events that follow is taken from the Commission report.

(34) Stuurman Kele, employee of the Native Trust, giving evidence at the trial, as quoted in the Guardian, 25th January 1951.

(35) Guardian, 12th April 1945.

(36) See, for example, the report of the Society of Friends of Africa for 1945. The report also said that conditions in the Reserves must lead to a serious reduction of "South Africa's greatest asset" - Native labour.

(37) The appearance of the Kongo at the AAC Conference as early as 1948 (and not in 1960, as suggested by Govan Mbeki, South Africa. The Peasants Revolt, p. 120) throws doubt on the suggestion that this was an abbreviation of "Congress".

(38) The information on the Transkei is obtained from the Minutes of the Conference of the All African Convention, December 1948, and I. B. Tabata, The Awakening of a People (People's Press, 1950), pp. 89-92.

(39) Tabata, op. cit., passim.

(40) Handwritten Memorandum headed "The Anti-Rehabilitation Government Scheme Committee for the Transkeian Territories Manifesto", signed by Hamilton G. Kraai, M. P. Nguloshe, and W. Jinga. Dated 14th October 1947 (Ballinger papers, Cape Town).

(41) Reports appear in the Guardian, 13th March 1952, and after this paper was suppressed by its successors, Clarion and People's World. After October, with reports of the drought and starvation in the area, the reports cease.

(42) Quoted by Dr A. B. Xuma in"Memorandum to Native Laws Commission of Enquiry" (W. Ballinger papers - Cape Town). Dr Xuma, unfortunately, does not give his source, and does not date the quotation.

(43) Quoted in S. Moroney, op. cit., p. 3.

(44) Ibid.

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Appendix

Alpheas Maliba wrote a pamphlet c.1938 on the Venda people (op. cit.), and the Johannesburg District Committee of the Communist Party published it as a party pamphlet. The documents conclude with a seven-point "Communist programme" for the Northern Transvaal.

The seven points are generally related to land questions, although (2) demands that the mines become the property of the people. There is considerable justification in including this matter, although it would have been more appropriate if the issue had been linked to the parallel problem of migratory labour.

Points 3, 4 and 5 call for an end of poll tax, dog tax, dipping and grazing fees; for the full franchise and an end to the power of Native Commissioners and the Native Affairs Department; and for the government to provide agricultural school and modern implements for farmers.

These points could have appeared in any programme and were by no means revolutionary. Nor was the seventh point, which called on all tribes to unify in the fight against oppression.

The two points that refer to land allocation and use were:

1. The claim that the land must be taken from the rich and, together with Crown land, returned to the people.

6. "Individual land tenure must take the place of tribal tenure so that competition will be encouraged, and the farm workers will have the incentive to improve their land."

It would be instructive to know whether this last point was in fact endorsed by the CPSA, or whether Maliba was given a free hand in issuing the publication.

Although the issue is in one sense academic, because there was no possibility of implementing the programme at the time, more information about this pamphlet would give us further insight into the attitude of the party majority on the land issue. If the programme had the full backing of the CPSA, it would indicate a remarkable phase in party thinking. The belief that private property was necessary so that consequent competition would provide an incentive to land improvement seems contrary to all the tenets of Marxism, and in the light of the experience at Glen Grey is incomprehensible.

If, on the other hand, the programme was not adopted by the CPSA, its appearance in a party publication would indicate that there was a lack of serious thought on the needs of the peasants in 1938.

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