

**The Bhisho March and Massacre of September 1992: The
“Leipzig Option” and the Meanings of Mass Action in the
South African Transition.**

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Revisiting the Bhisho March and Massacre of September 1992: The “Leipzig Option” and the Meanings of Mass Action in the South African Transition.

(Part 2)

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Abstract

Amid repressive state violence and an escalating civil war in the Eastern Cape’s Border region, on 7th September 1992 more than 80,000 people marched to the Ciskei bantustan capital of Bhisho to bring an end to the rule of its military leader, Brigadier Gqozo. Widespread fears of a fatal showdown were realised when the Ciskei Defence Force opened fire, killing 29 and injuring more than 200. These critical events, understood as a most pivotal moment in South Africa’s transition to democracy, have rarely been subjected to historical scrutiny. This paper casts new light on the events and politics surrounding the march; the contested meanings of mass action; the consequences of the massacre and its subsequent narration by politicians in the wake of the tragedy. As the tragic culmination of the African National Congress’ mass action campaign, the Bhisho march became a theatre of the contested politics of mass action within the Tripartite Alliance. An initiative of local and regional Alliance structures in the Border region, the march was exploited by national politicians to serve strategic agendas in the national negotiations, while the ANC’s narrative was carefully curated to legitimate its leaders and their national project.

Keywords: apartheid; negotiations; bantustans; Ciskei; social movements; democracy; ANC; TRC; Bisho.

Introduction

On the morning of the 7th September 1992, demonstrators gathered at the Victoria Grounds in eQonce (King William’s Town). Mobilised by local organisations under the banner of the Alliance led by the African National Congress (ANC), they planned to march to Bhisho, capital of the Ciskei ‘homeland’, to bring an end to the brutal repression of Brigadier Gqozo’s military regime which had continued despite the unbanning of the political organisations in 1990. With more than 80,000 participants, this march was a remarkable performance of popular mobilisation, yet understandably the events are best known for the tragedy that unfolded at the border, as the Ciskei Defence Force (CDF) opened fire on peaceful demonstrators, killing 29 people and injuring more than 200. Narratives of the march have been dominated by the brutal massacre by the CDF, who opened fire in a show of force that was disproportionate and frenzied, and by the conduct of some members of the march leadership, particularly Ronnie Kasrils, who led protesters through a gap in the fence

towards troops, triggering the extremely violent response by the CDF.¹ These events received much attention in the national and international press and were examined in great detail at the Goldstone Commission of Inquiry in 1992 and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission thereafter (TRC, 1996-8). Such investigations were critical in apportioning blame for the violence - which should rightly be attributed to the CDF, the South African Defence Force (SADF) and the National Party (NP) government, who supported the Ciskei regime. Yet the events – their context, politics and significance – have rarely been subjected to close historical scrutiny, despite the common understanding that they were crucial for the shape of the transition. This paper casts new light on the events and politics surrounding the march and the contested meanings of mass action.

Most accounts of the transition mention the march on Bhishe, its tragic outcome and major political consequences. It is commonly argued that the massacre brought South Africa to the edge of the ‘abyss’, persuading politicians on all sides to resume negotiations lest the country descend into an all-out civil war.² Yet, while most cite the pivotal importance of this moment, few have provided detailed empirical analyses of its various dimensions and the perspectives of the actors involved.³ Instead, a narrative drawn from dominant contemporary media tropes has dominated these analyses: that the march was the consequence of the initiatives of a group of Communist ‘insurrectionists’ in favour of the so-called ‘Leipzig option’ inspired by events in Eastern Europe; that the massacre - politically damaging as it was to all sides - underscored the dangers of mass mobilisation and cautioned all parties to resume negotiations and stem political violence.⁴ These representations place too much emphasis on the role of national politicians, particularly South African Communist Party (SACP) leaders, and elide the importance of local civic mobilisation, both in the planning of the Ciskei campaign and in the mass action campaign at large.

Stephanie Victor provides an important historical assessment of the Bhishe massacre, focusing particularly on the politics of memorialisation,⁵ while Wotshela has traced the dynamics of local civic mobilisation in the Border region during the late apartheid period.⁶ Alongside Simpson’s analysis of Boipatong, and recent accounts by Kynoch and Rueedi of political violence on the East Rand, these histories provide important correctives to existing perspectives on the transition, whose literature has lacked sustained analysis of popular protest and the local dynamics of political violence. In relation to the negotiations, such violence has often been represented as ‘flashpoints’ that interrupted the transition.⁷ But the transition was characterised by widespread repression and

¹ Commission of Inquiry regarding the Prevention of Public Violence and Intimidation (Goldstone Commission), ‘Report on the Bhishe Incident,’ 29th September 1992 (hereafter ‘Goldstone Commission Report’).

² A. Sparks, *Tomorrow is Another Country: The Inside Story of South Africa’s Road to Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 152; A. Guelke, ‘Political Violence and the South African Transition,’ *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 4 (1993), 62; S. Dubow, *Apartheid, 1948-1994* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 261, 273;

³ Exceptions are S. Victor, ‘The Politics of Remembering and Commemorating Atrocity in South Africa: The Bhishe Massacre and its Aftermath, 1992–2012,’ *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 41, 1 (2015), 83-102; C. White, ‘The Rule of Brigadier Oupa Gqozo in Ciskei: 4 March 1990 to 22 March 1994’ (MA thesis, Rhodes University, 2008).

⁴ P. Waldmeir, *Anatomy of a Miracle: The End of Apartheid and the Birth of the New South Africa* (London: W.W. Norton, 1997), 207; P. Laurence, ‘Communists Call the Shots,’ *Cape Argus*, 11 September 1992.

⁵ Victor, ‘The Politics of Remembering’; B. Pottinger, ‘When Wild Men Seize the Moment,’ *Sunday Times*, 13 September 1992.

⁶ L. Wotshela, ‘The Fate of Ciskei and Adjacent Border Towns: Political Transitions in a Democratic South Africa, 1985- 1995,’ South African Democracy Education Trust, *The Road to Democracy in South Africa*, Volume 4, Part 3 (Austin Texas: Pan African University Press, 2019), 1855- 1899.

⁷ J. Simpson, ‘Boipatong: The Politics of a Massacre and the South African Transition,’ *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 38, 3 (2012), 623-647; F. Rueedi, ‘The Hostel Wars in Apartheid South Africa: Rumour, Violence

violence which impacted heavily on the course and the possibilities of the negotiations, while local dynamics shaped their very terms.⁸

This article is the second of two papers that together develop an historical analysis of the context, significance and political dynamics of the march on Bhisho in September 1992. Where the first paper examines the escalating crisis in the Ciskei in 1991-2, providing the backstory to the march on the 7th September, this paper examines the September march itself; its contested politics and consequences. Through the examination of extensive archival and documentary sources as well as interviews, this article traces the events surrounding the march; its planning; aftermath and subsequent narration by politicians in the wake of the tragedy.

This paper argues that the crude trope of the 'Leipzig way' that has come to dominate narratives of the march offers little to enhance historical understanding of the politics surrounding the march and assigns too much agency to nationalist elites. The march on 7th September was an initiative of local and regional Alliance structures in the Border region whose increasingly militant campaign was focused on ending repression in Ciskei by forcing the replacement of Gqozo with an interim regime. But the meanings of mass action, and the proposed aims for the march, were contested at local and national levels. For the fact that it offered opportunities to force a change to the stalemate in national negotiations, and to evidence support for the ANC's negotiators, it became a theatre of the contested politics of mass action within the Alliance. The march was variously exploited by national politicians to serve strategic agendas in the negotiations, while in the wake of tragedy the ANC's narrative was carefully curated to legitimate its top leaders and their claim to power in the new dispensation.

The Meanings of Mass Action

During the winter of 1992, the CODESA negotiations (Congress for a Democratic South Africa) had broken down over fundamental constitutional issues, while animosity and distrust festered between the main negotiating parties of the NP and the ANC following the massacre at Boipatong in mid-June. Frustrated and impatient comrades, who had long called for a return to the streets, were rewarded with the ANC's endorsement of a renewed mass action campaign. Accounts of this campaign have been dominated by its tragic culmination at Bhisho in September. Amid the trauma and controversy of the massacre, a caricatured picture of the march and its political impetus belies a more complex history, for the meanings of mass action were hotly contested. As Hamill argued, the real debate within the Alliance was not between negotiation on the one hand, and mass action, on the other, as was often suggested, but over the role of mass action in the transition and its relationship with negotiations.⁹ The September march on Bhisho became a theatre of these contested politics.

In the Border region, a long democracy campaign preceded the September march, as is discussed in a previous paper in this volume. A major march took place on 4th August 1992 to coincide with the national stayaway, demanding Gqozo's removal and free political activity in the Ciskei. The latter was an exceptionally tense occasion, over which the threat of state violence loomed but which passed – to the surprise of many – without major incident. The August march and its tense climax were reported extensively in newspapers across the world. In response, the ANC proposed to shift the

and the Discourse of Victimhood,' *Social Identities*, 26, 6 (2020), 756-773, G. Kynoch, *Township Violence and the End of Apartheid: War on the Reef* (Oxford: James Currey, 2018).

⁸ L. Evans, 'Violence in the South African Transition', *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History* (forthcoming 2023.)

⁹ J. Hamill, 'South Africa: From CODESA to Leipzig,' *The World Today* 49, 1 (January 1993), 16.

focus of the mass action campaign to the 'hostile' bantustans, which were to become the strategic target of the national mass action campaign.¹⁰ The mounting confrontation in the Border thus provided a key opportunity to clarify the strategy for national mass action. National leaders looked to 'harness the power of the people' to bolster the ANC's demands for elections to a constitutional assembly; a transitional administration with control over the security forces; and serious efforts by the government to deal with political violence.¹¹ As ANC campaigns coordinator for a mass action campaign that had hitherto lacked strategic clarity, Kasrils responded to requests for support from the Border ANC leadership in late August by assimilating the aims of the local campaign into his national strategy for mass action. The Ciskei, among the weakest of the bantustans still in support of the government, became the first target of a campaign which then looked to topple the regimes of QwaQwa, Bophuthatswana, KwaZulu and, ultimately, Pretoria.¹²

Earlier in the winter of 1992, Jeremy Cronin identified three 'conflicting outlooks' on mass action within the liberation movement: 'the boat', 'the tap' and 'the Leipzig way'. The first ('don't rock the boat') focused on the role of elites in securing a negotiated transition: in this view, mass action might only serve to destabilise the negotiations. 'Turning on the tap' favoured elite negotiations, strategically supported by mass action to be turned on and off, as a tap, to overcome hurdles in negotiations. The third, he argued, was inspired by popular revolutions in Eastern Europe, and looked to oust the regime through popular mobilisation, replacing it with the organs of 'people's power'. He questioned the grounding and realism of the latter, cautioning those who touted 'insurrection' as a solution to deadlock in the negotiations: the situation in Eastern Europe had been much different to that in South Africa, where an entrenched military regime made extreme violence against any such actions highly likely.¹³ In late August, Cronin argued that the coexistence of, and unresolved conflict between, these three outlooks was at the root of the problems experienced by the liberation movement since its unbanning in February 1990.¹⁴ Although abstract and largely divorced from the dynamics of local struggles, to some degree his analysis presaged the tragic culmination of these tensions on 7th September.

As Friedman argues, '[F]or the mainstream, mass action was a negotiating tactic, not a revolutionary weapon.'¹⁵ Members of the ANC National Working Committee saw mass action as a 'tap' to bring pressure in negotiations.¹⁶ The notion of a revolutionary 'Leipzig way' was a minority position, even among the SACP, and was one that had gained criticism from Cronin, Chris Hani and others. COSATU members argued that mass action was necessary to bolster the alliance's position in the negotiations and to push the terms of the compromises. In this view, mass action was about pushing back against the domination of negotiations by a small handful of political elites. Meanwhile, politicians aligned to COSATU, including Cyril Ramaphosa and Jay Naidoo, saw the utility of mass action in applying pressure in national negotiations: this was the 'tap' that Cronin identified. Following the whites-only March referendum, and as the national mass action campaign cohered in July and August, they also referred to the legitimating function of mass action, to renew the ANC's 'mandate' to negotiate: to revitalise links between leadership and the grassroots to foster support in advance of elections.¹⁷

¹⁰ Sparks, *Tomorrow*, 147.

¹¹ R. Suttner, 'The Bisho March and Massacre: An Assessment,' *African Communist* 130, Third Quarter (October 1992), 25.

¹² L. Evans, 'The Mass Action Campaign of 1992: The Ciskei Crisis and the African National Congress in Transition' (this volume).

¹³ J. Cronin, 'The Boat, The Tap and the Leipzig Way,' *African Communist* 130 (Third Quarter, 1992), 41-54.

¹⁴ J. Cronin, 'Call for "One Organisation, One Strategy,"' *South* (22-26 August 1992), 9.

¹⁵ S. Friedman, 'Back to the Streets,' in S. Friedman, ed., *The Long Journey: South Africa's Quest for a Negotiated Settlement* (Braamfontein: Ravan Press, 1993), 142.

¹⁶ K. Cullinan, 'Moving the Masses,' *Work in Progress* 84 (September 1992), 9.

¹⁷ Friedman, 'Back to the Streets,' 143.

Many referred to the August stayaway as the 'black referendum, Frank Chikane argued.¹⁸ It was no accident that this discourse emerged as a resumption of bilateral negotiations drew closer. As Ramaphosa declared on 3rd August: '[o]ur people have voted on their feet and have given a resounding "yes" to peace and democracy'.¹⁹ The same day, Jay Naidoo claimed that the mass action campaign had struck a 'yes vote' for Alliance negotiators.²⁰

That the central objective of the mass action campaign was to renew the legitimacy of the leadership through reconnecting with the grassroots was commonly identified. As Philip Nel argued, '[m]ass action was decided on to address the fears of its followers that the leadership was no longer interested in people's power... a future renegotiated forum will have to accommodate the people's character of the ANC.'²¹ Jeremy Baskin argued that amid dwindling popular credibility, mass action was 'as much about revitalising the ANC as about challenging the government and regaining the political initiative... The success of the August actions must, in part, be judged by the extent to which it has boosted the standing of the ANC among its own membership...'.²²

In the repeated caricature of the 'Leipzig way', the concrete campaigns that underpinned mass action and its diverse political understandings have thus been overlooked. In the Border, where the civic movement was strong, direct action was focused on local impediments to democratisation—namely, the Ciskei regime.²³ Principal leaders in the Border, such as Arnold Stofile alongside many others in the UDF, placed local material issues at the heart of their conception of mass action. Both Lucille Meyer, member of the ANC regional leadership with roots in the UDF, and civic leader Lulamile Nazo, of the Mdantsane Residents' Association (MDARA) and Border Civic Congress (BOCCO), regarded the 'Leipzig option' discourse as unfamiliar and irrelevant to the political cultures and objectives that underpinned the Bhishe march as it evolved on the ground: this was not how local activists and leaders understood the aims and intentions of the march.²⁴ Instead, they saw the political aims of the march in terms of the civic movement's practices of direct democracy through a 'People's Assembly': popular pressure would compel Gqozo to resign and a locally-acceptable interim committee could be elected in his stead.²⁵ Even as the new chief of the SACP, Hani's position on mass action seems to have been closer to that of the civic movement than it was to some of his comrades in the SACP. In his reflections during the winter of 1992 there is no reference to Eastern Europe: instead, like Ramaphosa, he emphasised the need for the national leadership to renew its mandate and pointed to the role of civic action as a 'watchdog' of national politics.²⁶ His close

¹⁸ 'Let's Level These Playing Fields,' *City Press*, 9 Aug 1992; 'How Will Mandela Use his Mandate?', *Weekly Mail*, 7-13 August 1992.

¹⁹ 'Focus on Mass Action,' *Sowetan*, 6 August 1992.

²⁰ Robben Island- Mayibuye Archive, University of the Western Cape, VNS/ Afravision Collection, Mass action campaign: stayaway - Jay Naidoo speech in downtown Johannesburg, VNS 2181, 1992-08-03, Item ID: RIM.FV.2000.2120, Video 3 of 4 tapes.

²¹ Nel, cited by O'Malley in: P. O'Malley Interview with A. Akhalwaya, 17 September 1992, Heart of Hope Archive, accessed at <https://omalley.nelsonmandela.org/omalley/index.php/site/q/03lv00017/04lv00344/05lv00607/06lv00723.htm> on 10 March 2022.

²² J. Baskin, 'A Winter of Discontent,' *South African Labour Bulletin* 16, 7 (September/ October 1992), 13-14.

²³ Evans, 'The Mass Action Campaign.'

²⁴ Interview with Lucille Meyer, Cape Town (3 May 2019); Interview with Lulamile Nazo, East London (2 July 2019).

²⁵ Evans, 'The Mass Action Campaign'. Elsewhere in the bantustans during this same period, civics looked to People's Assemblies to address disputes with traditional authorities. 'Peoples Assemblies Plan Mooted by Civic Body', *New Nation*, 22-28 May 1992.

²⁶ P. O'Malley, Interview with Chris Hani, 15 July 1992, Heart of Hope Archive, accessed at <https://omalley.nelsonmandela.org/omalley/index.php/site/q/03lv00017/04lv00344/05lv00607/06lv00635.htm> on 5 June 2019.

associate, Skenjana Roji - SACP leader and MK Commander in the Border - was also determined to oust Gqozo and reportedly interested in the Leipzig comparison, though his understanding was certainly rooted in local dynamics more than abstract models.²⁷

Planning the September March

It was widely agreed among diverse sections of the Alliance in the Border that the aim of the march was to bring about a change of government in the Ciskei. However, the various roots of the liberation movement – civic associations; unions; student and community organisations; churches; underground military networks – shaped diverse conceptions of mass action: how a change of government in Ciskei might be brought about, and to what ends, was imagined in different ways. As the planned march on Bhisho was thrust to the forefront of national strategy, these different political cultures collided. They became manifest in the breakdown of communication, the emergence of political divisions among march leaders, and the exploitation of the march by some among the national leadership, both in the orchestration of the march and in the wake of the massacre.

The September march was organised amid escalating violence in the region, particularly following the August march. Angry and militant comrades impatient for change were met with repressive Ciskei policing and brutal vigilante violence by the African Democratic Movement (ADM), which was backed by a South African covert military operation, and witnessed an increased presence of South African security personnel. Having sacked serving government ministers and CDF officials, by mid-1992 the Ciskei regime was dominated by seconded South African officials in ministerial and military posts.²⁸ No wonder, therefore, that the Alliance leaders directed their demands to Pretoria, whose government was bankrolling and staffing the regime. They believed that Gqozo was F. W. De Klerk's 'puppet' and were determined to express local strength and unity in the face of his repression.²⁹ But this proved to be a major miscalculation, for De Klerk was no friend of Gqozo's: his ties were not to the political executive but to the South African military establishment, whose covert operations supported his regime through funding and arming the ADM and whose personnel dominated the military.

The events of 4th August informed the hopes and strategies of political leaders for the planned march on 7th September. In August, demonstrators had been prevented from reaching Bhisho by Ciskei Riot Police: they were halted at the main intersection, before finally being permitted to proceed into the stadium. Leaders were determined that this time their bid to hold a People's Assembly in the centre of Bhisho - and thereby to force Gqozo's capitulation - would not be stopped. Leaders in the Border ANC consulted with sub-regional leadership: there was widespread local support for a repeat march in September.³⁰ It 'was really a march organised... by the locals themselves', Hani argued. It was not, he emphasised, 'a march organised from [national ANC] headquarters...'.³¹

²⁷ Interview with Crispian 'Chippy' Olver, Johannesburg (11 July 2019). As MK Commander, Roji had been long embroiled in the conflict between the state and MK in the region; many of his cadres in Mdantsane had been arrested the previous November. P. Vantyu, 'The Bhisho Massacre', ANC Political School Assignment, 10 July 2010.

²⁸ Evans, 'Bantustan State,' 108-112; J. Peires, 'The Implosion of Transkei and Ciskei,' *African Affairs* 91, 364 (1992), 378-381.

²⁹ V. Ngcula, 'Pretoria's Men in Ciskei,' *African Communist* 130, Third Quarter (October 1992), 26-27.

³⁰ Historical Papers Research Archive, University of the Witwatersrand, Ronald Kasrils Papers, A3345, E 2.1.1, 'Border ANC Report on the Events Surrounding the Bisho Massacre on Monday 7th September 1992', 4-5.

³¹ African National Congress, 'Bisho: The Story Behind the Massacre,' VHS, (Johannesburg, 1992).

On 3rd September, three days before the march, Tripartite Alliance and civic leaders in the Border issued a memorandum to De Klerk, clarifying the strategic intentions of the local leadership and rejecting the 'insurrectionist' discourse circulating in the press. As the 'principal agents involved in the creation and support of the Ciskei regime', the memorandum held the South African government responsible for responding to their demands: an end to violence and intimidation and the creation of a climate of free political activity. 'The ANC and its allies have no interest in "seizing power" in Ciskei,' the memorandum stated; 'Our sole objective during the current period is to create the political space for our organisation to operate freely.' The memorandum demanded the removal of Gqozo, who they deemed illegitimate; the downgrading of Ciskei's 'independent' status and the appointment of an interim administration; the repeal of repressive legislation (Section 43 of the Ciskei Security Act); the removal of SADF Military Officials from Ciskei; and the removal of Peace Force, the security company arming and training vigilantes for the ADM. The Alliance confirmed that in spite of Gqozo's refusal to grant permission and his threats of violence, the march would proceed: 'The people of Ciskei will be gathering in Bisho ... in support of these demands, and we will wait in Bisho until a representative of the South African government informs us that these demands have been adequately addressed...'.³² In a letter to De Klerk on the eve of the march, Mandela indicated his expectation that the march would proceed in line with the parameters of the Peace Accord and Goldstone Commission guidelines.³³

In the days leading up to the march, a strategising committee was appointed to make tactical decisions on the day of the march. It included some Alliance leaders from the Border region- Crispian (Chippy) Olver; Skenjana Roji; Andrew Hendricks; Smuts Ngonyama and Silumko Sokupa; plus national leaders including Chris Hani, Ronnie Kasrils, Steve Tshwete, and Raymond Suttner. On the day of the march, this number was expanded to include Cyril Ramaphosa and John Gomo. ³⁴ Comprised of men, with a strong presence of national and SACP leaders, this committee did not represent the civic, church, sporting, student and labour organisations at the heart of the Border campaign. Nevertheless, it had an overwhelming impact on the events of the 7th, following the fateful decision - made on the morning of the march, under pressure, and with little deliberation – to break out of the Bisho stadium.³⁵

Leaders in the Border were adamant that they would take their demonstration into Bisho, despite Gqozo's threats to use violent force to prevent this. An application for permission to march was duly made by the Border leadership to comply with the Peace Accord. In the final hours before the march, the chief magistrate, D. B. Tali, belatedly granted permission for demonstrators to approach Bisho and to assemble at the stadium, as they had done on August 4th after tense negotiations.³⁶ Yet the permission was a mere formality: leaders had no intention of staying within the limits of the court order by stopping at the Bisho stadium. It was firm intention among leaders and supporters of the Border Alliance that the march would proceed into Bisho, but how this was to be done was

³² Kasrils Papers, A3345, E 2.1.1, 'Memorandum Submitted by the Tripartite Alliance and South African National Civics Organisation to the South African Government Concerning the Resolution of the Violence in Ciskei and the Creation of a Climate for Free Political Activity', 3rd September, East London; 'ANC Move to Oust Gqozo: Bloodbath Feared as Alliance Gathers for Ciskei Showdown', *City Press*, 6 September 1992.

³³ Letter from Mandela to De Klerk, evening of 6th September 1992, in Mandela, *Conversations With Myself*, 333-334.

³⁴ Kasrils Papers, E3345, Border ANC Report, 14.

³⁵ Border ANC Report, 11; Suttner, 'Don't Blame Us for Bisho', *Star*, 17 September 1992.

³⁶ 'Ciskei March is On', *Cape Argus*, 7 September 1992.

less clear.³⁷ Among those in the strategising group were leaders known to be disillusioned and frustrated with the Peace Accord, which some believed stood in the way of progress and protected those in power.³⁸

In the days leading up to the march, the Ciskei and South African security forces made preparations. South African security forces would police the march up to the Ciskei border at the entrance to Bhisho, where the Ciskei Police Force would assume responsibility for operations. Equipped and more experienced in riot policing, it was decided that the Ciskei Police would lead operations, with the CDF playing a supportive role: riot police, armed with rubber bullets and teargas, were to form the front line, with CDF troops, armed with live ammunition, in the rear. With no permission yet granted for the march, security forces were charged with preventing demonstrators from gaining access to Bhisho. According to this situation, access to the stadium should also be prevented: CDF troops would be deployed around the stadium and surrounding areas.³⁹ At the August march, as Ciskei riot police were forced back, the crowd had come to 'intermingle' with them, causing concern for the safety of officers and the practicalities of control. Therefore, in advance of the September march, two containers of razor wire had been procured to construct a barrier defending the route to Bhisho.⁴⁰

On the morning of the march the limited capacity of the Ciskei security forces became evident. Ciskei police, numbering 1800 in total, were deployed in roadblocks preventing access routes to Bhisho, and along the main road. They were also deployed in Mdantsane after rioting the previous day. This left only 70 police at the border, where the march would be halted by razor wire. Meanwhile, the razor wire was hurriedly unfurled, blocking access to Bhisho and restricting entrance to the stadium to a narrow passage through which demonstrators would be funnelled. Unused to such operations, officers struggled to handle the wire and ran out: the existing perimeter fence of the stadium would have to suffice to contain the demonstrators, assuming that they would be marshalled to adhere to the conditions of the march and remain in the stadium. As late as twenty minutes prior to the march reaching the border, senior officers were still attending to the razor wire fencing.⁴¹

Brigadier Ngcobo, of the Ciskei Riot Police, had been charged with leading the operations for the march. But on arriving in Bhisho on the morning of the 7th, the preparations in motion were unrecognisable to him. Contrary to prior decisions, he found CDF troops stationed around the entrance to Bhisho: at the Fort Hare University building, at the telephone exchange and on the northern side of the stadium. His senior, General Viktor, refused to explain and he tried in vain to speak with other CDF personnel. Ngcobo surmised that in last minute meetings his leadership was frozen out, placing Brigadier Oelschig, chief of the CDF, at the helm of operations in which the role of CDF troops was significantly increased. Gqozo had grown suspicious of the black officers in his own

³⁷ Border ANC Report, 11; 'Clergymen in Bid to Diffuse Ciskei Tension: ANC March May End in Bloodshed,' *Business Day*, 7 September 1992.

³⁸ Interview with Lucille Meyer.

³⁹ Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Bisho Massacre Hearings 2, Day 1, 18 November 1996, Brigadier Vuyisile Ngcobo and Superintendent Raymond Simms, accessed at <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/bisho2/ngcobo.htm> on 1 March 2022.

⁴⁰ TRC, Bisho Massacre Hearings 2, Day 1, Brigadier Ngcobo; Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Bisho Massacre Hearings 2, Day 1, 18 November 1996, General Johannes Viktor, accessed at <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/bisho2/viktor.htm> on 1 March 2022.

⁴¹ TRC, Bisho Massacre Hearings 2, Day 1, Brigadier Ngcobo, Superintendent Raymond Simms. Advocate Sandi argued that the shortage of razor wire prevented the gap in the barbed wire perimeter fence from being fixed. Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Bisho Massacre Hearings 2, Day 2, 19 November 1996, Antonie Gildenhuys, accessed at <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/bisho2/gildenhu.htm> on 1 March 2022.

security forces, and it seems likely that this change to the planned operations was a consequence of the influence of the senior ranking CDF officers, seconded from South Africa.⁴² Moreover, CDF chiefs had received new intelligence of a planned military incursion by MK, as discussed below.

ANC strategists - including Kasrils, Suttner and other members of the strategising committee - hoped and expected that, when faced with popular pressure, Ciskei civil servants and security forces would defect to the ANC's side.⁴³ ANC pamphlets distributed prior to the march in the Bisho area called upon people to 'join your people in ending Gqozo's rule... in building peace and freedom. No one need be an outcast. There will be no vengeance.'⁴⁴ They saw Gqozo as the 'weakest link' in the NP's electoral alliance. 'Part of our build up [to the march] is an appeal to Ciskei security forces and the public service to come over to us,' Suttner explained; 'this could mean the collapse of the Ciskei's public administration.'⁴⁵ They were informed by ANC intelligence that the CDF would not fire on their 'own people'; and assumed that the soldiers' loyalty would ultimately rest with 'the people'. There was also belief among activists that Ciskei police and troops sympathetic to the cause would allow demonstrators access to Bisho.⁴⁶ Leaders had been optimistic that Gqozo, upon travelling to the conference on federalism, would be unable to return to Bisho, but the Brigadier never departed for fear of that eventuality.⁴⁷ Informed by poor intelligence, Alliance leaders miscalculated the attitude of Ciskei personnel, who were facing frequent attacks by ANC supporters.⁴⁸ The assumption that a racial 'brotherhood' would prevail over the cleavages of civil war echoed the early naivety of the ANC's approach towards bantustan leaders, with whom they had hoped to 'speak with one voice'. Of this approach the UDF was always critical.⁴⁹

The ANC's favourable relationship with Transkei's Bantu Holomisa had helped to foster this perception. Ciskei civil servants had certainly challenged Gqozo with the National Education, Health and Allied Workers' Union (NEHAWU) strike in March 1991, and he had been brought to power in a coup in 1990 by CDF seniors who were fed up with Lennox Sebe's inept regime and motivated to install a more favourable climate for political change. The repression waged by the Ciskei regime - first under Sebe and then under Gqozo - created polarisation and animosity. But whereas in the Transkei a more synergistic relationship existed between the bantustan state and the middle classes aligned to the ANC, in the Ciskei the system of chiefs and headmen - which from mid-1991, Gqozo's regime was trying through force to resurrect - was in most areas politically defunct.⁵⁰ Civic associations comprised the functioning forms of local governance. If there was suggestion that the glimmer of democratic change experienced after the coup in 1990 might still be realised, the situation was much unlike that in Transkei. While the Ciskei regime was itself weak and fragile, being heavily dependent on support from Pretoria, with the weight of the South African Defence Force's Military Intelligence section (SADF-MI) behind it the regime had license and capacity to employ

⁴² TRC, Bisho Massacre Hearings 2, Day 1, Brigadier Ncobo.

⁴³ 'ANC Plan to Drive a Wedge into the Nats' Alliance,' *Business Day*, 7 September 1992; Suttner, 'The Bisho March and Massacre,' 22; Interview with Crispian 'Chippy' Olver, Johannesburg (11 July 2019); Friedman, 'Back to the Streets', 153.

⁴⁴ ANC pamphlet, cited in 'Clergymen in Bid to Diffuse Ciskei Tension: ANC March May End in Bloodshed,' *Business Day*, 7 September 1992.

⁴⁵ 'ANC Plan to Drive a Wedge in the Nats' Alliance', *Business Day*, 7 September 1992.

⁴⁶ Interview with Lulamile Nazo.

⁴⁷ 'ANC Plan to Drive a Wedge in the Nats' Alliance', *Business Day*, 7 September 1992.

⁴⁸ With a background in MK intelligence and in the light of his actions at the march, Kasrils must be seen in this particular regard as having failed in his responsibility.

⁴⁹ Kwenosi Modisani, 'Leaders Speak with Once Voice,' *Sowetan*, 8 October 1990.

⁵⁰ T. Gibbs, *Mandela's Kinsmen: Nationalist Elites and Apartheid's First Bantustan* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2014).

extreme violence, apparently without sanction. Gqozo's regime had for many months been waging a violent repression, and his escalating threats in the face of mass demonstrations had the tacit support of Pretoria, where Pik Botha and De Klerk were content to let the confrontation play out, no doubt in hope that the ANC's strong-arm tactics would be undermined and state control restored. South African politicians maintained that they had neither the authority nor the power to prevent the march, both points on which they were most likely correct. Brigadier Oelschig, Commander of the CDF, saw violence as an inevitable consequence of the large march fixed on getting to Bhisho, which would be met by armed security forces mandated to do everything necessary to prevent this. On the morning of the march Oelschig met with two South African government ministers and appealed to them to stop the march and inevitable clash; they refused, although it is difficult to imagine they might have halted it without extensive use of force. In the event, Oelschig's primary objective was not to prevent violence but to use it to defend the Ciskei's borders.⁵¹

The Threat of Violence

The march took place in the context of an escalating civil war. Across the political spectrum and the media, warnings of impending violence proliferated. On 6th September, the Johannesburg Star reported: 'The battle lines between the ANC alliance and pro-government forces threatens to erupt into conflict tomorrow... Tomorrow's action is far more threatening than its march during last month's mass action... Some ANC members are said to be prepared to die in the process.'⁵² Church leaders warned of the 'potential violent confrontation and massive loss of life likely to take place' at the planned march. In an effort to avert the seemingly inevitable violence, on 6th September church leaders including Frank Chikane and Desmond Tutu called for the march to be cancelled subject to the holding of a referendum to test the support for the Ciskei government.⁵³ Gqozo refused. 'There is an indication of a hardening of hearts and positions on both sides. We believe Monday could bring disaster', said Chikane.⁵⁴ Local church congregations gathered for hours in prayer for a peaceful resolution to avert the violence.⁵⁵

Albert Whittles and his colleagues at the Border Council of Churches were informed on the day before the march that the CDF were preparing for a confrontation: 'We received reports earlier that they were digging trenches and filling it up with branches... we heard about it the day before, from someone who worked in Bhisho. He came and he told us that night... "hey, guys, tomorrow's gonna be war."'⁵⁶ Whittles thus describes the CDF's last minute security measures to prevent marchers from exiting the stadium towards Bhisho. The CDF's Colonel Silence Pita subsequently told the TRC that Gqozo had received a security report on the day of the massacre informing him that MK planned a coup to overthrow his regime. The CDF planned their response accordingly, Pita reported: 'The [CDF] soldiers told us where they were going to be deployed. They told us they were going to prevent people from going to Bhisho and that there would be (soldiers) standing at the fence where

⁵¹ White, 'The Rule of Brigadier Oupa Gqozo,' 138-139.

⁵² 'Plan to Take Out Gqozo', *Star*, 6 September 1992.

⁵³ 'Clergymen in Bid to Diffuse Ciskei Tension: ANC March May End in Bloodshed,' *Business Day*, 7 September 1992.

⁵⁴ 'Guards Told to "Shoot at Rally"', *Herald Sun*, September 7, 1992.

⁵⁵ 'Ciskei Crisis: Battle Lies Drawn at Bisho', *Cape Times*, 7 September 1992.

⁵⁶ 'Albert Whittles and the Museum Historian Discuss the Aims of the March' (audio recording, Amathole Museum, c.2017), accessed at: http://www.museum.za.net/index.php?option=com_sermonspeaker&view=sermon&id=2:albert-whittles-and-the-museum-historian-discuss-the-aim-of-the-march&Itemid=203 on 14 May 2019.

there was a gap.⁵⁷ There is evidence that the soldiers beyond the stadium perimeter fence were deliberately concealed from view, and that such preparations were made in advance of the march in response to Oelschig's orders from the head of South African Military Intelligence, General van der Westhuizen, to 'use all means necessary' to prevent demonstrators from reaching Bhisho.⁵⁸

According to many involved in the planning of the march, it was to be a peaceful demonstration of militant popular resistance, to bring about political change through the pressure of direct action. Yet there is also evidence that underground activities were planned to complement the mounting campaign. Gqozo was paranoid of the threat of a violent coup against him: he feared assassination by MK, or that a CDF coup might oust him. These fears were further fuelled by information and misinformation fed to him by the SADF-MI personnel in his government.⁵⁹ Ciskei Foreign Affairs Minister Mickey Webb agreed that misinformation indeed was being disseminated by intelligence agencies to fuel the Ciskei's repression and provoke confrontation with the ANC.⁶⁰ Some within MK and the ANC understood that it was the objective of securocrats like van der Westhuizen to derail the political settlement by provoking MK into using violence to justify a blanket repression.⁶¹

Not all of the intelligence fed to Gqozo was fabricated, as the ANC claimed. The TRC hearings on the Bhisho massacre inadvertently unearthed underground activities underway in August. Tatise William Ncapayi suggested that during the 4th August march, he and comrades managed to breach security to reach Gqozo's office. Ncapayi's testimony was interrupted by the audience: the chairperson struggled to hold order following the revelation, which was silenced by the interruption.⁶² The Commissioners, Reverend Bongani Finca and Advocate Dumisa Ntsebeza chose not to press this and other similar evidence pointing to underground activities quietly sanctioned, if not explicitly ordered, by MK leaders.⁶³

Some supporters of MK planned to assassinate Gqozo shortly before the September march. Intelligence regarding Gqozo's movements had been collected; extensive operational plans had been made; the time and place of his murder had been decided. Two days before this planned operation it

⁵⁷ 'Gqozo Was Told of Coup Attempt on Day of Bisho Massacre: TRC Told', South African Press Association, September 10 1996, accessed at <https://omalley.nelsonmandela.org/omalley/index.php/site/q/03lv02424/04lv03275/05lv03276/06lv03278.htm> on 21 March 2022. Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Bisho Massacre Hearings 1, Day 2, 10 September 1996, accessed at <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/bisho1/day2.htm> on 1 March 2022. (NB the transcript refers erroneously to 'Col Peter' [sic].) See also Peter Stiff, *Warfare By Other Means: South Africa in the 1980s and 1990s* (Alberton: Galago, 2001), 526.

⁵⁸ Norm Dixon, 'Evidence that Ciskei Massacre was Planned,' (September 1992), Padraig O'Malley Archives, accessed at <https://omalley.nelsonmandela.org/index.php/site/q/03lv02424/04lv03275/05lv03288/06lv03293.htm> on 22/05/2024.

⁵⁹ For example, Gert Hugo, SADF whistleblower, argued that the murder of Charles Sebe and onward Guzana was a staged 'coup' to convince Gqozo of threats against him, and therefore to drive him into the arms of SADF-MI/ IR-CIS (run by three former SADF officers, Clive Brink, Anton Niewoudt and Ted Brassell). J. Battersby, 'Pretoria's 'Divide and Rule' Strategy in Ciskei,' *Christian Science Monitor*, 9 September 1992.

⁶⁰ TRC, Bisho Massacre Hearings 1, Day 2, 10 September 1996. See also CDF Colonel Zantsi's testimony at this same hearing.

⁶¹ Vantyu, an MK member, was employed by the Border ANC to provide security expertise and leadership in advance of the September march. Vantyu, 'Bisho Massacre'; Interview with Petros Vantyu, East London (3 July 2019).

⁶² TRC, Bisho Massacre Hearings 1, Day 2, 10 September 1996.

⁶³ The evidence of Butiki John Kibi suggested he was involved in underground activities prior to the September march, and that he had a close working relationship with Hani, who was closely involved with politics and MK networks in the Border. *Ibid.*

was vetoed by a senior member of the organisation - possibly Hani - for it risked making a martyr out of Gqozo.⁶⁴ It is difficult to establish what was known by Skenjana Roji, MK commander in the Border, who passed away just a year later in 1993. Gqozo's cabinet and CDF chiefs were convinced of a planned coup to coincide with the march in a 'two pronged approach'.⁶⁵ On the eve of the march, Ciskei official Brigadier Nkani reported to the Zwelitsha Chief Magistrate that the ANC had been amassing arms which they planned to use in the march on Bisho: '[h]uge amounts of weapons and ammunition were smuggled into the Ciskei since the end of August 1992, which are going to be used at the mass action', he claimed.⁶⁶ The ANC's Silumko Sokupa denied the allegations, reiterating the intentions for a peaceful march.⁶⁷

At the Goldstone Commission, the Ciskei government cited press sources that noted the presence of arms among the crowd: Hani, seeing a comrade with a gun, chided him to 'put it away, Comrade, you are going to cause a massacre'.⁶⁸ If these claims were inflated they were not wholly untrue: some members of the regional ANC leadership knew that comrades had arranged for cars carrying ammunition to accompany the march, should the need to use it arise.⁶⁹ Kasrils and Hani had both been involved in supplying arms and establishing caches in the Ciskei.⁷⁰ It was also known within MK networks that a consignment of weapons had been ordered for transportation to the Ciskei prior to the September march.⁷¹ If some leaders claimed that the march was intended to be peaceful they were not lying. But there is good reason to believe that others - particularly those with MK links, a number of whom were in the strategising group - conceded to the presence of arms at the march, to protect demonstrators in the event of a confrontation and to bolster the occupation of Bisho by a People's Assembly.⁷² Mike Hala, then Commander of MK's Transkei region, had been summoned along with around twenty other cadres from Transkei to protect Chris Hani and other leaders at the head of the march. Hala and comrades were not prepared for a military confrontation: there had not been a discussion of military strategy. They had been informed by CDF informers the day before the

⁶⁴ Mluleki George, cited in White, 'The Rule of Brigadier Oupa Gqozo,' 130; personal communication with anonymous former MK operative. By the early 1990s, MK had established networks across the Border region. P. Mangashe, 'Operation Zikomo: The Armed Struggle, the Underground and Mass Mobilisation in South Africa's Border Region, 1986-1990, Through the Experiences of MK Cadres,' *South African Historical Journal*, 70, 1, (2018), 42-55.

⁶⁵ This was maintained by Gqozo in the wake of the march and is a view supported by (then CDF Colonel), Silence Pita at the TRC. 'Gqozo Was Told Of Coup Attempt on Day of Bisho Massacre, TRC Told,' SAPA, 10 September 1996, accessed at <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/media/1996/9609/s960910d.htm> on 2 March 2022; TRC, Bisho Massacre Hearings 1, Day 2, 10 September 1996; Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Bisho Massacre Hearings 2, Day 2, 19 November 1996, Colonel Chris Nel, accessed at <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/bisho2/nel.htm> on 2 March 2022.

⁶⁶ Nkani cited in 'ANC has Smuggled in Arms- Claim,' *Citizen*, 7 September 1992. Such evidence had been collected under oath, it was argued. TRC, Bisho Massacre Hearings 2, Day 2, 19 November 1996, Colonel Chris Nel.

⁶⁷ 'ANC has Smuggled in Arms- Claim,' *Citizen*, 7 September 1992.

⁶⁸ G. Jebson, East Cape News Agency, cited in 'Goldstone Commission of Inquiry Regarding the Prevention of Public Violence and Intimidation, Held at Bisho, Ciskei, Violence in Bisho- 23 September,' Proceedings Transcript, Historical Papers Research Archive, University of the Witwatersrand, AK 3342f Goldstone Commission, 1991-1994, B- DVD, Evidence: Mo449 (hereafter 'Goldstone Commission Transcript').

⁶⁹ Interview with Crispian Olver.

⁷⁰ *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report: Volume 2* (London: Macmillan, 1999), 683.

⁷¹ Personal communication with anonymous former MK operative.

⁷² MK cadres in the area were allegedly 'combat ready' to defend demonstrators from an attack by Ciskei troops. 'ANC Move to Oust Gqozo: Bloodbath Feared as Alliance Gathers for Ciskei Showdown,' *City Press*, 6 September 1992.

march about the hole in the stadium fence, deliberately left by the CDF as a 'luring ambush' and to be avoided at all cost. Kasrils' decision to go through this hole was, he argues, 'inexplicable'.⁷³

CDF soldiers were worried about the likelihood of violence and it is not surprising that they felt vulnerable to attack.⁷⁴ Ciskei personnel, members of the CDF especially, faced intimidation, violence and attacks on their homes. By August 1992, many Ciskei personnel had sought refuge in Bisho, in East London and in CDF compounds.⁷⁵ Gqozo had instructed his soldiers that they should sleep at the barracks the night before the march; senior CDF officers were also acting strangely, in the knowledge of the CDF's last minute plans. Mzwabantu Nqabisa, whose brother, Rifleman Vusumzi Sydney Nqabisa, was the CDF soldier killed on 7th September, returned home against orders to warn his family that they should not attend the march as 'there was going to be trouble in Ciskei'.⁷⁶

Ciskei personnel were well aware of the regime's weakness; its susceptibility in the face of mass protests, disgruntled civil servants and poor military capacity. This is what informed the uncompromising stance towards the planned People's Assembly, since it was understood that to allow demonstrators into Bisho might indeed precipitate the collapse of the regime. On 28th August, Pik Botha's Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs met with Ciskei ministers Mickey Webb and Henk Kayser at the Ciskei Council of State. On the likely outcomes of the forthcoming march Kayser warned that

security forces... are so thin on the ground that if those people ... get in here to Bisho we would not know how to handle them and thousands of civil servants are sitting there crumbling in their offices... What is going to happen then if it comes from all sides? Our security forces won't be adequate on the ground.⁷⁷

Ministers in the Ciskei government firmly believed - and rightly - that the objective of the march was to bring about a change of regime. If their imaginations embellished the intentions of the planned People's Assembly with rumours that Bisho 'would be razed to the ground', their fears also reflected the circumstances of ongoing conflict intensified by the ANC's underground military activities. Webb told the TRC that '[f]rightening stories were prevalent and the mood of the Ciskei government... was to prevent an invasion, destruction, and insurrection'.⁷⁸ As Advocate Ntsebeza of the TRC also noted, 'the fear of being unseated by popular demand' was a real concern for the Ciskei government as it was for the foot soldiers of the regime living the daily realities of an escalating warzone.⁷⁹

Despite what they later claimed, ANC leaders were well aware of the likelihood of state violence. Gqozo threatened publicly and repeatedly that he would use violence to prevent demonstrators

⁷³ M. Hala, 'M.M. Hala: Memoirs of an Umkhonto WeSizwe Cadre,' (MA Thesis, Rhodes University, 2022), 76-77.

⁷⁴ White, 'The Rule of Brigadier Oupa Gqozo,' 135.

⁷⁵ TRC, Bisho Hearings 1, Day 3, 11 September 1996, Marius Oelschig, accessed at <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/bisho1/day3.htm> on 8 March 2022; TRC, Bisho Massacre Hearings 2, Day 2, 19 November 1996, Brigadier Gqozo, accessed at <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/bisho2/gqozo.htm> on 8 March 2022.

⁷⁶ *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report: Volume 3* (London: Macmillan, 1999), 138.

⁷⁷ TRC, Bisho Massacre Hearings 1, Day 1, 9 September 1996, Kayser cited by Advocate Ntsebeza, accessed at <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/bisho1/day1.htm> on 8 March 2022.

⁷⁸ TRC, Bisho Massacre Hearings 1, Day 2, September 10 1996.

⁷⁹ TRC, Bisho Massacre Hearings 1, Day 1, 9 September 1996.

from entering Ciskei.⁸⁰ Shortly before the march ANC leaders warned Gqozo in return: 'Our people in Ciskei are coming to remove you from the seat of power. Come what may.'⁸¹ Two days before the march, the districts of East London, King William's Town, Queenstown, Cathcart and Stutterheim were declared unrest areas and the presence of South African security stepped up.⁸² ANC leaders confirmed that 'imminent threats of violence are in the air'.⁸³ On the eve of the march, Suttner described the threat of violence as central to the ANC's brinkmanship: 'At some stage De Klerk would have had to choose whether allies like Gqozo were worth their trouble. Now he will be forced into making that decision... Can he afford a bloodbath as the price of maintaining that alliance, or is Gqozo becoming more a liability than an asset?'⁸⁴ Members of the strategising committee accepted the significant risk of violence and accepted that their plan to 'storm Bisho' would 'incur losses'.⁸⁵ Shortly after the massacre Kasrils reported: 'Everyone knew there was a risk... but we believed getting rid of Gqozo was worth that risk.'⁸⁶ Nevertheless, the mood was high and hopeful, to the extent that many underestimated the risk or least hoped that the threat was less grave than many feared. Leaders with young children at home took up their places at the head of the march, believing in the strength and possibility of popular solidarity and that the South African government would come to its senses to prevent the worst coming to pass.⁸⁷ No methodical or studied risk assessment was conducted by Alliance leaders in the final planning phases before the march.⁸⁸ Compelled by the militancy of local branches to press ahead with the march to confront Gqozo, some leaders accepted that the risk of state violence was balanced by the murderous brutality of the regime being experienced daily by communities in the region.⁸⁹

Leaders anticipated a hard negotiation, brought about through direct action, to force the South African regime to remove Gqozo. Only some adopted the language of insurrection. 'The battle lines are drawn,' Chris Hani told a gathering at Ndevana, near King William's Town, on Sunday 6th. 'Tomorrow we are going to Bisho to remove Oupa Gqozo, De Klerk's "kitchen boy"'. 'We are sick and tired of him. We must remove him from power tomorrow so we can elect an interim administration in his place... not later than tomorrow... we will sleep there if we have to.'⁹⁰ 'This is not just a symbolic march', echoed Suttner, 'we are creating a crisis situation for the other side,' to force De Klerk to discipline and end his alliance with Gqozo.⁹¹ As crowds gathered at the Victoria Grounds on

⁸⁰ Gqozo relayed his stance on 4th August to Pdraig O'Malley, pointing to the near fatal outcome of that march and his intention to defend Ciskeian territory: 'I said [to Pik Botha]... I'm going to shoot the bastards if they make a false move. And my troops will not stand there the whole day.' P. O'Malley, interview with Brigadier Gqozo, 14 August 1992, Heart of Hope Archive, accessed at <https://omalley.nelsonmandela.org/index.php/site/q/03lv00017/04lv00344/05lv00607/06lv00690.htm> on 8 March 2022.

⁸¹ 'ANC Move to Oust Gqozo: Bloodbath Feared as Alliance Gathers for Ciskei Showdown', *City Press*, 6 September 1992

⁸² *Ibid.* 1000 South African troops were deployed in the area. 'Tension in Ciskei on the Eve of the ANC March: Fuse to Bisho Powder Keg Burns', *Sowetan*, 7 September 1992.

⁸³ 'ANC Move to Oust Gqozo: Bloodbath Feared as Alliance Gathers for Ciskei Showdown', *City Press*, 6 September 1992

⁸⁴ 'ANC Plan to Drive a Wedge in the Nats' Alliance', *Business Day*, 7 September 1992.

⁸⁵ Interview with Crispian Olver.

⁸⁶ 'Profile : ANC Leader in Ciskei Protest Is a Veteran of Brinkmanship', *LA Times*, 15 Sept 1992.

⁸⁷ Interview with Lucille Meyer.

⁸⁸ Nowhere in the Border ANC Report is there mention of a risk assessment in the planning meetings before the march. Olver described this equivalence of risk as common in local discourse and in the minds of leaders. Interview with Crispian Olver.

⁸⁹ Interview with Lucille Meyer; Interview with Crispian Olver.

⁹⁰ 'Ciskei Crisis: Battle Lines Drawn at Bisho', *Cape Times*, 7 September 1992.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

the morning of 7th September, Steve Tshwete declared to the crowd: 'We are going to Bisho to drive the pig out of the barn!'⁹²

Shortly before the scheduled march, Suttner alluded to the lack of strategic clarity around the march: 'The ANC's Ciskei initiative is a germ, an embryo, of a process, although not a process whose completion we can yet see. But it is, therefore, more than just a Border initiative. If Gqozo goes, Mangope would be our obvious next target.'⁹³ In hindsight, Suttner openly accepted the strategic failures. In a candid analysis, he acknowledged the rushed preparations; the lack of clarity concerning the objective of the march; the ambiguous tactics to be employed to realise this objective; and the relevance of an appeal to De Klerk as the political arbiter in Ciskei. 'We were not clear what we would do in Bisho,' he reflected; '[t]here was talk of a people's assembly. There was also an expectation that sections of the security forces and civil service would join us. Would we then have removed Gqozo? ...these questions had not been answered nor was there real debate...'. What did seem clear was a common commitment, at least rhetorically, 'that we would occupy Bisho and thereby remove Gqozo. That seemed to be the understanding of a lot of activists and leadership of the alliance - at every level'.⁹⁴

If national leaders lacked clarity on the role of the occupation and the People's Assembly, local activists and leaders were a little more precise. The People's Assembly as a mode of direct democracy was adopted by the civic movement in areas still dominated by bantustan rule, as a solution - amid neglect at CODESA - to the question of interim government. In May 1992, People's Assemblies were planned by SANCO in the northern and eastern Transvaal, as a method to resolve disputes with traditional authorities over local government.⁹⁵ As Lulamile Nazo described, activists were adamant they would go to Bisho to hold a peaceful demonstration, on the model of the People's Assembly held in East London in late July. This was not a planned coup or a naïve attempt to 'overthrow' the Ciskei regime: it was to be a visible performance of people's power; a demonstration of the strength and breadth of the alliance in the region, and a testament to the illegitimacy of Gqozo's regime. They intended to force the government in Pretoria to intervene.⁹⁶ The powerful civics in the Border had since March 1992 been clear that the purpose of the People's Assembly would be to elect a new interim regime to replace Gqozo.⁹⁷ It was to be 'a march of occupation', Whittles concurred.⁹⁸

The ANC's assessment of Gqozo as De Klerk's puppet was problematic. Leaders misunderstood the nature of Gqozo's alliance, which was with the military generals and not with the political executive. When interviewed in August, Gqozo saw himself as having been betrayed by De Klerk, and lamented De Klerk's failure to protect him.⁹⁹ At the TRC Gqozo reiterated: 'I owed no allegiance to the Pretoria Government. On the contrary I had a lot of fights with them, and they definitely did not like me.'

⁹² 'Ciskei March is On', *Cape Argus*, 7 September 1992; R. Kasrils, *Armed and Dangerous: My Underground Struggle Against Apartheid* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1993), 359- 360.

⁹³ 'ANC Plan to Drive a Wedge in the Nats' Alliance', *Business Day*, 7 September 1992.

⁹⁴ Suttner, 'The Bisho March and Massacre,' 22.

⁹⁵ 'Peoples Assemblies Plan Mooted by Civic Body', *New Nation*, 22-28 May 1992.

⁹⁶ Interview with Lulamile Nazo; Interview with Lucille Meyer; Vantyu, 'The Bisho Massacre'; Suttner, 'The Bisho March and Massacre,' 14-25.

⁹⁷ The tradition of direct democracy in the civics is discussed in T. Botha, 'Civic Associations as Autonomous Organs of Grassroots Participation,' *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory*, 79 (May 1992), 71.

⁹⁸ 'Albert Whittles and the museum historian discuss the aims of the march'.

⁹⁹ Gqozo interview with P. O'Malley, 14 August 1992, Heart of Hope Archive, accessed at <https://omalley.nelsonmandela.org/omalley/index.php/site/q/03lv00017/04lv00344/05lv00607/06lv00690.htm> on 3 March 2022.

They would never have supported me on anything...'.¹⁰⁰ Had De Klerk been inclined to discipline the SADF generals supporting Gqozo's intransigent stance, which at this stage he was still unwilling to do, it is questionable whether he would have had the power to intervene as quickly as the ANC anticipated.¹⁰¹

Evidence of underground military operations to topple or assassinate Gqozo must be understood in the context of the regional territorial struggle that was escalating between, on the one hand, Holomisa's Transkei and his allies in MK, and, on the other, South African covert military operations who were engaged in efforts to undermine Hani, Holomisa and the influence of MK and the liberation movement in the region through the conduit of the Ciskei's military regime. For the South African security state, Gqozo's military regime provided both a bulwark against Holomisa and his support for MK in Transkei and a platform for their hostile activities.¹⁰² Many MK cadres - returning from exile and connected to Hani's networks in Transkei - were present in the vicinity of East London.¹⁰³ It was believed with good reason among MK cadres that South African covert operatives, working from East London and through the Ciskei regime, had further plans to install a favourable ally in Transkei which threatened the lives of both Holomisa and Hani.¹⁰⁴ Gqozo reputedly vowed to shoot Hani dead should he set foot in Ciskei. This strategic imperative arguably informed the reluctance by the South African government to intervene against Gqozo and the securocrats who supported him, for to do so would compromise such operations.¹⁰⁵ Holomisa was furious at South African involvement in coup attempts against him. De Klerk and Pik Botha refused to apologise and, indignant in the face of Holomisa's accusations, De Klerk silenced him with threats to sever financial and diplomatic ties.¹⁰⁶ Beyond the obvious demand for peace and democracy, for Hani, Holomisa and other MK leaders, the march on Ciskei was thus also about confronting the securocrats behind Gqozo's regime and challenging their territorial agenda in the region. While the ANC executive would not have supported a coup by MK against Gqozo, the march was an invaluable opportunity to

¹⁰⁰ TRC, Bisho Massacre Hearings 2, Day 2, 19 November 1992, Brigadier Gqozo, accessed at <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/bisho2/gqozo.htm> on 10 March 2022. Pik Botha also described these poor diplomatic relations: see TRC, Bisho Massacre Hearings 1, Day 1, 9 September 1996, Pik Botha.

¹⁰¹ P. Rich, 'Apartheid, the State and the Reconstruction of the Political System,' in P. Rich (ed), *Reaction and Renewal in South Africa* (London: Macmillan, 1996), 57-58.

¹⁰² For a discussion of the context and this 'militant moment' in Transkei, see Tim Gibbs, *Mandela's Kinsmen: Nationalist Elites & Apartheid's First Bantustan* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2014), 147-150.

¹⁰³ My thanks to Patrick Mangashe for this insight.

¹⁰⁴ The attempted Duli coup to oust Holomisa in November 1990 had been supported by covert South African operations long underway in the region: SADF-MI officers behind the International Research front company linked to Ciskei intelligence (IR-CIS, run by Clive Brink, Anton Niewoudt, Ted Brassell) had supplied weapons for the coup through Vlakplaas (Gen. Eugene De Kock) and the South African Directorate of Covert Collection (DCC, Gen. Christoffel Pierre 'Joffel' van Der Westhuizen). 'Vlakplaas Amnesty Applicants Tell of Failed 1990 Transkei Coup,' South African Press Association, 20th April 1999, accessed at <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/media/1999/9904/s990420b.htm> on 5th June 2024. IR-CIS was also behind the murder of Onward Guzana and Charles Sebe. Peires, 'The Implosion', 379-380. As head of the Eastern Province Command in the 1980s Van de Westhuizen had (alongside Andreas 'Kat' Liebenberg) set up numerous covert operations under 'Operation Katzen' to wage war on the liberation movement and murder its activists, including the Cradock Four and PEBCO Three. A. Minnaar, 'The PEBCO Three, Cradock Four (Goniwe) and Motherwell Killings'; L. Flanagan, 'Covert Operations in the Eastern Cape' and S. Sole, 'The Hammer unit and Goniwe Murders' in *The Hidden Hand: Covert Operations in South Africa*, ed. C. Schutte, I. Liebenberg and A. Minnaar, 2nd ed. (Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council, 1998).

¹⁰⁵ TRC, Bisho Massacre Hearings 1, Day 1, Bongani Finca and Dumisa Ntsebeza. For context see Peires, 'The Implosion,' 373- 376, 379.

¹⁰⁶ Peires, 'The Implosion,' 374-375.

oust him for strategic gain.¹⁰⁷ Once again, the Border region was a central battleground in the war for liberation.¹⁰⁸

7th September: The 'Berlin Wall'

On the morning of 7th September, large crowds gathered for a rally at the Victoria Grounds in King William's Town. Meanwhile, Alliance leaders met with Peace Accord officials, John Hall and Antonie Gildenhuys, who were given assurance that the leadership would adhere to the conditions of the march, now permitted to enter the Bhisho stadium.¹⁰⁹ Meanwhile, members of the strategising committee - including Skenjana Roji; Andrew Hendricks; Ronnie Kasrils; and Smuts Ngonyama, driven by Crispian Olver in his bakkie - went to survey the situation at the border.¹¹⁰ They found the razor wire erected to prevent the march from proceeding to the main intersection in Bhisho. As Hani later explained: 'There was no Berlin wall before [on 4 August], but on this day... this fence was erected to stop us moving into Bisho'.¹¹¹ On entering the stadium the advance group found a hole in the perimeter fence, left during the previous march.¹¹²

The eleventh-hour approval, permitting demonstrators access to the stadium, was not anticipated in the already-rushed preparations made by the Alliance and by the Ciskei's security forces. Gqozo had remained adamant that the march should not be permitted. If some among the march leadership had hoped that the march might proceed to Bhisho via different routes, they found that all alternative access routes were blocked by Ciskei police: only the main road from King Williams Town - Maitland Road - would be passable.¹¹³ The huge demonstration - large by metropolitan standards and quite colossal for the resources and spaces of a provincial town - would be funnelled into one column for the five kilometre walk to Bhisho, intensifying the pressure on space, security resources and nerves.

At about 12h00, the march set off for Bhisho. At 13h00, members of the strategising committee went ahead to survey the situation in the stadium.¹¹⁴ They encountered the Peace Accord officials, John Hall and Antonie Gildenhuys, stationed on the Ciskei side behind the razor wire fence that had been erected to block access to Bhisho. A conversation ensued between Kasrils; Hendricks; Hall and Gildenhuys. The peace officials cautioned the leaders of the tense situation, and of the importance of allowing time for 'shuttle diplomacy', which had been critical in averting violence on 4th August. Kasrils, at times monosyllabic, seemed eager to end the conversation. When Gildenhuys enquired as to whether the leaders intended to remain within the stadium or to seek alternative access to

¹⁰⁷ Holomisa had also long aspired to incorporate Ciskei into a 'greater Transkei': the SADF's domination of the smaller bantustan was an obvious obstacle. M. Ottaway, *South Africa: The Struggle for a New Order* (Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1993), 186; Interview with Bantu Holomisa, BBC World Service, 'Talkabout Africa: Bloody Massacre in Ciskei', 9 September 1992, accessed at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p03mn770> on 1 June 2021.

¹⁰⁸ Flanagan, 'Covert Operations.'

¹⁰⁹ TRC, Bisho Massacre Hearings 2, Day 2, 19 November 1996, Antonie Gildenhuys; TRC, Bisho Massacre Hearings 2, Day 1, 18 November 1996, General Johannes Viktor.

¹¹⁰ According to Smuts Ngonyama, Donn   Cooney was also present. TRC, Bisho Massacre Hearings 1, Day 1.

¹¹¹ ANC, 'Bisho: The Story Behind the Massacre.'

¹¹² Interview with Crispian Olver.

¹¹³ While some in the Border leadership maintained that only the main road would be utilised as the route for the march, Kasrils and Suttner both pointed to plans for multiple columns of marchers to proceed to Bhisho. Border ANC Report, 13 (with Kasrils' annotations); Suttner, 'The Bisho March and Massacre,' 23.

¹¹⁴ TRC, Bisho Massacre Hearings 1, Day 1, 9 September 1996, Ngonyama.

Bhisho, Kasrils was avoidant: 'Well, we're on our way, so you'll have to see. I can't say any more than that...', he said, indicating in his vague response that they had little intention of remaining within the stadium or relying on Peace Accord intermediaries to broker negotiations.¹¹⁵

The advance group returned to the main march for a rapid meeting with other leaders in the strategising group, which included Ramaphosa but excluded many other local leaders. With little time to spare before the march reached the border, it was decided that the march would divide into two groups: on reaching the border, one group, headed by Ramaphosa, would proceed to the razor wire to pursue negotiations via the peace secretariat; the other, led by Kasrils and others in the strategising committee who had accompanied the morning reccy, would enter the stadium and pass through the gap in the fence towards Bhisho.¹¹⁶

As the march neared the entrance to the stadium, before the razor wire fence that was strung along the border, Kasrils and other leaders - many of whom had been in the advance group (including Hani, Roji, Olver, Linda Mti and Smuts Ngonyama) - turned into the stadium. Some demonstrators made for the stands. Kasrils ran ahead into the stadium, while Hani hung further back. '[B]ecause I am an exceptionally fast runner,' said Kasrils in hindsight, 'I was at the front of the marchers when we arrived at the stadium. Chris Hani was some distance behind me. I beckoned to others to follow me and together with Linda [Mti] and Smuts [Ngonyama], started moving through the gap in the fence.'¹¹⁷ As the crowd of demonstrators reached the razor wire barrier, General van der Bank of the CDF observed disagreement among 'factions' at the head of the march: '[W]hen the crowd moved in there were factions... running all over, going there, coming back, going there, it was chaos.'¹¹⁸ Perhaps he refers to a disagreement between Kasrils and Hani at the head of the march. Reporting after the massacre, the Border leadership noted that as the dense crowd were halted at the razor wire, some attempted in frustration to force and breach the barrier preventing their access to Bhisho; indeed, some succeeded in making a gap in the razor wire barrier where it had been fixed to the permanent stadium fencing.¹¹⁹ With CDF troops stationed immediately behind the razor wire, facing the crowd, the situation grew ever more critical.

The brutal and tragic events that followed are well known and have been subjected to extensive scrutiny, at the Goldstone Commission; the TRC; criminal trials and academic publications.¹²⁰ CDF troops were stationed in front of the government buildings beyond the stadium; in a hidden trench in the open ground between the stadium and the government buildings; and all along the razor wire preventing access to Bhisho. Kasrils led a group of demonstrators through the hole in the perimeter fence of the stadium, towards Bhisho, and directly towards troops who were hidden in a trench on the open ground.¹²¹ The decision to go through the gap in the fence forestalled any possibility of Ramaphosa and other leaders at the razor wire engaging in negotiations via the Peace Accord. The group that had entered the stadium with a view to breaching the fence were known to be hostile

¹¹⁵ A3345 Kasrils Papers, E2.2.2, Personal submission by RK to the TRC on the Bisho massacre, Typescript of conversation at the razor wire fence, between Ronnie Kasrils, Andrew Hendricks, Antonie Gildenhuys and John Hall, Bhisho, 7th Sept 1992.

¹¹⁶ Border ANC Report, 14.

¹¹⁷ Kasrils Affidavit regarding Bisho Massacre, 14th March 1996, Cape Town. Kasrils Papers, A3345, E2.2.1.

¹¹⁸ Gen van der Bank, TRC, <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/bisho2/vdbank.htm>

¹¹⁹ This was a different gap in the fence from that in the stadium fencing, through which Kasrils' group ran. Border ANC Report, 15.

¹²⁰ White, 'The Rule of Brigadier Oupa Gqozo'; Victor, 'The Politics of Remembering.'

¹²¹ According to Kasrils, interviewed shortly after the events, members of this group were 'hand-picked' and had been briefed on establishing an occupation of Bhisho. 'A Risk Too Far for Kasrils,' *Star*, 12 September 1992.

towards the Peace Accord.¹²² Many of them had not been present at meetings with Hall and Gildenhuys earlier that morning.¹²³ With orders to employ every capacity to prevent marchers reaching Bhisho, CDF Colonel Mkosana, believing that his troops were under fire, informed his commanders who gave permission to open fire.¹²⁴ In two long volleys of automatic fire, bullets rained down on protesters – upon those in Kasrils' group exiting the stadium and those in the dense crowd approaching the razor wire fence. Realising that they were being shot at, many among Kasrils' group retreated to the stadium only to be shot from behind while running away. More than 425 rounds of ammunition were fired in two long volleys; grenades were also fired at the crowd.¹²⁵ As a helicopter flew overhead, some demonstrators believed they were being fired on from above.¹²⁶ Demonstrators dived for cover, with many acting as human shields to protect political leaders from the gunfire. 28 demonstrators were killed, while more than 200 sustained serious injury from the gunfire. One Ciskei soldier was killed by CDF fire. Amid the chaos, confusion and horror, people tended to their injured comrades. With the road blocked by the colossal size of the march, ambulances struggled through the crowd to reach the stadium. Some comrades, lying badly injured and vulnerable in hospital, were later hunted out and harassed by Ciskei police: even in the wake of this horrendous show of force, state repression did not relent.¹²⁷

After the Massacre

Following the massacre, leaders including Hani and Kasrils stayed with traumatised activists in the Bhisho stadium, where they held a night vigil. The next morning, Mandela accompanied a memorial march from King William's Town to Bhisho, where Tutu and other church leaders delivered a rousing memorial service. 'We have come to wipe your tears... to pour oil on the wounds in your hearts...' expressed the Reverend, '[b]ut we have come also to tell you that there is *no way* in which injustice; there is *no way* in which oppression; there is *no way* in which a lie will prevail forever!' Tutu also made plain his anger towards some in the ANC leadership:

We have come as church leaders in support of the church leaders in this region, to demonstrate our solidarity, not with the ANC; our solidarity with our people in their struggle for justice and peace. It is important that we make that quite clear...¹²⁸

Mandela's statement at the memorial laid the blame firmly at the feet of the government: the massacre by the CDF 'was not just the action of a bantustan leader', he argued, '[t]here were bigger

¹²² Interview with Crispian Olver. John Hall had been highly critical of ANC regional leadership and its Campaign for Peace and Democracy in March, blaming them for the breakdown of peace structures in the region. 'Peace Body's Failure ANC's Fault', *Star*, 27 March 1992.

¹²³ TRC, Bisho Massacre Hearings 2, Day 2, 19 November 1996, Antonie Gildenhuys; TRC, Bisho Massacre Hearings 2, Day 1, 18 November 1996, General Johannes Viktor.

¹²⁴ TRC Amnesty Decision, Vakele Archibald Mkosana and Mzamile Thomas Gonya, AM 4458/96, AM 7882/97. Accessed at <https://sabctrc.saha.org.za/documents/decisions/59245.htm?t=%2BBisho+%2Bmassacre> on 4 May 2023.

¹²⁵ Video evidence established that the first volley of automatic fire lasted 90 seconds and the second lasted 60 seconds. Goldstone Commission Report; Goldstone Commission Transcript.

¹²⁶ The Commission could not confirm this. The helicopter was a South African police surveillance craft. Goldstone Commission Transcript. See also Victor, 'The Politics of Remembering,' 92.

¹²⁷ Interview with Petros Vantyu; Truth And Reconciliation Commission, Bisho Massacre Hearings 2, Day 1, 18 November 1996, Petros Vantyu, accessed at <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/bisho2/vantyu.htm> on 1 March 2022.

¹²⁸ Historical Papers Research Archive, University of the Witwatersrand, AB2378-389 09-09-1992 Desmond Tutu Interviews - Visit to Bisho After Massacre.

forces behind him... our task as democrats is to pull out South Africa from this quagmire.'¹²⁹ The ANC made a public statement from Johannesburg, condemning the CDF's gross aggression while underplaying the element of confrontation and alluding to ongoing mass action: 'The unprovoked killing of unarmed demonstrators at Bisho, today Monday 7th September, by troops in the hire of Brigadier Gqozo... marks a crucial turning point in the current phase of the struggle for democracy in South Africa.'¹³⁰ The Border ANC issued another statement, reiterating the focused local demands for free political activity; the removal of Gqozo; interim government in Ciskei; the scrapping of section 43; the removal of Peace Force; stating their ongoing commitment to negotiations and peace.¹³¹ Gqozo and the South African government blamed the ANC: De Klerk blamed the ANC's mass action campaign while Gqozo claimed that that the shooting was defensive and that demonstrators had fired the first shots.¹³² The Ciskei government's Pickard Commission claimed, apparently with little irony, that the ANC's leaders had led the marchers towards CDF guns 'like lambs to the slaughter.'¹³³

Press coverage proliferated in South Africa and internationally. The right-wing press blamed the 'insurrectionary' communist leadership including Kasrils, Hani, Suttner and others. According to this view, mass action was perilous and the Alliance should be held responsible for provoking violence.¹³⁴ More balanced coverage placed blame on the CDF, and on the South African government for having failed to intervene. Such accounts, otherwise more sympathetic to the Alliance, also scrutinised the march leadership and Kasrils' decision to break out of the Bisho stadium and into the line of fire.¹³⁵ Leaders were accused of using local demonstrators as 'cannon fodder' in a politics of brinkmanship.¹³⁶ Church leaders came out in a collective condemnation of all sides of political leadership: while the Ciskei and government should be held accountable for the violence, Alliance leaders had behaved irresponsibly, they argued, exploiting local circumstances for political gain.¹³⁷

Contrary to a dominant narrative which holds that the massacre at Bisho solidified commitment to talks, there is evidence that the massacre stalled the progress already being made in talks, and aggravated cleavages within the ANC alliance. Given that in August new rounds of negotiations were already on the cards, why did Ramaphosa feel it was necessary to pursue this hard confrontation? It seems likely that the imperative of securing a mandate for his leadership in negotiations among the ANC's caucus through association with radical mass action was a central driving force behind his support for the march, which would have gone ahead regardless. It was also surely an effort to hold together the Alliance and its leadership. Journalist Gavin Evans saw the massacre as a major setback

¹²⁹ ANC, 'Bisho: The Story Behind the Massacre'. Hani echoed this analysis on 11th September: 'The triggers were pulled in Bisho, but the plan was hatched in Pretoria.' C. Hani, 'Just How Possible is Peace?' *African Communist* 130, Third Quarter (October 1992), 6.

¹³⁰ Historical Papers Research Archive, University of the Witwatersrand, AK2818, Bisho Massacre (Truth and Reconciliation Commission), File 5 Part 2, Statement of the African National Congress on the Bisho Killings, 7th September 1992.

¹³¹ AK2818, File 5 part 1.

¹³² 'FW Blames Bloodshed on Mass Action,' *Business Day*, 8 September 1992; for an excellent discussion of blame-laying following the massacre see Victor, 'The Politics of Remembering,' 89-92.

¹³³ Stiff, *Warfare*, 527.

¹³⁴ Suttner, 'The Bisho March and Massacre,' 18.

¹³⁵ For example, among various other coverage in this edition of the *Weekly Mail*, P. van Niekerk, 'It's Time for Another Letter, Mr. Mandela,' *Weekly Mail*, 11-17 September 1992; D. Beresford, 'Blood and Tears,' *Weekly Mail*, 11-17 September 1992.

¹³⁶ 'Focus on Ciskei', Sowetan, 9 September 1992.

¹³⁷ 'Church Condemns Attitudes, Actions,' *Citizen*, 9 September 1992; *Pretoria News*, 12 September 1992.

on the road to progress in the national negotiations.¹³⁸ The day following the massacre, as Mandela spoke of the quick resumption of talks to 'save' South Africa, Hani pointed to public anger in the Border and a lack of enthusiasm for talks. Many young comrades called for a return to armed struggle. Hani told the press of the situation in the Border: 'I can't see [Gqozo] being able to contain the anger'; 'People will kill members of the Ciskei police and defence force. People will get revenge.'¹³⁹ The same day, following Tutu's service at Bhisho, Kasrils reportedly declared that the ANC should re-evaluate its suspension of the armed struggle in the wake of the massacre, to which he received a 'rousing cheer'.¹⁴⁰

Violence in the Border region escalated significantly.¹⁴¹ While ANC supporters faced continued repression, the violence was also characterised by retaliatory attacks on Ciskei personnel. As Albert Whittles explained, 'fighting broke out in all villages. People were burnt, people were killed, people were attacked. And there was a lot of anger... people were not afraid of anybody. Anything that had to do with Ciskei was attacked.'¹⁴² After the widely attended funeral for victims of the massacre, held at the Victoria Grounds in King William's Town on 18th September, further violence and looting ensued; Youth League President Peter Mokaba proclaimed that 'the time has come to fight fire with fire... we must fight, Comrades.'¹⁴³ By October, the conflict between the ANC and the ADM was escalating into 'overt warfare'.¹⁴⁴ While angry, communities across the Border were also profoundly traumatised by the massacre. Having waged a militant campaign for many months, the tragic crescendo of 7th September forced activists and leaders of the Border ANC into a period of grief, uncertainty and introspection. While families and communities mourned those killed in the gunfire, and nursed the injured, leaders of the Border Region ANC experienced intense personal distress as a consequence of the tragedy.¹⁴⁵ The momentum of their popular campaign against Gqozo was halted.

The fallout of the massacre - and the international reputational damage it caused for politicians of both the NP and the ANC - threatened to have a major impact on the South African economy, further focusing the minds of national leaders. The massacre dented investor confidence and precipitated a downturn in the housing market.¹⁴⁶ Following a worrying report from the Minister of Finance, Derek Keys, in mid-September De Klerk proposed a summit on violence. Mandela agreed to the summit on condition that the NP met conditions regarding hostels, dangerous weapons and the release of political prisoners. After the massacre the country had 'come very near to a disaster', and the deadlock in negotiations had to be broken 'to save the country from that disaster' Mandela

¹³⁸ 'Echoes of a Fatal Volley,' *Guardian*, 10 September 1992.

¹³⁹ 'Mandela Places Wreath at Site of Ciskei Massacre', United Press International, 9 September 1992.

¹⁴⁰ 'Ciskei Leader Bends to Pressure for Poll: Gqozo Apologises to Churchmen for Massacre of ANC Marchers,' *Independent*, 8 September 1992.

¹⁴¹ TRC, Bisho Massacre Hearings 1, Day 1, 9 September, Smuts Ngonyama.

¹⁴² 'Albert Whittles Reflects on the Outbreak of Violence After the March (audio recording, Amathole Museum, c.2017), accessed at

http://www.museum.za.net/index.php?option=com_sermonspeaker&view=sermon&id=4:albert-whittles-reflects-on-the-outbreak-of-violence-after-the-massacre&Itemid=203 on 14 May 2019.

¹⁴³ 'South Africa May Seek Shift in Black Homelands,' *Washington Post*, 18 September 1992.

¹⁴⁴ *TRC Report Volume 2*, 671–672; Historical Papers Research Archives, University of the Witwatersrand, Independent Board of Inquiry into Informal Repression (IBI), Records, AG2543, 2.2.29, IBI Report (October 1992), 33; L. Evans, 'The Bantustan State and the South African Transition: Militarisation, Patrimonialism and the Collapse of the Ciskei Regime, 1986–1994,' *African Historical Review*, 50, 1-2 (2018), 115-16.

¹⁴⁵ Interviews with Lucille Meyer; Interview with Crispian Olver.

¹⁴⁶ 'Home Buyers Confidence Shot to Pieces,' *Business Day* 16 September 1992; 'Investors Lie Low as Confidence Dives,' *Business Day*, 9 September 1992.

reasoned. He conceded that he was facing considerable pressure from Alliance members disillusioned with negotiations and that the benefit of talks would need to be obvious: mass action could be halted if there was an agreement on interim government.¹⁴⁷

Amid criticism of the confrontational dimension of mass action, seen by many national and international commentators to undermine the climate for negotiations, ANC leaders moved to curb mass action. Nevertheless, in the short term, the ANC upheld its plans to stage further marches on the 'homelands'. A modest demonstration in Qwaqwa passed without major incident.¹⁴⁸ But the Bophuthatswana and KwaZulu regimes promised to employ their full military capacity against demonstrations. 'We will match fire with fire', promised one of Mangope's cabinet ministers. The prospect of toppling Mangope through popular protest did not look promising.¹⁴⁹ For more than a month after the massacre at Bisho, the ANC remained committed to its planned march on Ulundi, the capital of KwaZulu, even as Buthelezi promised to 'make the Bisho bloodbath look like a Sunday school picnic'.¹⁵⁰ Divisions among ANC leaders over the future of the mass action campaign continued to muddy political strategy. With further ANC demonstrations scheduled in Mmabatho and Ulundi, foreign governments and the UN urged the ANC to halt its mass action campaign. UN Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali called on the ANC 'to abandon its mass action campaign'.¹⁵¹ While threatening to continue the campaign of rolling mass action for more than a month after the massacre, the ANC eventually pulled out of planned marches on Mmabatho and Ulundi.

Bilateral negotiations between Ramaphosa and Meyer marginalised Buthelezi, who, until now, had remained a firm ally of the NP, and in turn led to the Record of Understanding on 26th September, which severed the government's pact with Inkatha. Through the Understanding, the NP acknowledged the right to public demonstrations 'in accordance with the provisions of the National Peace Accord'; while the NP and ANC committed to strengthen the Peace Accord and to de-escalate tensions. The ANC would thus reassess its programme of mass action.¹⁵² After a brief NEC consultation to ratify the Understanding, mass action was called off on 30th September.¹⁵³ With clear emphasis on the primacy of national talks, local processes of negotiation that had been underway during the winter of 1992 and the involvements therein of local organisations, were marginalised. De Klerk set about distancing the political executive from the destabilising strategies of the security

¹⁴⁷ 'Mandela's Olive Branch,' *Star*, 15 September 1992. In private notes prior to the massacre, Mandela also noted the imperative of swift progress in talks to bolster economic stability, since, he noted, for the previous two months the economy had been in decline. Mandela notebook, 26 August 1992, in N. Mandela, *Conversations With Myself* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2010), 332.

¹⁴⁸ 'ANC Disrupts Qwaqwa Show', *Business Day* 11 September 1992.

¹⁴⁹ 'Apartheid's 'Sovereign' Offspring,' *LA Times*, 18 September 1992

¹⁵⁰ 'Ulundi: A Stern Test for Peace', *Daily News*, 8 October 1992; 'Ulundi March Row Deepens', *Citizen*, 25 September 1992; 'Ulundi March Will Make Bisho Look Like a Picnic: IFP', *Citizen*, 21 September 1992.

¹⁵¹ C. Landsberg, *The Quiet Diplomacy of Liberation: International Politics and South Africa's Transition* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2004), 134.

¹⁵² Record of Understanding, 26 September 1992, accessed at <https://omalley.nelsonmandela.org/omalley/index.php/site/q/03lv02039/04lv02046/05lv02092/06lv02096.htm> on 10 June 06 2019.

¹⁵³ UNISA Library Digital Collections, ANC NEC, Year 1992, 'Press statement of the NEC of the ANC, Urgent meeting on 30th September 1992 to ratify the 'Record of Understanding' reached as a result of the meeting between ANC and government led by Nelson Mandela and FW de Klerk' accessed at <http://digilib.unisa.ac.za/digital/collection/p21049coll19/id/4/> on 15 March 2022 and 'Memo from the Secretary General MC Ramaphosa to NEC members, informing about emergency NEC meeting of the 30th September 1992 : agenda, agreement reached between the ANC and SA government at the summit meeting held on 26th September 1992', accessed at <http://digilib.unisa.ac.za/digital/collection/p21049coll19/id/3/rec/1> on 15 March 2022.

state and embarked on efforts to control their excesses.¹⁵⁴ But the violence did not stop: in the Border region it escalated throughout 1993. If indeed there was the political will to do so, the political executive lacked the capacity to exert full control over powerful generals, who continued to pursue covert operations well into 1993.¹⁵⁵

Curating the ANC's Narrative on Bisho

Evidence of divisions among the ANC's leadership; bungled decision-making and criticism of overconfidence in the face of state violence demanded a concerted public relations exercise to seize control of the narrative. In the wake of the criticism, as a new round of multi-party talks were in the making, the ANC leadership carefully marshalled its narrative of the march and massacre. The curation of evidence by the ANC's submissions at the Goldstone Commission, and then more carefully at the TRC, fostered a partial, political 'truth' that elided some key aspects of the march and its politics.

In some ANC circles, the massacre was initially regarded as having been the 'necessary' violence to get negotiations going again. Kasrils maintained that '[i]f we had not been prepared to sacrifice, we would not be where we are- on the eve of liberation'.¹⁵⁶ Southall argued that the massacre had been a 'necessity' to resume effective negotiations and restore the ANC's upper hand: 'attention is turning to Bisho's silver lining.... [F]or all its brutality, Bisho was just what was needed to get negotiations going again,' he argued.¹⁵⁷ Paul Trewhela echoed this sentiment in dark irony, lambasting SACP leaders: 'This was South Africa: it needed a massacre, a really good, upfront massacre, with lots of dead, to get negotiations on the road again. Blood to grease the words.'¹⁵⁸

Following the tragedy members of the Border ANC leadership, Lucille Meyer and Crispian Olver, prepared a report for submission to the Goldstone Commission. Crucial for the ANC's submission, the evidence it provided led the organisation into criticism from the Commission for the hurried decisions taken at the march; the lack of strategic clarity and the breaching of the conditions laid down for the march.¹⁵⁹ The Border report also described how, when the march reached the razor wire, attached that morning to the stadium fencing, demonstrators 'loosened the barbed wire coils adjoining the stadium and proceeded through this gap into the stadium.' This was a different gap, on the other side of the stadium, from that through which Kasrils led marchers. According to the Border report an armed vehicle then raced towards the razor wire and the demonstrators passing through it; CDF troops exited the vehicle and opened fire on demonstrators.¹⁶⁰ This evidence was not raised

¹⁵⁴ M. Taylor and M. Shaw, 'The Dying Days of Apartheid,' in A. Norval and D. Howarth, eds, *South Africa in Transition* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), 23-24.

¹⁵⁵ Rich, 'Apartheid', 57-58. For example, Generals Liebenberg and van der Westhuizen, who had developed the web of violent South African covert military operations in the Eastern Cape, remained in high ranking military posts until 1994.

¹⁵⁶ 'Profile : ANC Leader in Ciskei Protest Is a Veteran of Brinkmanship,' *LA Times*, 15 Sept 1992; P. Trewhela, 'A Massacre of Innocence: The March at Bisho, 7 September 1992,' *Searchlight South Africa* 3, 2 (April 1993), 43.

¹⁵⁷ R. Southall, 'Beyond the Bodycount,' *Reality* 24, 5 (January 1993), 5.

¹⁵⁸ Trewhela, 'A Massacre of Innocence,' 39.

¹⁵⁹ Goldstone Commission Transcript.

¹⁶⁰ Border ANC Report, 15. At the TRC, Superintendent Raymond Simms of the Ciskei Police described similar events, as the marchers, having reached the razor wire at the border, 'started tampering with the fence and started pulling at it.' ¹⁶⁰ Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Bisho Massacre Hearings 2, Day 1, 18 November 1996, Brigadier Vuyisile Ngcobo and Superintendent Raymond Simms.

at the Commission by the ANC's counsel, Arthur Chaskalson, whose representations were otherwise closely informed by the same report.

While condemning the actions of the CDF 'in the strongest terms' as 'morally and legally indefensible', the Goldstone Commission criticised the conduct of march leaders, particularly Kasrils. The decision 'to risk the lives of their followers by advancing out of the stadium was unfortunate and unjustified;' it was 'irresponsible and deliberately placed such people in imminent danger which resulted in death and injury...'. Kasrils' decision to withhold their plans from the Peace Secretariat stationed at the border was deemed 'disingenuous', and the Commission urged the ANC to censure him.¹⁶¹ Meanwhile, the ANC argued that leaders had been led into an ambush: the hole in the stadium fence, made at the march on 4th August, had not been repaired, while CDF soldiers lay concealed in a trench just beyond the fence through which demonstrators had run.¹⁶² The Goldstone Commission disputed the validity of this claim.¹⁶³ If the evidence confirms it was a deliberate strategy by the CDF to surreptitiously guard this route, and even to lure protesters through it, this point was also employed to defend Kasrils' rash decision.

While the ANC's top leadership publicly supported Kasrils' claim that the decision to exit the stadium was taken 'unanimously' by the march leadership, a closer analysis casts doubt over this narrative.¹⁶⁴ In the rapid turn of events on the morning of the 7th, communications among the march leadership were disjointed and some disagreement emerged over the strategy to be pursued. Some in the Border ANC leadership had planned for the march to reach the main intersection in Bhisho, which they had reached during the August march, where they might proceed with a rally. In their report, the Border leadership maintained that the agreed plan of action, made on the morning of the march, was that one column of marchers would proceed on the main route into Bhisho to this intersection, where they expected they would be stopped as they had in August.¹⁶⁵ Kasrils disputed that any such agreement had been made.¹⁶⁶

The authors of the Border report alluded to discord over strategic approaches to the march and pointed to discomfort among some of the Border leadership with the actions taken by Kasrils' group. Their report noted that at a national meeting in late August, leaders agreed they should 'guard against' an 'incipient insurrectionist approach' in their planning, thus distancing themselves from the 'Leipzig way' discourse.¹⁶⁷ While Olver describes having himself been persuaded by a militant vision to topple Gqozo through popular action,¹⁶⁸ this is a perspective that Meyer - more aligned with the civic and community structures in the region - dissociates herself from: the 'Leipzig option' was in

¹⁶¹ Goldstone Commission Report.

¹⁶² 'Bisho Killings Deliberate, Inquiry Told', *Weekly Mail*, 25 September 1992; Goldstone Commission Transcript.

¹⁶³ Goldstone Commission Report.

¹⁶⁴ Kasrils, *Armed and Dangerous*, 360; Victor, 'The Politics of Remembering,' 89; 'We Won't Censure Kasrils, Says ANC on Goldstone Report,' *Sowetan*, 1 October 1992.

¹⁶⁵ 'Border ANC Report', 13.

¹⁶⁶ Kasrils annotations to 'Border ANC Report', 13.

¹⁶⁷ 'Border ANC Report', 3-6. A memorandum issued by the Border Alliance leadership and SANCO on 3rd September supports the position of local leaders described in the report. Kasrils Papers, A3345, E 2.1.1, 'Memorandum Submitted by the Tripartite Alliance and South African National Civics Organisation to the South African Government Concerning the Resolution of the Violence in Ciskei and the Creation of a Climate for Free Political Activity', 3rd September, East London.

¹⁶⁸ Interview with Crispian Olver.

her view a perspective that emanated from the conservative press, and did not reflect the discourse or the strategic aims of local Alliance leaders responsible for planning the march.¹⁶⁹

Kasrils was right to later argue that he had not made the decision alone to breach the stadium gap: it was discussed by the strategising committee. But it was disingenuous to claim that the decision had been approved by the whole leadership, for many among the march leadership - regional ANC leaders, Alliance partners, church and BOCCO representatives - were not consulted. Instead, there had been a meeting with members of the Peace Accord on the morning of the march, pointing to the split that had emerged among leaders over the role of the peace body. The leaders in the strategising committee were not responsible for the campaign, nor for the organisation of this march, as the media suggested in the wake of the massacre. Nevertheless, they did play a disproportionate role in shaping the further escalation of the situation through their decision, made on the morning of the march, to move out of the stadium.

ANC national leaders, naturally traumatised by the massacre, also used it to cement their political legitimacy. In a video entitled 'Bisho: The Story Behind the Massacre', produced by the national offices of the ANC to counter the government's blame-laying, a new narrative was curated. As Victor has shown, Kasrils' actions at the march are elided in the video: he is falsely portrayed as having negotiated with the Peace Secretariat and the narrative concludes that he 'was not acting alone'.¹⁷⁰ The film projects the legitimacy of the national leadership in the wake of disillusionment within the Alliance over the negotiations process. Ramaphosa relates the moving experience of having been protected by comrades who shielded him from gunfire in a powerful show of loyalty:

...I was amazed to witness the courage, the bravery of a number of comrades amongst us. Principally the marshals, whose sole care, even at a moment of great danger to themselves, was to protect the leadership... The fact that you had marshals, who were prepared even to sacrifice their lives to protect their leadership is to me... the most moving moment during that whole march.¹⁷¹

He claims that national leaders had a new mandate in the wake of the massacre to negotiate on behalf of 'the people':

...we can look back and say that in spite of having gone through a setback like the massacre, we are now poised on a plane where dramatic changes can take place because the ANC will be giving leadership to the whole process.¹⁷²

In his autobiography, first published in 1993, Kasrils wrote proudly of his adventurism and bravery at Bisho, 'as someone whose name had become synonymous with mass action and who headed the charge through the fence'.¹⁷³ Moving swiftly away from his declarations shortly after the massacre, where he acknowledged the brinkmanship and the known risk of violence, in this account he adopted a narrative of victimhood, arguing that he and comrades were 'lured' into a 'trap' laid by the CDF as a consequence of a 'last minute bungle' by the Peace Accord (a charge for which there is little evidence), and suggesting that he was unaware of the possibility that troops might fire on

¹⁶⁹ Interview with Lucille Meyer.

¹⁷⁰ Victor, 'The Politics of Remembering,' 89.

¹⁷¹ Ramaphosa, in ANC, 'Bisho: The Story Behind the Massacre.'

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

¹⁷³ Kasrils, *Armed and Dangerous*, 366.

demonstrators.¹⁷⁴ He demonstrates the vanguardism that informed his actions at Bhisho, foregrounding the leadership of national and SACP leaders in his depiction of the march, where '[a]t the head, mingling with the leaders, were priests in robes, marching behind the red flags of the SACP and the banners of the ANC and COSATU.'¹⁷⁵ The central role of church and civic leaders in the Border campaign is elided: church leaders, instrumental in local peace initiatives, had been among those most critical of his conduct at the march.

Ramaphosa's report on the ANC's 29th National Conference in December 1994, shortly after the organisation came to power, reveals an effort to construct a more agreeable historical narrative of 1992, from which the Bhisho march is entirely erased. After Boipatong, so Ramaphosa's narrative proceeds, the negotiations broke down over constitutional disagreements and ongoing state violence. In turn, the ANC launched its mass action campaign, to enhance the basis of its widespread support, with the effect of securing the upper hand in negotiations and speeding the process of negotiated transition. Not once are the bantustans mentioned; the cataclysmic Bhisho march and massacre is entirely erased from this 'history'.¹⁷⁶

In the wake of Goldstone's reproach, a more selective narrative was curated at the TRC, where ANC leaders maintained that they were unaware of the threat of violence. This position underplayed the militant intentions of the march and the known threat of violence. Their amended narrative confirmed a central role for the national leadership and claimed their innocence. Both Ramaphosa and Smuts Ngonyama maintained that ANC leaders could not have anticipated violence, even in breaching the march's conditions; that Gqozo had given no warning he might use force.¹⁷⁷ Ramaphosa rejected Goldstone's criticisms, claiming that the march was 'conducted as far as possible in accordance with guidelines that were set out in the Peace Accord'.¹⁷⁸ Kasrils' testimony echoed this narrative: 'We did not imagine that Gqozo, as cruel and desperate as we regarded him, would dare react with such brute force, particularly at such a public event in the eyes of the world's media...' ¹⁷⁹

The group of demonstrators led by Kasrils out of the stadium was small, estimated at between 150 and 300.¹⁸⁰ This became significant in the ANC's narrative at the TRC: how could such a small group of unarmed protesters be considered a threat to the CDF? Moreover, the demonstrators stationed at the razor wire with the rest of the leadership were described as unarmed and thus passive. The evidence put forward in the Border report had contradicted this narrative: the second hole in the fence, made by protesters corralled at the razor wire, would have allowed the main march to rapidly enter the stadium; in breaching the razor wire, these demonstrators were also showing that popular action might well overrun efforts by the security forces to contain the huge demonstration. While there is no evidence to suggest that this group were armed, although it is possible that some may have been, the evidence in the Border report pointed to the determination of the crowd to reach

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 358-359.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 359; 356; 362. Operation Vula also adopted a vanguardist approach, seeking to influence the decisions of local leaders. Heidi Brooks, 'Differential Interpretations in the Discourse of 'People's Power': Unveiling Intellectual Heritage and Normative Democratic Thought,' *African Studies*, 77, 3 (2018), 462.

¹⁷⁶ C. Ramaphosa, '49th National Conference General Secretary's Report', accessed at <https://www.anc1912.org.za/49th-national-conference-secretary-generals-report/> on 10 January 2023.

¹⁷⁷ TRC, Bisho Massacre Hearings 1, Day 1, 9 September 1996, Ramaphosa, Ngonyama.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, Ramaphosa.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, Kasrils.

¹⁸⁰ Goldstone Commission Transcript.

Bhisho, and lent weight to the CDF's claims that they had opened fire out of self-defence, being vastly outnumbered by the advancing crowd.

Through rhetorical sleight, the narrative that later cohered underplayed the widely-stated objective of the march, as understood locally and advertised by the regional ANC: to march to Bhisho in order force the resignation of Gqozo through popular mobilisation and to stage a People's Assembly to elect a new interim administration. Instead, national leaders emphasised the other objectives of the march 'to draw national and international attention to the demand for the creation of a climate for free political activity and the end to violence in the Ciskei.'¹⁸¹

Conclusions: "Harnessing the Power of the People"

Mass action, like 'people's power', drew on diverse strands of thought and praxis within the liberation movement.¹⁸² The meanings of mass action were thus various, differing greatly at local and national levels. In the Border, civic activists saw the march on Bhisho as a route to democratic change through a People's Assembly, whereby a broad-based and consensual interim regime might be installed following Gqozo's capitulation, thereby bringing an end to the spiral of violence and opening the possibility for negotiated local reform. Meanwhile, militants, including some MK members, saw the march as an opportunity to follow through on a longer-held ambition to eliminate Gqozo through military means. If not formally sanctioned by Hani, such an outcome might dramatically improve the territorial and geopolitical goals of both Hani's MK and Holomisa's Transkei. The role of mass action and the proposed march on Bhisho were understood in different terms by national leaders: Ramaphosa came to see mass action as a national plebiscite for the ANC's role in negotiations. Meanwhile, as national coordinator for the ANC's mass action campaign, Kasrils' plan to target the homelands - which rested on the notion that Ciskei might fall as the first domino, before Qwaqwa, Bophuthatswana, KwaZulu and finally Pretoria - was informed by the vanguardist revolutionary theory dominant in exile.¹⁸³ Dislocated from the realities of the domestic and regional situation, it was poorly conceived and wildly unrealistic. Kasrils does not seem to have been present at the 4th August march on Bhisho, which nearly descended into state violence. Furthermore, any sober assessment of the August week of action, including the march on Pretoria on 5th August, would have shown the fallacy that popular mobilisation - peaceful or otherwise - might overthrow the Pretoria regime.

The ANC executive surely knew this, for Ramaphosa was already in talks with Meyer about an imminent resumption of formal negotiations, but they were responding to the continued enthusiasm for mass action within broader Alliance structures. That Kasrils' strategy and the Bhisho march were supported by the ANC executive may be seen as an attempt to hold the Alliance together. The proposed march in September was an opportunity for national ANC leaders - not least Ramaphosa - to renew the organisation's mandate to negotiate and thereby represent the UDF by association with the signs and symbols of a grassroots struggle in its heartland. Hoping for a speedy resolution to the mass action campaign, and for it to deliver on the national agenda by forcing the

¹⁸¹ TRC, Bisho Massacre Hearings 1, Day 1, 9 September 1996, Ramaphosa.

¹⁸² Heidi Brooks, 'Differential Interpretations in the Discourse of 'People's Power': Unveiling Intellectual Heritage and Normative Democratic Thought,' *African Studies*, 77, 3 (2018), 451-472; Heidi Brooks, *The African National Congress and Participatory Democracy: From People's Power to Public Policy* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 62-164.

¹⁸³ Brooks, 'Differential Interpretations', 458-462; Heidi Brooks, 'Popular Power and Vanguardism: The Democratic Deficit of 1980s 'Peoples Power,' *Politikon*, 45, 3 (2018), 313-334.

government to cede to the Alliance's renewed demands (curbs on political violence; a 66% majority for ratification of the constitution; immediate progress towards elections to a constitutional assembly), national leaders, like their local counterparts, were overconfident that the marchers would triumph over Gqozo. To this extent, Kasrils appears to have been both bullish and too eager for his mass action strategy to bear fruit. If his position as campaigns coordinator enabled something of a political recovery after the Vula fiasco in July 1990, his actions at the march overstepped his role and might reveal distance from MK colleagues in Transkei. Implicated in swelling the local conflict through Vula's supply of arms, it could be imagined that he would have been informed, as were Hani's men attendant at the march, of the likelihood of a 'luring ambush' by Ciskei troops. More than an expectation of overzealous crowd control, such precise knowledge of the threat of violence might have encouraged a greater caution that Hani appeared to show, yet Kasrils' conduct and his subsequent testimonies suggest he could have been in the dark.

The tragic events at Bhisho have long been understood as a disaster with cautionary consequences, persuading the main parties to renew their commitment to negotiated change. It is often said that having lost their way, the two sides realised their errors and agreed that negotiations were the only viable course of action. This narrative belies a more complex reality. The Bhisho march became a theatre of the contested politics of mass action within the Alliance. Among the march leadership disagreement emerged, reflecting various political traditions among the Alliance and their differing perspectives on mass action. Amid a breakdown in communication in the final hours before the march, the strategising committee - dominated by men with positions in national leadership - came to have disproportionate influence. Their decisions, taken without full consultation of the regional march leadership, shaped the day's events decisively and tragically.

The government had been content to let the confrontation play out: Ciskei was, after all, 'independent'. The anticipated violence might also discipline their opposition, quell popular mobilisation and stall political change. Yet reputational damage for the government following the massacre demonstrated the limited political utility of the homelands policy in new rounds of negotiations, since the likes of Gqozo had indeed become 'more of a liability than an asset'.¹⁸⁴ After the Bhisho massacre, Roelf Meyer - invested in negotiations with Ramaphosa - was crucial in reshaping the NP's political outlook, shifting its alliances away from the bantustans and moving towards the ANC's demand for reincorporation.¹⁸⁵ In choosing the supposed 'war dove' Meyer's approach, De Klerk alienated NP 'hawks' who accused him of selling out. On his return from a trip to Europe, and hearing of the Record of Understanding, an emotional Tertius Delport told De Klerk: 'My God, FW what have you done?... You've given away our country to the ANC.... You allowed the children to negotiate and they've given the country away.'¹⁸⁶ But alongside the NP's old guard, who saw this as a great betrayal, were far-right politicians and the military establishment, who still looked

¹⁸⁴ 'ANC Plan to Drive a Wedge in the Nats' Alliance', *Business Day*, 7 September 1992. See also O'Malley, Interview with A. Akhalwaya.

¹⁸⁵ Hilary Lynd, 'Homelands: Together and Apart in the Soviet Union and South Africa' (PhD Dissertation, University of California, 2023), 198.

¹⁸⁶ Delport in P. O'Malley, Interview with Tertius Delport, 12th August 1998, Heart of Hope Archive, accessed at <https://omalley.nelsonmandela.org/index.php/site/q/03lv00017/04lv00344/05lv01183/06lv01226.htm> on 3rd June 2024. See also P. O'Malley, Interview with Tertius Delport, 14th October 1997, Heart of Hope Archive, accessed at <https://omalley.nelsonmandela.org/index.php/site/q/03lv00017/04lv00344/05lv01092/06lv01175.htm> on 3rd June 2014. My thanks to Jeff Peires for his insights. Delport, hailing from the Eastern Cape and with his constituency in Port Elizabeth, was a key negotiator in the failed talks over constitutional majorities at CODESA.

to the bantustans as the institutions and alliances that might protect white privilege. The NP did not abandon its bantustan allies entirely, but sought to mobilise them through 'federal' or regional alliances.¹⁸⁷ Evident that such egregious state violence as evidenced at Bisho now risked the government's international reputation and negotiating position, De Klerk began to discipline the generals, yet without thorough intervention repression and violence still escalated.

In the immediate wake of the massacre, all sides of the political leadership came under fierce criticism: the Ciskei regime and South African government were widely held responsible for the violence, and the latter faced international disrepute. So too did the ANC. At best, the massacre cast its leaders in an unfavourable light; at worst, it undermined their integrity. Curating an acceptable narrative would prove crucial. If a key local objective of the march had been to draw attention to local mobilisation against repression in Ciskei, to remind national leaders of their duty to push for meaningful local change, the effect of the massacre and its reportage in the media was to underline the primacy of the ANC's national leadership. For all the misrepresentations, national leaders were willing to accept the emergent narrative. The 'media event' of the march usefully evidenced the strength of grassroots support for national leaders, Ramaphosa especially.¹⁸⁸ The ANC's account at the TRC was a partial and carefully-curated version of the events and the meanings of mass action. It elided the widely-understood and militant aims of the march and the known threat of violence in order to absolve the leadership, Kasrils in particular, while excising the perspectives of church and civic leaders in the Border. Instead, a nationalist narrative prevailed, which depicted the march as a testament of popular support for the national leaders who had supposedly engineered it and who stood to inherit power in the new democracy.

The changed political climate after the massacre conditioned the waning fortunes of the civic movement. As many among South Africa's left had feared, courting confrontation precipitated an intensified repression, stalled democratic mobilisation and led to the ANC's withdrawal of support for local mass action to favour progress in talks.¹⁸⁹ For the fact that the Record of Understanding confirmed a shift in the NP's alliances and progress towards new agreement between the government and the ANC, the massacre was seen by some as politically expedient. Yet local processes of democratic change in the Border were arrested by the shock of the massacre and the subsequent intensification of repression. Consistent with a traditional opposition among the ANC's top leadership to the prefigurative pretensions of civic associations and a long-held fear that local agreements could be co-opted by conservative forces, as the dust settled after the massacre the ANC's centralism further cohered while the influence of the civic movement in national negotiations declined.¹⁹⁰ If the ANC's top leaders wished to nation-build by strengthening links with the grassroots, tensions within the Alliance were cast into relief. The UDF's traditions of local participatory democracy would be overshadowed by the constitutionalism and centralism of the ANC's top leadership. According to an instrumentalist view of 'people's power', popular protest at

¹⁸⁷ Evans, 'The Bantustan State,' 112-114.

¹⁸⁸ M. Evans, *Broadcasting the End of Apartheid: Live Television and the Birth of a New South Africa* (London: IB Tauris, 2014).

¹⁸⁹ See for example D. Pillay, 'Editorial', *Work in Progress* 84 (September 1992), inside cover.

¹⁹⁰ For discussion of the latter see Jeremy Seekings, 'The Decline of South Africa's Civic Organizations, 1990-1996,' *Critical Sociology* 22, 3 (1996), 135-157; Kimberly Lanegran, 'South Africa's Civic Association Movement: ANC's Ally or Society's "Watchdog"? Shifting Social Movement-Political Party Relations,' *African Studies Review*, 38, 2 (1995), 101-126.

Bhisho had served its purpose in delivering the national leadership further along the path to power.¹⁹¹

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¹⁹¹ These politics and perspectives developed through the late 1980s in the ANC's Constitution Committee. Heidi Brooks, 'Merging Radical and Liberal Traditions: The Constitution Committee and the Development of Democratic Thought in the African National Congress, 1986–1990,' *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 44, 1 (2018), 167-184.