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“Leipzig Option” and the Meanings of Mass Action in the
South African Transition.**

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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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ABSTRACT

Amid repressive state violence and an escalating civil war in the Eastern Cape’s Border region, on 7 September 1992 more than 80,000 people marched to Bhisho, capital of the Ciskei Bantustan, to bring an end to the rule of its military ruler, Brigadier Gqozo. Widespread fears of a fatal showdown were realised when the Ciskei Defence Force opened fire, killing 29 and injuring more than 200. This critical event, understood as a most pivotal moment in South Africa’s transition to democracy, has rarely been subjected to historical scrutiny. This article 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 mass action campaign by the African National Congress (ANC), 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.

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Introduction

On the morning of 7 September 1992, demonstrators gathered at the Victoria Grounds in King William’s Town (present-day Qonce). Mobilised by local organisations under the banner of the Tripartite 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

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Gqozo's military regime which had continued despite the unbanning of political organisations in South Africa 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 bantustan's 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.² 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 article 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 Bhisho, its tragic outcome, and 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.³ Yet, while most cite the pivotal importance of this moment, few have provided detailed empirical analysis of its various dimensions and the perspectives of the actors involved.⁴ 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

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1. Goldstone Commission of Inquiry regarding the Prevention of Public Violence and Intimidation, 'Report on the Bisho Incident', 29 September 1992 (hereafter Goldstone Commission Report).
 2. *Ibid.*; Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, vol. 2 (Cape Town: Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 1999), 623–624.
 3. 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.
 4. Exceptions are S. Victor, 'The Politics of Remembering and Commemorating Atrocity in South Africa: The Bisho 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, Makhanda, 2008).

and stem political violence.⁵ These representations place too much emphasis on the role of national politicians, particularly leaders of the South African Communist Party (SACP), 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 that focuses particularly on the politics of memorialisation,⁶ while Luvuyo Wotshela traces the dynamics of local civic mobilisation in the Border region during the late apartheid period.⁷ Alongside James Simpson's analysis of Boipatong and recent accounts by Gary Kynoch and Franziska Rueedi of political violence on the East Rand, these histories provide important correctives to existing perspectives on the transition,⁸ whose literature has lacked sustained analysis of popular protest and the local dynamics of political violence. In relation to the negotiations, moments of intense violence have often been represented as 'flashpoints' that interrupted the transition. But the transition was characterised by widespread repression and violence which impacted heavily on the course and the possibilities of the negotiations, while local dynamics shaped their very terms.⁹

This article is the second of two that together develop a historical analysis of the context, significance, and political dynamics of the march on Bhishe in September 1992. Where the first article examines the escalating crisis in the Ciskei in 1991–1992, providing the backstory to the march on 7 September,¹⁰ this one deals with the September march itself; its contested politics, and its consequences. Through an examination of extensive archival and documentary sources as well as interviews, it traces the events surrounding the march, its planning, its aftermath, and its subsequent narration by politicians in the wake of the tragedy.

This article argues that the crude trope of the 'Leipzig way' that has come to dominate narratives of the march offers little to enhance historical

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5. 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.
 6. Victor, 'The Politics of Remembering'; B. Pottinger, 'When Wild Men Seize the Moment', *Sunday Times*, 13 September 1992.
 7. L. Wotshela, 'The Fate of Ciskei and Adjacent Border Towns: Political Transitions in a Democratic South Africa, 1985–1995', in South African Democracy Education Trust, *The Road to Democracy in South Africa*, vol. 4 (Austin: Pan African University Press, 2019), Part 3: 1855–1899 'Overlying and Muddled Power: The Ciskei Bantustan's Disputed Rural Governance in the Twilight Decade of Apartheid, c.1985–95', *Review of African Political Economy*, 51, 180 (2024), 290–307.
 8. J.G.R. Simpson, 'Boipatong: The Politics of a Massacre and the South African Transition', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 38, 3 (2012), 623–647; G. Kynoch, *Township Violence and the End of Apartheid: War on the Reef* (Oxford: James Currey, 2018); F. Rueedi, 'The Hostel Wars in Apartheid South Africa: Rumour, Violence and the Discourse of Victimhood', *Social Identities*, 26, 6 (2020), 756–773.
 9. L. Evans, 'Violence in the South African Transition', in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History* (2024), <https://oxfordre.com/africanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.001.0001/acrefore-9780190277734-e-1104>.
 10. L. Evans, 'The Mass Action Campaign of 1992: The Ciskei Crisis and the African National Congress in Transition', *South African Historical Journal*, 75, 3 (2024).

understanding of the politics surrounding the march and assigns too much agency to national politicians. The march on 7 September was an initiative of local and regional alliance structures in the Border region whose increasingly militant campaign was focused on ending repression in the 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 level. 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 negotiations of the Congress for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) broke down over fundamental matters regarding the constitution, 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 1992. Amid the trauma and controversy of the Bhisho 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 James Hamill argued at the time, 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.¹¹ The September march on Bhisho became a theatre of these contested politics.

In the Border region, a long democracy campaign preceded the September march.¹² A major march took place on 4 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 focus of the mass action campaign to the 'hostile' bantustans, which were to become the strategic target of the national mass action campaign.¹³

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

12. Evans, 'The Mass Action Campaign of 1992'.

13. Sparks, *Tomorrow*, 147.

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.¹⁴ 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 would subsequently look to topple the hostile bantustan regimes of QwaQwa, Bophuthatswana, KwaZulu, and, ultimately, Pretoria.¹⁵

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 with strategically supported mass action that could be turned on and off, as a tap, to overcome hurdles in negotiations. The third, he argued, was inspired by the 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 quite different from that in South Africa, where an entrenched military regime made extreme violence against any such actions highly likely.¹⁶ 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 1990.¹⁷ Although abstract and largely divorced from the dynamics of local struggles, to some degree his analysis presaged the tragic culmination of these tensions on 7 September.

As Steven Friedman argues, 'for the mainstream, mass action was a negotiating tactic, not a revolutionary weapon'.¹⁸ Members of the ANC National Working Committee saw mass action as a 'tap' to bring pressure in negotiations.¹⁹ The notion of a revolutionary 'Leipzig way' was a minority position, even within the SACP, and was one that had gained criticism from Cronin,

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

15. Evans, 'The Mass Action Campaign of 1992'.

16. J. Cronin, 'The Boat, the Tap and the Leipzig Way', *African Communist*, 130 (1992), 41–54.

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

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

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

Chris Hani, and others. Members of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) 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 referendum in March 1992, and as the national mass action campaign cohered in July and August, these politicians also referred to the legitimating function of mass action, to renew the ANC's 'mandate' to negotiate: to revitalise links between the leadership and the grassroots to foster support ahead of elections.²⁰ Many referred to the August stayaway as the 'black referendum', Frank Chikane argued.²¹ It was no accident that this discourse emerged as the resumption of bilateral negotiations drew closer. As Ramaphosa declared on 3 August: 'Our people have voted on their feet and have given a resounding "yes" to peace and democracy.'²² The same day, Jay Naidoo claimed that the mass action campaign had struck a 'yes vote' for alliance negotiators.²³

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'.²⁴ 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.²⁵

In the repeated caricature of the 'Leipzig way', the concrete campaigns that underpinned mass action and its diverse political understandings have been overlooked. In the Border, where the civic movement was strong, direct action was focused on local impediments to democratisation – namely, the

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

21. 'Let's Level These Playing Fields', *City Press*, 9 August 1992; 'How Will Mandela Use His Mandate?', *Weekly Mail*, 7–13 August 1992.

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

23. UWC Robben Island Mayibuye Archive, University of the Western Cape, VNS/Afravision Collection, Mass Action Campaign: Stayaway – Jay Naidoo Speech in Downtown Johannesburg, VNS 2181, 3 August 1992, Item ID: RIM.FV.2000.2120, Video 3 of 4 tapes.

24. Philip Nel, cited by Patrick O'Malley in Pdraig O'Malley Heart of Hope Archive (hereafter O'Malley Archive), P. O'Malley interview with A. Akhalwaya, 17 September 1992, <https://omalley.nelsonmandela.org/omalley/index.php/site/q/03lv00017/04lv00344/05lv00607/06lv00723.htm>, accessed 10 March 2022.

25. J. Baskin, 'A Winter of Discontent', *South African Labour Bulletin*, 16, 7 (1992), 13–14.

Ciskei regime.²⁶ Principal leaders in the Border, such as Rev. Arnold Stofile alongside many others in the United Democratic Front (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 and Border Civic Congress, regarded the discourse of the 'Leipzig option' as unfamiliar and irrelevant to the political cultures and objectives that underpinned the Bhisho march as it evolved on the ground: this was not how local activists and leaders understood the aims and intentions of the march.²⁷ Instead, they saw the political aims of the march with reference to 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.²⁸ Hani's position on mass action, in his role as the new chief of the SACP, 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.²⁹ His close associate, Skenjana Roji – SACP leader and commander of uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) in the Border – was also determined to oust Gqozo and was reportedly interested in the Leipzig comparison, though his understanding was certainly rooted in local dynamics more than abstract models.³⁰

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, and 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 various political cultures were cast into relief.

26. Evans, 'The Mass Action Campaign'.

27. Interview by author with Lucille Meyer, Cape Town, 3 May 2019; Interview by author with Lulamile Nazo, East London, 2 July 2019.

28. 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.

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

30. Interview by author 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.

They became manifest in the breakdown of communication, the emergence of political divisions among march leaders, and the exploitation of the march by some in 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.³¹ No wonder, therefore, that the Alliance leaders directed their demands to Pretoria, whose government was bankrolling and staffing the regime. The leaders believed that Gqozo was the ‘puppet’ of the South African president, F.W. de Klerk, and were determined to express local strength and unity in the face of the bantustan leader’s repression.³² But this proved to be a major miscalculation, for De Klerk’s relationship with Gqozo was difficult: the latter’s principal ties were not to South Africa’s political executive but its military establishment, whose covert operations supported the Ciskei regime through the provision of funds and arms for the ADM and whose personnel dominated the military.

The events of the march on 4 August informed the hopes and strategies of political leaders for the planned march on 7 September. In August, the Ciskei Riot Police had prevented demonstrators from reaching Bhisho, halting them at the main intersection before finally allowing them 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 subregional leadership: there was widespread local support for a repeat march in September.³³ It ‘was really a march organised [...] by the locals themselves’, Hani argued. It was not, he emphasised, ‘a march organised from [national ANC] headquarters’.³⁴

On 3 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. Identifying the South African government as the ‘principal agents involved in the creation and support of the Ciskei regime’, the

31. J. Peires, ‘The Implosion of Transkei and Ciskei’, *African Affairs* 91, 364 (1992), 378–381.

32. V. Ngcula, ‘Pretoria’s Men in Ciskei’, *African Communist* 130 (October 1992), 26–27.

33. Historical Papers Research Archive, University of the Witwatersrand, Ronald Kasrils Papers, A3345 (hereafter Kasrils Papers), E2.1.1, ‘Border ANC Report on the Events Surrounding the Bisho Massacre on Monday 7th September 1992’, 4–5.

34. African National Congress, ‘Bisho: The Story Behind the Massacre’, video, 30m, directed by Zeph Makgetla (Johannesburg: ANC, 1993).

memorandum held it 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, whom 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 for the march 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’.³⁵ In a letter to De Klerk on the eve of the march, Nelson Mandela indicated his expectation that the march would proceed in line with the parameters of the Peace Accord and the guidelines set by the Goldstone Commission.³⁶

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 ‘Soks’ 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.³⁷ With this strong presence of national ANC 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 7 September, following the fateful decision – made on the morning of the march, under pressure, and with little deliberation – to break out of the Bisho stadium.³⁸

Leaders in the Border were adamant that they would take their demonstration into Bisho, despite Gqozo’s threats to use violent force to prevent

35. Kasrils Papers, E2.1.1, ‘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’, 3 September, East London; ‘ANC Move to Oust Gqozo: Bloodbath Feared as Alliance Gathers for Ciskei Showdown’, *City Press*, 6 September 1992.

36. Letter from Mandela to De Klerk, evening of 6 September 1992, in N. Mandela, *Conversations with Myself* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2010), 333–334.

37. Kasrils Papers, E2.1.1, ‘Border ANC Report on the Events Surrounding the Bisho Massacre on Monday 7th September 1992’, 14.

38. Kasrils Papers, E2.1.1, ‘Border ANC Report on the Events Surrounding the Bisho Massacre on Monday 7th September 1992’, 11; R. Suttner, ‘Don’t Blame Us for Bisho’, *Star*, 17 September 1992.

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 4 August after tense negotiations.³⁹ Yet the permission was a mere formality: the leaders of the march had no intention of staying within the limits of the court order by stopping at the Bisho stadium. It was the firm intention of the leaders and supporters of the Border Alliance that the march would proceed into Bisho, but how this was to be done was less clear.⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹

In the days leading up to the march, the Ciskei and South African security forces made preparations. The South African security forces would police the march up to the Ciskei border, on the outskirts of Bisho, 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 Bisho. According to this situation, access to the stadium should also be prevented: CDF troops would be deployed around the stadium and in the surrounding areas.⁴² 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 were procured to construct a barrier defending the route to Bisho.⁴³

On the morning of the march the limited capacity of the Ciskei security forces became evident. Ciskei police, numbering 1800 in total, were deployed at roadblocks to close off access routes to Bisho 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

39. 'Ciskei March Is On', *Cape Argus*, 7 September 1992.

40. Kasrils Papers, E2.1.1, 'Border ANC Report on the Events Surrounding the Bisho Massacre on Monday 7th September 1992', 11; 'Clergymen in Bid to Diffuse Ciskei Tension: ANC March May End in Bloodshed', *Business Day*, 7 September 1992.

41. Interview with Lucille Meyer.

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

43. TRC, Bisho Massacre Hearings 2, Day 1, 18 November 1996, Brigadier Vuyisile Ngcobo, <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/bisho2/ngcobo.htm>, accessed 1 March 2022; TRC, Bisho Massacre Hearings 2, Day 1, 18 November 1996, General Johannes Viktor, <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/bisho2/viktor.htm>, accessed 1 March 2022.

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.⁴⁴

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 7 September, 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 the changes, and he tried in vain to speak with other CDF personnel. Ngcobo surmised that his leadership had been frozen out in last minute meetings, placing Brigadier Oelschig, chief of the CDF, at the helm of operations, in which the role of CDF troops was now significantly increased. Gqozo had grown suspicious of the black officers in his own security forces, and it seems likely that this change to the planned operations was a consequence of the influence of senior-ranking CDF officers seconded from South Africa.⁴⁵ 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.⁴⁶ ANC pamphlets distributed prior to the march in the Bhisho 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.'⁴⁷ 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.'⁴⁸ They were informed by ANC

44. TRC, Bisho Massacre Hearings 2, Day 1, 18 November 1996, Brigadier Vuyisile Ngcobo and Superintendent Raymond Simms, <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/bisho2/ngcobo.htm>, accessed 1 March 2022. Advocate Sandi argued that the shortage of razor wire prevented the gap in the barbed wire perimeter fence from being fixed. TRC, Bisho Massacre Hearings 2, Day 2, 19 November 1996, Antonie Gildenhuys, <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/bisho2/gildendu.htm>, accessed 1 March 2022.

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

46. '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 Olver; Friedman, 'Back to the Streets', 153.

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

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

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 Bhisho.⁴⁹ Leaders had been optimistic that Gqozo, upon travelling to the conference on federalism, would be unable to return to Bhisho in time, but the brigadier never departed for fear of that eventuality.⁵⁰ Informed by poor intelligence, Alliance leaders miscalculated the attitude of Ciskei personnel, who were facing frequent attacks by ANC supporters.⁵¹ 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.⁵²

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 strike by the National Education, Health and Allied Workers' Union in March 1991; and he had been brought to power in a coup in 1990 by CDF seniors who were fed up with the inept regime of his predecessor, Lennox Sebe, and who were motivated to install a more favourable climate for political change. The repression waged by the Ciskei regime – first under Sebe and then under Gqozo, who quickly turned against the ANC – created polarisation and animosity. But where in the Transkei a more ambivalent relationship existed between bantustan elites and the middle classes aligned to the ANC, the situation in the Ciskei was different, for the system of chiefs and headmen – which Gqozo's regime was trying forcefully to resurrect from mid-1991 – was in most areas politically defunct.⁵³ 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 SADF's Military Intelligence (SADF-MI) behind it, the regime had license and capacity to employ extreme violence, apparently without sanction. It had for many months been waging a violent repression, and Gqozo's 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 the 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

49. Interview with Lulamile Nazo.

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

51. 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.

52. Kwenosi Modisani, 'Leaders Speak with One Voice', *Sowetan*, 8 October 1990.

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

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 the 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.⁵⁴

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 6 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.⁵⁵

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 6 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.⁵⁶ Gqozo refused. 'There is an indication of a hardening of hearts and positions on both sides. We believe Monday could bring disaster', said Chikane.⁵⁷ Local church congregations gathered for hours in prayer for a peaceful resolution to avert the violence.⁵⁸

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'.⁵⁹

54. White, 'The Rule of Brigadier Oupa Gqozo', 138–139.

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

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

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

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

59. 'Albert Whittles and the Museum Historian Discuss the Aims of the March', audio recording, 1m 43s, Amathole Museum, c.2017, <https://museum.za.net/interviews/>, accessed 14 May 2019.

Whittles thus describes the CDF's last minute security measures to prevent marchers from exiting the stadium and continuing towards Bisho. The CDF's Colonel Silence Pita subsequently told the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (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 Bisho and that there would be (soldiers) standing at the fence where there was a gap'.⁶⁰ There is evidence that the soldiers beyond the stadium's northern 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 Bisho.⁶¹

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 SADF Military Intelligence personnel in his government.⁶² Ciskei Foreign Affairs Minister Mickey Webb agreed that misinformation was indeed being disseminated by intelligence agencies to fuel the Ciskei's repression and provoke confrontation with the ANC.⁶³ 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.⁶⁴

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60. 'Gqozo Was Told of Coup Attempt on Day of Bisho Massacre: TRC Told', South African Press Association, September 10 1996, consulted at O'Malley Archive, <https://omalley.nelsonmandela.org/omalley/index.php/site/q/03lv02424/04lv03275/05lv03276/06lv03278.htm>, accessed 21 March 2022. TRC, Bisho Massacre Hearings 1, Day 2, 10 September 1996, <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/bisho1/day2.htm>, accessed 1 March 2022. (Note that the transcript refers erroneously to 'Col Peter'.) See also P. Stiff, *Warfare by Other Means: South Africa in the 1980s and 1990s* (Alberton: Galago, 2001), 526.
61. O'Malley Archive, N. Dixon, 'Evidence that Ciskei Massacre was Planned', September 1992, <https://omalley.nelsonmandela.org/index.php/site/q/03lv02424/04lv03275/05lv03288/06lv03293.htm>, accessed 22 May 2024.
62. 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 the SADF military intelligence and International Research (a front company linked to Ciskei intelligence and 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.
63. TRC, Bisho Massacre Hearings 1, Day 2, 10 September 1996, <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/bisho1/day2.htm>, accessed 1 March 2022. See also CDF Colonel Zantsi's testimony at this same hearing.
64. Vantyu, a MK member, was employed by the Border ANC to provide security expertise and leadership in advance of the September march. Vantyu, 'Bisho Massacre'; interview by author with Petros Vantyu, East London, 3 July 2019.

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 4 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.⁶⁵ 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.⁶⁶

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 was vetoed by a senior member of the organisation – possibly Hani – for the risk of making a martyr out of Gqozo.⁶⁷ It is difficult to establish what Skenjana Roji, MK commander in the Border, knew, as he 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'.⁶⁸ 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 BhisHo: 'Huge 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.⁶⁹ The ANC's Silumko Sokupa denied the allegations, reiterating the intentions for a peaceful march.⁷⁰

At the Goldstone Commission, the Ciskei government cited press sources that noted the presence of arms among the crowd: Hani, seeing a comrade

65. TRC, Bisho Massacre Hearings 1, Day 2, 10 September 1996, <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/bisho1/day2.htm>, accessed 1 March 2022.

66. 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.*

67. M. 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.

68. 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, <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/media/1996/9609/s960910d.htm>, accessed 2 March 2022; TRC, Bisho Massacre Hearings 1, Day 2, 10 September 1996, <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/bisho1/day2.htm>, accessed 1 March 2022; TRC, Bisho Massacre Hearings 2, Day 2, 19 November 1996, Colonel Chris Nel, <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/bisho2/nel.htm>, accessed 2 March 2022.

69. Brigadier 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 Hearing 2, Day 2, 19 November 1996, Colonel Chris Nel, <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/bisho2/nel.htm>, accessed 2 March 2022.

70. 'ANC has Smuggled in Arms – Claim', *Citizen*, 7 September 1992.

with a gun, chided him to ‘put it away, Comrade, you are going to cause a massacre’.⁷¹ 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.⁷² Kasrils and Hani had both been involved in supplying arms and establishing caches in the Ciskei.⁷³ 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.⁷⁴ 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, some 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.⁷⁵ 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 told by CDF informers the day before the 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’.⁷⁶

CDF soldiers were worried about the likelihood of violence, and it is not surprising that they felt vulnerable to attack.⁷⁷ 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.⁷⁸ 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

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71. Historical Papers Research Archive, University of the Witwatersrand, Goldstone Commission Compilation of Documents 1991–1994, AK3342f, B–DVD, Evidence: Mo449, ‘Goldstone Commission of Inquiry Regarding the Prevention of Public Violence and Intimidation, Held at Bisho, Ciskei, Violence in Bisho – 23 September’, Proceedings Transcript (hereafter Goldstone Commission Transcript), G. Jebson, East Cape News Agency.
 72. Interview with Crispian Olver.
 73. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, vol. 2 (London: Macmillan, 1999), 683.
 74. Personal communication with anonymous former MK operative.
 75. 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.
 76. M. Hala, ‘M.M. Hala: Memoirs of an Umkhonto WeSizwe Cadre’ (MA thesis, Rhodes University, Makhanda, 2022), 76–77.
 77. White, ‘The Rule of Brigadier Oupa Gqozo’, 135.
 78. TRC, Bisho Massacre Hearings 1, Day 3, 11 September 1996, Marius Oelschig, <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/bisho1/day3.htm>, accessed 8 March 2022; TRC, Bisho Massacre Hearings 2, Day 2, 19 November 1996, Brigadier Gqozo, <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/bisho2/gqozo.htm>, accessed 8 March 2022.

Nqabisa, was the CDF soldier killed on 7 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’.⁷⁹

Ciskei personnel were well aware of the regime’s weakness: its susceptibility in the face of mass protests, its disgruntled civil servants, and its 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 Bhisho might indeed precipitate the collapse of the regime. On 28 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.⁸⁰

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’.⁸¹ As Advocate Ntsebeza, commissioner at 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 who were living the daily realities of an escalating warzone.⁸²

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 from entering Ciskei.⁸³ 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.’⁸⁴ Two days

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

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

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

82. TRC, Bisho Massacre Hearings 1, Day 1, 9 September 1996, <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/bisho1/day1.htm>, accessed 8 March 2022.

83. Gqozo relayed his stance on 4 August to Padraig 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’. O’Malley Archive, P. O’Malley interview with Brigadier Gqozo, 14 August 1992, <https://omalley.nelsonmandela.org/index.php/site/q/03lv00017/04lv00344/05lv00607/06lv00690.htm>, accessed 8 March 2022.

84. ‘ANC Move to Oust Gqozo: Bloodbath Feared as Alliance Gathers for Ciskei Showdown’, *City Press*, 6 September 1992.

before the march, the districts of East London, King William's Town, Queens-town, Cathcart, and Stutterheim were declared unrest areas and the presence of South African security forces stepped up.⁸⁵ ANC leaders confirmed that 'imminent threats of violence are in the air'.⁸⁶ 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?⁸⁷

Members of the strategising committee accepted the significant risk of violence and accepted that their plan to 'storm Bhishe' would 'incur losses'.⁸⁸ Shortly after the massacre Kasrils reported: 'Everyone knew there was a risk [...] but we believed getting rid of Gqozo was worth that risk.'⁸⁹ 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.⁹⁰ No methodical or studied risk assessment was conducted by Alliance leaders in the final planning phases before the march.⁹¹ 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.⁹²

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, 6 September. '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.'⁹³ 'This is not just a symbolic march', echoed Suttner, 'we are creating a crisis situation for the other side', to force

85. *Ibid.* One thousand 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.

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

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

88. Interview by author with Crispian Olver.

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

90. Interview with Lucille Meyer.

91. 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.

92. Interview with Lucille Meyer; Interview with Crispian Olver.

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

De Klerk to discipline and end his alliance with Gqozo.⁹⁴ As crowds gathered at the Victoria Grounds on the morning of 7 September, Steve Tshwete declared to the crowd: 'We are going to Bisho to drive the pig out of the barn!'⁹⁵

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.'⁹⁶ 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.

There 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.'⁹⁷

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, the South African National Civic Organisation planned people's assemblies in the northern and eastern Transvaal as a method to resolve disputes with traditional authorities over local government.⁹⁸ 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.⁹⁹ 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

94. *Ibid.*

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

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

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

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

99. Interview with Lulamile Nazo; interview with Lucille Meyer; Vantyu, 'The Bisho Massacre'; Suttner, 'The Bisho March and Massacre', 14–25.

regime to replace Gqozo.¹⁰⁰ It was to be ‘a march of occupation’, Whittles concurred.¹⁰¹

The ANC’s assessment of Gqozo as De Klerk’s puppet was problematic. Leaders misunderstood the nature of Gqozo’s alliance, which was primarily with the military generals and not 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.¹⁰² 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. They would never have supported me on anything.’¹⁰³ 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.¹⁰⁴

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 that 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.¹⁰⁵ Many MK cadres – returning from exile and connected to Hani’s networks in Transkei – were present in the vicinity of East London.¹⁰⁶ 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 the Transkei, which would threaten the lives of both Holomisa and Hani.¹⁰⁷ Gqozo reputedly vowed to shoot Hani dead should he set foot in

100. 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 (1992), 71.

101. ‘Albert Whittles and the Museum Historian’.

102. O’Malley Archive, P. O’Malley interview with Brigadier Gqozo, 14 August 1992, <https://omalley.nelsonmandela.org/index.php/site/q/03lv00017/04lv00344/05lv00607/06lv00690.htm>, accessed 3 March 2022.

103. TRC, Bisho Massacre Hearings 2, Day 2, 19 November 1992, Brigadier Gqozo, <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/bisho2/gqozo.htm>, accessed 10 March 2022. Pik Botha also described these poor diplomatic relations; see TRC, Bisho Massacre Hearings 1, Day 1, 9 September 1996, Pik Botha, <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/bisho1/day1.htm>, accessed 8 March 2022.

104. 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.

105. For a discussion of the context and this ‘militant moment’ in Transkei, see T. Gibbs, *Mandela’s Kinsmen: Nationalist Elites and Apartheid’s First Bantustan* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2014), 147–150.

106. My thanks to Patrick Mangashe for this insight.

107. The attempted Duli coup to oust Holomisa in November 1990 had been supported by covert South African operations long underway in the region. SADF military intelligence officers behind the front company International Research had supplied weapons for the coup through Vlakplaas

the 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.¹⁰⁸ 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.¹⁰⁹ 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 oust him for strategic gain.¹¹⁰ Once again, the Border region was a central battleground in the war for liberation.¹¹¹

7 September: The 'Berlin Wall'

On the morning of 7 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 the assurance that the leadership would adhere to the conditions of the march, now permitted to enter the Bhischo stadium.¹¹² Concurrently, members of the strategising committee – including Skenjana Roji, Andrew Hendricks, Ronnie Kasrils, and Smuts Ngonyama, driven by Crispian Olver in his bakkie – went

(General Eugene De Kock) and the South African Directorate of Covert Collection (General Christoffel Pierre 'Joffel' van der Westhuizen). 'Vlakplaas Amnesty Applicants Tell of Failed 1990 Transkei Coup', South African Press Association, 20 April 1999, <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/media/1999/9904/s990420b.htm>, accessed 5 June 2024. International Research 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', in C. Schutte, I. Liebenberg, and A. Minnaar, eds, *The Hidden Hand: Covert Operations in South Africa*, 2nd ed. (Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council, 1998); L. Flanagan, 'Covert Operations in the Eastern Cape', in C. Schutte, I. Liebenberg, and A. Minnaar, eds, *The Hidden Hand: Covert Operations in South Africa*, 2nd ed. (Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council, 1998); and S. Sole, 'The Hammer unit and Goniwe Murders', in C. Schutte, I. Liebenberg, and A. Minnaar, eds, *The Hidden Hand: Covert Operations in South Africa*, 2nd ed. (Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council, 1998).

108. TRC, Bisho Massacre Hearings 1, Day 1, 9 September 1996, Bongani Finca and Dumisa Ntsebeza, <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/bisho1/day1.htm>, accessed 20 March 2022. For context, see Peires, 'The Implosion', 373–376, 379.

109. Peires, 'The Implosion', 374–375.

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

111. Flanagan, 'Covert Operations'.

112. 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.

to survey the situation at the border.¹¹³ They found the razor wire erected to prevent the march from proceeding to the main intersection in Bhishe. 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 Bhishe.’¹¹⁴ On entering the stadium the advance group also found a hole in the stadium’s northern perimeter fence, left there from the previous march.¹¹⁵

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 Bhishe via a different route, they found that all alternative access routes were blocked by Ciskei police; only the main road from King William’s Town, Maitland Road, was passable.¹¹⁶ 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 Bhishe, intensifying the pressure on space, security resources, and nerves.

At about noon, the march set off for Bhishe. At 1:00 pm, members of the strategising committee went ahead to survey the situation in the stadium.¹¹⁷ 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 Bhishe. 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 4 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 Bhishe, Kasrils was avoidant. His vague response, ‘Well, we’re on our way, so you’ll have to see. I can’t say any more than that’, indicated that they had little intention of remaining within the stadium or relying on Peace Accord intermediaries to broker negotiations.¹¹⁸

113. According to Smuts Ngonyama, Donné Cooney was also present. TRC, Bisho Massacre Hearings 1, Day 1.

114. ANC, ‘Bisho: The Story Behind the Massacre’.

115. Interview with Crispian Olver.

116. 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 Bhishe. Kasrils Papers, E2.1.1, ‘Border ANC Report on the Events Surrounding the Bisho Massacre on Monday 7th September 1992’, 13 (with Kasrils’ annotations); Suttner, ‘The Bisho March and Massacre’, 23.

117. TRC, Bisho Massacre Hearings 1, Day 1, 9 September 1996, Ngonyama, <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/bisho1/day1.htm>, accessed 8 March 2022.

118. Kasrils Papers, E2.2.2, Personal submission by Ronnie Kasrils 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, Bhishe, 7 September 1992.

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 demonstrators 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 reconnaissance, would enter the stadium and pass through the gap in the fence towards Bisho.¹¹⁹

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. Kasrils described afterwards that

because I am an exceptionally fast runner, 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'.¹²⁰

As the crowd of demonstrators reached the razor wire barrier, General Van der Bank of the CDF observed disagreement amongst '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.'¹²¹ 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 when the dense crowd was halted at the razor wire, some attempted in frustration to force and breach the barrier that was preventing their access to Bisho; indeed, some succeeded in forcing a gap in the razor wire barrier where it had been fixed to the permanent stadium fencing.¹²² 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, in criminal trials and academic publications.¹²³ CDF troops were stationed in front of the Ciskei legislature to the south east of the stadium; in a hidden

119. Kasrils Papers, E2.1.1, 'Border ANC Report on the Events Surrounding the Bisho Massacre on Monday 7th September 1992', 14.

120. Kasrils Papers, E2.2.1, Ronnie Kasril affidavit regarding Bisho Massacre, 14 March 1996, Cape Town.

121. TRC, Bisho Massacre Hearings 2, Day 1, 18 November 1996, General Van der Bank, <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/bisho2/vdbank.htm>, accessed 1 March 2022.

122. This was a different gap in the fence from that in the stadium fencing through which Kasrils' group had run. Kasrils Papers, E2.1.1, 'Border ANC Report on the Events Surrounding the Bisho Massacre on Monday 7th September 1992', 15.

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

trench in the open ground between the stadium and the government buildings; and all along the razor wire preventing access to Bhishe. Kasrils led a group of demonstrators through the hole in the northern perimeter fence of the stadium, towards Bhishe and directly towards troops who were hidden in a trench in the open ground.¹²⁴ 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 towards the Peace Accord.¹²⁵ Many of them had not been present at meetings with Hall and Gildenhuys earlier that morning.¹²⁶ With orders to employ every capacity to prevent marchers reaching Bhishe, CDF Colonel Mkosana, believing that his troops were under fire, informed his commanders, who gave permission to open fire.¹²⁷ In two long volleys of automatic fire, bullets rained down on protesters – both on those in Kasrils’ group exiting the stadium through the gap and on 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.¹²⁸ As a helicopter flew overhead, some demonstrators believed they were being fired on from above.¹²⁹ Demonstrators dived for cover, with many acting as human shields to protect political leaders from the gunfire. Twenty-eight demonstrators were killed, while more than 200 sustained serious injuries 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.¹³⁰

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

125. 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.

126. 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.

127. SABC, Truth Commission Special Report, TRC Amnesty Decision regarding Vakele Archibald Mkosana and Mzamide Thomas Gonya, AM 4458/96 and AM 7882/97, <https://sabctr.saha.org.za/documents/decisions/59245.htm?t=%2BBisho±%2Bmassacre>, accessed 4 May 2023.

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

129. 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.

130. Interview with Petros Vantyu; TRC, Bisho Massacre Hearings 2, Day 1, 18 November 1996, Petros Vantyu, <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/bisho2/vantyu.htm>, accessed 1 March 2022.

After the massacre

Following the massacre, leaders including Hani and Kasrils stayed with traumatised activists in the Bhischo stadium, where they held a night vigil. The next morning, Mandela accompanied a memorial march from King William's Town to Bhischo, where Tutu and other church leaders delivered a rousing memorial service at the border. 'We have come to wipe your tears [...] to pour oil on the wounds in your hearts', declared 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 [but] our solidarity with our people in their struggle for justice and peace. It is important that we make that quite clear.¹³¹

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. 'There were bigger forces behind him [...] our task as democrats is to pull out South Africa from this quagmire.'¹³² The ANC made a public statement from Johannesburg, condemning the CDF's gross aggression while underplaying the element of confrontation: 'The unprovoked killing of unarmed demonstrators at Bisho, today Monday 7 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.'¹³³ The Border ANC issued another statement, reiterating the focused local demands for free political activity, the removal of Gqozo, the establishment of an interim government in the Ciskei, the scrapping of Section 43, the removal of the Peace Force, and stating its ongoing commitment to negotiations and peace.¹³⁴ Gqozo and the South African government blamed the ANC: De Klerk blamed the ANC's mass action campaign while Gqozo claimed that the shooting was defensive and that demonstrators had fired the first shots.¹³⁵ 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'.¹³⁶

Press coverage proliferated in South Africa and internationally. The right-wing press blamed the 'insurrectionary' communist leadership including

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131. Historical Papers Research Archive, University of the Witwatersrand, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, AB2378, 389, Desmond Tutu Interviews – Visit to Bisho after Massacre, 9 September 1992.
 132. ANC, 'Bisho: The Story Behind the Massacre'. Hani echoed this analysis on 11 September 1992: 'The triggers were pulled in Bisho, but the plan was hatched in Pretoria.' C. Hani, 'Just How Possible is Peace?' *African Communist*, 130 (October 1992), 6.
 133. Historical Papers Research Archive, University of the Witwatersrand, Bisho Massacre (Truth and Reconciliation Commission), AK2818, File 5 Part 2, Statement of the African National Congress on the Bisho Killings, 7 September 1992.
 134. *Ibid.*, File 5 Part 1.
 135. '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.
 136. Stiff, *Warfare by Other Means*, 527.

Kasrils, Hani, Suttner, and others. According to this view, mass action was perilous and the Alliance should be held responsible for provoking violence.¹³⁷ 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 Bhisho stadium and into the line of fire.¹³⁸ Leaders were accused of using local demonstrators as 'cannon fodder' in a politics of brinkmanship.¹³⁹ Church leaders came out in a collective condemnation of all sides of political leadership stating that while the Ciskei and government should be held accountable for the violence, Alliance leaders had behaved irresponsibly, exploiting local circumstances for political gain.¹⁴⁰

Contrary to a dominant narrative which holds that the massacre at Bhisho 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 on the road to progress in the national negotiations.¹⁴¹ 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.'¹⁴² 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'.¹⁴³

Violence in the Border region escalated significantly.¹⁴⁴ While ANC supporters faced continued repression, the violence was also characterised by retaliatory attacks on Ciskei personnel. As Albert Whittles explained, 'fighting broke

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

138. For example, amongst 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.

139. 'Focus on Ciskei', *Sowetan*, 9 September 1992.

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

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

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

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

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

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.’¹⁴⁵ After the widely attended funeral for victims of the massacre, held at the Victoria Grounds in King William’s Town on 18 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’.¹⁴⁶ By October, the conflict between the ANC and the ADM was escalating into ‘overt warfare’.¹⁴⁷ 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 7 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.¹⁴⁸ 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.¹⁴⁹ Following a worrying report from 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 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.¹⁵⁰

145. ‘Albert Whittles Reflects on the Outbreak of Violence after the March’ (audio recording, Amathole Museum, c.2017), 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, accessed 14 May 2019.

146. ‘South Africa May Seek Shift in Black Homelands’, *Washington Post*, 18 September 1992.

147. *TRC Report Volume 2*, 671–672; Historical Papers Research Archives, University of the Witwatersrand, Independent Board of Inquiry into Informal Repression 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), 115–116.

148. Interviews with Lucille Meyer; interview with Crispian Olver.

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

150. ‘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, as 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.

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 ‘home-lands’. A modest demonstration in QwaQwa passed without major incident.¹⁵¹ 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.¹⁵² 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’.¹⁵³ 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 United Nations urged the ANC to halt its mass action campaign. The secretary general of the United Nations, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, called on the ANC ‘to abandon its mass action campaign’.¹⁵⁴ 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 26 September, which severed the government’s pact with Inkatha. Through the Record of 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.¹⁵⁵ After a brief NEC consultation to ratify the agreement, mass action was called off on 30 September.¹⁵⁶ With this clear emphasis on the primacy of national talks, local processes of negotiation

151. ‘ANC Disrupts Qwaqwa Show’, *Business Day*, 11 September 1992.

152. ‘Apartheid’s “Sovereign” Offspring’, *LA Times*, 18 September 1992.

153. ‘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.

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

155. O’Malley Archive, F.W. de Klerk and N.R. Mandela, ‘Record of Understanding 26 September 1992’, <https://omalley.nelsonmandela.org/omalley/index.php/site/q/03lv02039/04lv02046/05lv02092/06lv02096.htm>, accessed 10 June 2019.

156. UNISA Library Digital Collections, ANC NEC, Year 1992, ‘Press Statement of the NEC of the ANC, Urgent Meeting on 30 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’, <http://digilibary.unisa.ac.za/digital/collection/p21049coll19/id/4/>, accessed 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’, <http://digilibary.unisa.ac.za/digital/collection/p21049coll19/id/3/rec/1>, accessed 15 March 2022.

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 state and embarked on efforts to control their excesses.¹⁵⁷ But the violence did not stop; in the Border region it even 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 1993.¹⁵⁸

Curating the ANC's narrative on Bhisbo

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 by the ANC to seize control of the narrative. In the wake of the criticism, as a new round of multiparty talks was in the making, the ANC leadership carefully marshalled its narrative of the Bhisbo march and massacre. The curation of evidence by the ANC in its submission to the Goldstone Commission and then more carefully in that to 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'.¹⁵⁹ 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.¹⁶⁰ Paul Trewhela echoed this sentiment in dark irony, lambasting the 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.'¹⁶¹

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 Commission to criticise the organisation for the hurried decisions it had taken at the march, for its lack of strategic clarity, and for breaching the conditions that had

157. 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.

158. 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.

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

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

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

been laid down for the march.¹⁶² The Border report also described how, when the march reached the razor wire that had been 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.¹⁶³ This evidence was not raised 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.¹⁶⁴ The ANC, in turn, argued that its leaders had been led into an ambush: the hole in the stadium fence, made at the march on 4 August, had not been repaired, while CDF soldiers lay concealed in a trench just beyond the fence through which demonstrators had run.¹⁶⁵ The Goldstone Commission disputed the validity of this claim.¹⁶⁶ The evidence confirms, as discussed above, that it was a deliberate strategy by the CDF to surreptitiously guard this route and to lure protesters through it. Nevertheless, the question of this ‘ambush’ was also employed to defend the rash decision taken by Kasrils..

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.¹⁶⁷ In the rapid turn of events on the morning of 7 September, communications among the march leadership were disjointed and some disagreement emerged over the strategy to be

162. Goldstone Commission Transcript.

163. Kasrils Papers, E2.1.1, ‘Border ANC Report on the Events Surrounding the Bisho Massacre on Monday 7th September 1992’, 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’. Council for the CDF at the Goldstone Commission, Mr. I. J. Smuts, also described how the dense crowd on the southern (entrance) side of the stadium had pulled down the fence. Goldstone Hearing Transcript. The very tense situation to the south of the stadium, where demonstrators were breaching the razor wire that corralled them into the narrow entrance on the south side of the stadium, might also help explain - but not justify - why Captain Kema gave orders to fire on the dense crowd in front of the legislature, causing the most fatalities. White, ‘The Rule of Brigadier Oupa Gqozo’, 147–148.

164. Goldstone Commission Report.

165. ‘Bisho Killings Deliberate, Inquiry Told’, *Weekly Mail*, 25 September 1992; Goldstone Commission Transcript.

166. Goldstone Commission Report.

167. 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.

pursued. Some in the ANC Border 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, just as they had been in August.¹⁶⁸ Kasrils disputed that any such agreement had been made.¹⁶⁹

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 regional leaders agreed they should 'guard against' an 'incipient insurrectionist approach' in their planning, thus distancing themselves from the 'Leipzig way' discourse.¹⁷⁰ While Olver describes having himself been persuaded by a militant vision to topple Gqozo through popular action,¹⁷¹ this is a perspective that Lucille Meyer – more aligned with the civic and community structures in the region – dissociates herself from: the 'Leipzig option' was in 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.¹⁷²

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, Tripartite Alliance partners, church leaders, and representatives of the Border Civic Congress – 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 played 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.

168. Kasrils Papers, E2.1.1, 'Border ANC Report on the Events Surrounding the Bisho Massacre on Monday 7th September 1992', 13.

169. Kasrils Papers, E2.1.1, 'Border ANC Report on the Events Surrounding the Bisho Massacre on Monday 7th September 1992', Kasrils annotations, 13.

170. 'Kasrils Papers, E2.1.1, 'Border ANC Report on the Events Surrounding the Bisho Massacre on Monday 7th September 1992', 3–6. A memorandum issued by the Border Alliance leadership and SANCO on 3 September supports the position of local leaders described in the report. Kasrils Papers, E2.1.1, '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', 3 September, East London.

171. Interview with Crispian Olver.

172. Interview with Lucille Meyer.

ANC national leaders were traumatised by the massacre, but they also used this 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. Victor draws attention to the fact that 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’.¹⁷³ 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.¹⁷⁴

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

[W]e 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.¹⁷⁵

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’.¹⁷⁶ 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 demonstrators.¹⁷⁷ He demonstrates the vanguardism that informed his actions at Bisho, 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’.¹⁷⁸ The central role of church and civic leaders in

173. Victor, ‘The Politics of Remembering’, 89.

174. Ramaphosa, in ANC, ‘Bisho: The Story Behind the Massacre’.

175. *Ibid.*

176. Kasrils, *Armed and Dangerous*, 366.

177. *Ibid.*, 358–359.

178. *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.

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 Bhisno 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 Bhisno march and massacre are entirely erased from this 'history'.¹⁷⁹

In the wake of Goldstone's reproach, the ANC curated a more selective narrative at the TRC, where its 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.¹⁸⁰ 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'.¹⁸¹ 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'.¹⁸²

The group of demonstrators led by Kasrils out of the stadium was small, estimated at between 150 and 300.¹⁸³ 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 individuals in this group were armed, although it is possible that some may

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

180. TRC, Bisho Massacre Hearings I, Day 1, 9 September 1996, Ramaphosa, Ngonyama, <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/bisho1/day1.htm>, accessed 8 March 2022.

181. *Ibid.*, Ramaphosa.

182. *Ibid.*, Kasrils.

183. Goldstone Commission Transcript.

have been, the evidence in the Border report pointed to the determination of the crowd to reach 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 to force Gqozo to resign 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, namely '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'.¹⁸⁴

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.¹⁸⁵ The meanings of mass action were thus various, differing greatly at local and national level. 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 political 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 hostile bantustans – which rested on the notion that Ciskei might fall as the first domino, before QwaQwa, Bophuthatswana, and KwaZulu, leading to the fall of Pretoria – was informed by the vanguardist revolutionary theory dominant in exile.¹⁸⁶ 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 4 August march on Bhisho, which nearly descended into

184. TRC, Bisho Massacre Hearings 1, Day 1, 9 September 1996, Ramaphosa, <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/bisho1/day1.htm>, accessed 8 March 2022.

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

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

state violence. Furthermore, any sober assessment of the August week of action, including the march on Pretoria on 5 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 Roelf 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 government to cede to the Alliance's renewed demands (curbs on political violence, a 66 per cent 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 raid and exposure of Operation Vula in July 1990 and the embarrassment this caused for the ANC, his actions at the march overstepped his role and might reveal distance from MK colleagues in Transkei. With Kasrils 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 members 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 a disproportionate influence. Their

decisions, taken without full consultation of the regional march leadership, shaped the day's events decisively and tragically.

The government, in turn, had been content to let the confrontation play out: Ciskei was, after all, 'independent'. The anticipated violence might also discipline their opponents, 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'.¹⁸⁷ 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.¹⁸⁸ In choosing the approach of supposed 'war dove' Meyer, 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.'¹⁸⁹ 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 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.¹⁹⁰ Evident that such egregious state violence as evidenced at Bhisho 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

187. 'ANC Plan to Drive a Wedge in the Nats' Alliance', *Business Day*, 7 September 1992. See also O'Malley Archive, P. O'Malley interview with A. Akhalwaya, 17 September 1992, <https://omalley.nelsonmandela.org/omalley/index.php/site/q/03lv00017/04lv00344/05lv00607/06lv00723.htm>, accessed 10 March 2022.

188. H. Lynd, 'Homelands: Together and Apart in the Soviet Union and South Africa' (PhD thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 2023), 198.

189. O'Malley Archive, Patrick O'Malley interview with Tertius Delport, 12 August 1998, <https://omalley.nelsonmandela.org/index.php/site/q/03lv00017/04lv00344/05lv01183/06lv01226.htm>, accessed 3 June 2024. See also O'Malley Archive, Patrick O'Malley interview with Tertius Delport, 14 October 1997, <https://omalley.nelsonmandela.org/index.php/site/q/03lv00017/04lv00344/05lv01092/06lv01175.htm>, accessed 3 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. As a hardliner in De Klerk's cabinet, he was marginalised by the Record of Understanding.

190. Evans, 'The Bantustan State', 112–114.

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.¹⁹¹ 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.¹⁹² 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.¹⁹³ If the ANC's top leaders wished to build the nation by strengthening links with the grassroots, tensions within the Tripartite 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 Bhisho had served its purpose in delivering the national leadership further along the path to power.¹⁹⁴

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

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

193. For discussion of the latter, see J. Seekings, 'The Decline of South Africa's Civic Organizations, 1990–1996', *Critical Sociology*, 22, 3 (1996), 135–157; K. 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.

194. These politics and perspectives developed through the late 1980s in the ANC's Constitution Committee. H. 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.

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