

MANDELA'S ARMY

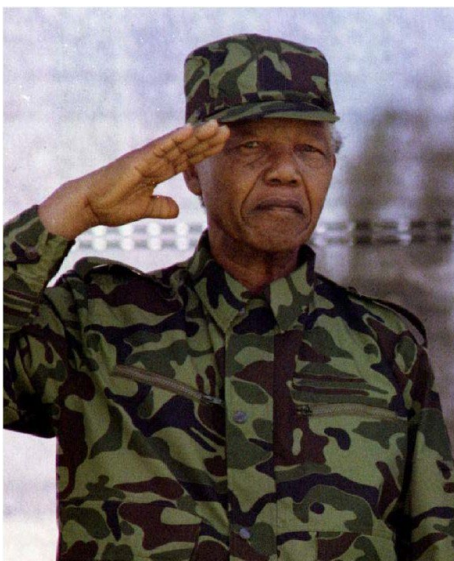


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SUMMARY

This film retraces, through the paths of former members of uMkhonto weSizwe (MK for short), the little-known story of the avant-garde military group founded by Nelson Mandela within the ANC. The "peaceful" end of apartheid could make us forget that it was preceded by a deadly struggle between the white power and South Africa's anti-racist activists. Thanks to the testimonies of these men and women who gave everything to the struggle, the film brings to life the years of guerrilla warfare led by the MK youth. This movement symbolizes all the radical energy of an era while calling for a reflection on what seems to be the repetition, throughout the history of the 20th century, of a terrible gap between revolutionary dreams and post-revolutionary realities: for South Africa, a democratic society still plagued by inequality, violence and racism.



*Mandela says we must take up arms and liberate our country in Lusaka! Oh this is a long road that we've embarked on.
Mandela said to his followers that this is a very long road,
But we will meet on freedom day.*

**Excerpts from Mayihlome iihlasele and Yinde lendlela esihambayo,
uMkhonto we Sizwe revolutionary songs**

"I, who had never been a soldier, who had never fought in battle, who had never fired a gun at an enemy, had been given the task of starting an army. It would be a daunting task for a veteran general much less a military novice. The name of this new organization was Umkhonto we Sizwe (The Spear of the Nation)--or MK for short. The symbol of the spear was chosen because with this simple weapon Africans had resisted the incursions of whites for centuries."

Nelson Mandela

SYNOPSIS

Lulled by the struggle songs broadcast on the ANC's underground radio, Zola Maseko, an ex-MK member, lets himself be guided behind the wheel of his car, his eyes focused on the horizon. You can hear the voices of his former comrades in arms calling for them to take their common destiny into their own hands and overthrow white power. *"There is only one way: to fight relentlessly. That is the way of sacrifice, the way of war and glory."*

In the early 1980s, angry about the apartheid crimes and with the passivity of the rest of the world, he, like thousands of other Black South Africans of his generation, took up arms to free his country. He joined the pioneers of the armed struggle who had taken up the struggle twenty years earlier with uMkhonto we Sizwe (the nation's spear, abbreviated to MK), an armed struggle organization created within the ANC to fight against the Boer oppression. We hear a speech by its leader, Nelson Mandela, who became famous, as well as the struggle songs and the sound of weapons.

For more than thirty years, thousands of boys and girls, sometimes only 13 years old, would leave South Africa clandestinely to join the training camps of the ANC's armed wing in Tanzania, Angola, the socialist countries of Europe, Cuba and China. Teenagers who then, at the risk of their lives, would try to return to South Africa to fight the apartheid regime.

Through their testimonies and archival documents, Apartheid takes shape in its crudest form, that of racist violence and segregation, to the point of making non-white South Africans marginalized in their own country.



Sharpeville massacre, 1960



Mass funeral for victims of the Sharpeville massacre



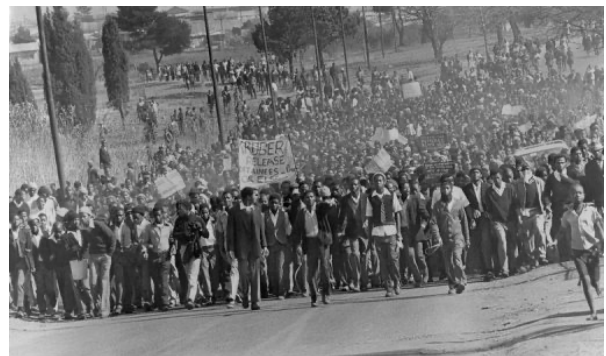
Training in an MK camp



Rivonia trial defendants, 1962



ANC protest



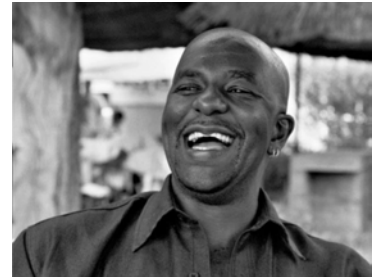
Soweto marches, 1976



Nelson Mandela's release from prison, 1990

THE CHARACTERS

Zola Maseko joined MK at the age of 18. His father was the principal of the ANC school, his mother taught at the school and also worked as a nurse at the hospital where wounded MK soldiers were treated. "The ANC and MK are in my family's DNA," he says. At the age of nineteen, he was put in charge of an "assassination squad", a unit for the execution of "askaris", the "traitors". This task has haunted him ever since. At the heart of the film, he will be our "go between", our middleman with the MK veterans.



A member of the first contingent of young people to have joined MK in 1962, **Tedding N'Capayi**, alongside his comrades, eventually fought the Boer-allied Rhodesian army in Rhodesia, without actually fighting on South African soil. 32 years in exile in the service of the ANC and MK. He is one of the few survivors of these bloody battles. Seventy-seven years old, small, frail, with a keen eye and impeccable memory, he says he has difficulty recognizing in today's South Africa the country for which he fought and sacrificed the best years of his life.



Mac Maharaj, a member of the South African Communist Party, was arrested in 1964 for his activities within MK. He was imprisoned on Robben Island for sabotage. Released in 1976, he was sent to a training camp in Zambia to continue the struggle. He was a member of the National Executive Committee of the ANC in the 1980s before becoming Minister of Transport in Nelson Mandela's first government.

Ka Shabangu became an MK fighter at 17. He was arrested at nineteen by the South African police, accused of high treason and sentenced to death. He spent 11 years on death row, waiting every morning to be executed. He still cannot explain why he survived his sentence. It is Nelson Mandela, in person, who brought him out of Robben Island after his own release. He then joined MK until the first multiracial elections which brought Mandela to power and marked the effective dissolution of the armed movement.

Ronnie Kasrils, an exiled Lithuanian Jewish communist activist and former member of the MK High Command who became Minister of Defense and then of Security (Intelligence) after the end of apartheid.

His son, **Andy Kasrils**, joined MK in the mid-eighties, "to kill the Boers and free my country." He did not die in the Angolan jungle thanks to a comrade who sacrificed his own life to save his. At the age of 54, he is only beginning to have a calmer, less tormented relationship with his past





Dudu Msomi was 13 when she left Kwazulu Natal to join the ANC in exile, and later the MK. She was one of the youngest recruits. At 16, she became a camp trainer and led a four-member unit in underground operations in South Africa. The members of her unit, betrayed by an "askari", an undercover agent within MK, were ambushed and decimated. Dudu, who had been assigned elsewhere that day, was accused of being an enemy agent by the victims' families.

She would carry this burden for twenty years. Since the end of apartheid, she has been fighting for the bodies of all the comrades who died in combat to be brought back to their families and buried with dignity.

Bomber Sybanioni joined MK at the age of fifteen. Without education, without training, his only skills were those acquired in the MK training camps. After the end of apartheid, unemployed and left to his own devices, he set up a gang of robbers with ex-fighters like himself. After several years of operation, the gang was arrested and Bomber was sentenced to fifty-five years of imprisonment. In prison, he would come across hundreds of ex-MKs, lost like him in a post-apartheid South Africa that was not waiting for them and had nothing to offer them. Bomber, who benefited from the presidential pardon and the aggregate sentences, was now free. He lived on social assistance and spent his days with the ex-MKs drinking and recounting the memories of the years of struggle, of the promises he had broken, of his escaped youth. He has since passed away.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE OF INTENT

This film traces the little-known history of the ANC's military wing, founded by Nelson Mandela, through the lives of former MK members. The wise old pacifist with a bright smile, Father of the South African Nation, who was sentenced to life imprisonment for having founded and led a guerrilla army...

What influence did MK really have in the struggle against the apartheid system? To what extent did MK's actions force the Pretoria regime to open negotiations with Mandela while he was in prison? What part did armed violence play in the final process of dismantling apartheid?

Because they did not enter Johannesburg or Pretoria with their weapons in hand to overthrow the apartheid regime, as Mandela intended when he founded MK, the young guerrillas of yesteryear, now veterans, were increasingly told that their contribution to the fall of apartheid was relative. Having the blues, some of them wondered whether this essential part of their lives had been in vain... whether they had been mistaken in thinking that their participation in the armed struggle had been the driving force behind the liberation of their country...

Thirty years after Nelson Mandela's release,

Twenty-five years after the advent of a multiracial democracy in South Africa.

Tedding N'Capayi, Ka Shabangu, Zola Maseko, Andy and Ronnie Kasrils, Dudu Msomi, Mac Maharaj who belong to different generations of young fighters who joined MK after its creation in 1961, remember February 11, 1990, the day of the liberation of their first commander-in-chief: "the beginning of the end of the dark years..."

I met Zola Maseko, a former uMkhonto weSizwe member, about 15 years ago in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. He had just won the Étalon de Yennenga (English: Stallion of Yennenga) standard at the Fespaco, the most important African film festival. Constantly cheerful, Zola smoked a lot. He also drank. We became friends, then time, distance, our episodic email exchanges, the rare calls, eventually stopped.

When I saw him again in 2016, he was emaciated, he had lost 20 kilos and had just come out of a drastic rehab program to get clean from cocaine. Looking serious, he smiled little, drank only water, and repeated like a litany that life had slipped through his fingers, that the demons from his past had turned him into a wreck. He was 49 years old, almost half a century old. How did he come to tell me about the night he first killed an apartheid police informer who had infiltrated MK? MK?" I asked. *Yes, uMkhonto weSizwe, shortened to MK, the army founded by Mandela, you know.*" Mandela's army? No, I didn't know. He continued his story: the man, his camp commander, an "elder" who trained the young recruits, tried to run away; Zola, wearing a mask and a large dark trenchcoat, shot him in the back, then approached the body, which was still moving, and shot him three times in the head. He told me many stories like that, the violence, the blood, the struggle.

He introduced me to a group of childhood friends. One of them, quiet, shy, smiling, forthcoming, had been like Zola an MK member. I didn't understand why he never left the tiny apartment where he lived, and how he could wear the same worn-out clothes every day. Zola explained. His friend, the recluse, had just come out of twenty years in prison in Australia. He had slaughtered his white girlfriend with a machete. A moment of madness. *One of the nicest people I've ever known in MK,*" he said. I could see that during my visits, Zola's friend was indeed kind, always ready to help. *"His moment of madness? A sequela of the years spent in MK,"* Zola says.

The other extroverted friends in the group were never stingy about their past accomplishments. I listened with skepticism. I found the stories of their MK activities extravagant. Sabotaging public infrastructure, killing informers, targeted killings of Boers, instigating uprisings in the townships, having sex with female MK members just before an attack... They told and laughed while slapping their hands on their thighs. One day, after the group had left, Zola showed me a press clipping. Before the Truth and Reconciliation Committee, the name of a friend he had introduced to me a few hours earlier had been mentioned by the *Special Branch*. He was an informer working for them. His friend always denied it.

With the children of ANC executives like himself, Zola often recalled their sacrificial childhoods, the unavailable parents, devoted to a single cause: the fight against apartheid. *"We grew up with the feeling that we didn't matter, that we weren't really loved, that we were after the anti-apartheid fight, way after. Our parents sent us to boarding school at a very young age so that they could focus on their political commitment. We were born in exile and grew up dreaming of a country where we had never set foot. Our parents instilled the love of this country in our blood, and here we are today, in Johannesburg, still dreaming of this country. We suffer from the "exile syndrome" that plagues the lives of children of ANC activists."*

When Zola met up with his friends, they would go back in time, smoke marijuana (which is legal in South Africa), listen to *struggle songs*, and sullenly, defeatedly, one or the other would say: *"Dreams carried us, we young people who abandoned our families, our studies, to join MK, we who were ready to die to end the apartheid regime! When I look at South Africa, I wonder if this is why our comrades were tortured, hanged, imprisoned in Robben Island? Those who are in power today, those who taught us politics, those who taught us to fight for our beliefs, who convinced us to go to war, to risk our lives, to push us to move forward, are the same ones who are the most unfair today. This is almost a philosophical question in Africa, isn't it? The clique that comes to power want to secure their family financially to the tenth generation so that no one ever has to work again. Is this our curse, we Africans?"*

I heard this with a twinge in my heart. I thought of Cameroon where I come from, a president in power for 37 years, tirelessly re-elected; I thought of the Democratic Republic of the Congo where I lived for eight years and Joseph Kabila, ruling his country with an iron fist, rigging elections as in so many other countries in Africa, putting a straw man at the head of a country he continues to rule underhandedly; I thought of Gabon, Togo... and wondered, *"Indeed, is there an African atavism?"*

In 2009, I made a documentary, *Une affaire de nègres*, in which a central character is a lawyer who was fighting against the exactions and crimes committed by the state against defenseless populations. And it is the same one who, in the last presidential election in October 2018, renounced thirty years of commitment, struggle, and convictions to side with the "presidential majority." As I shared with him my shock, my disappointment, he replied, *"Not everyone is Mandela."*

During my stays in South Africa, and my conversations with Zola, I wanted to delve into the contemporary history of South Africa, as I discovered it, starting from the story of the former MK soldiers, the youngest of whom were approaching fifty. And finally, to know better the history of this MK movement which contributed to bring down the system of apartheid by insufflating a constantly maintained hope, of another South Africa.

I like the idea of giving back to these young South African men and women, these unsung heroes who paid dearly for the liberation of their country and who were sometimes only 13 years old when they made Mandela's last words their own at the Rivonia Trial: *"I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society (...) It is an ideal for which I am prepared to die."*

Finally, I would like to introduce you to the face of Nelson Mandela in chiaroscuro, a face that is too often overlooked today. A warlord turned pacifist whose personal story, his fight for freedom, is part of the history of us all.

The fight led by the children of South Africa to access freedom remains a beacon, a model that illuminates the path of those who, elsewhere in Africa, in those countries with so-called "tropicalized" democracy, still hope to see the birth one day of true democratic states freed from violence, from the oppression of a prevaricating minority.

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