

FINDING FOREIGN POLICY: RESEARCHING IN FIVE SOUTH AFRICAN ARCHIVES¹

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I

The turbulent modern history of South Africa, which includes notable events such as the Sharpeville Massacre in 1960, the banning and exile of the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC), and the dramatic transition from apartheid to democracy in the early 1990s, has drawn academics from a number of fields to studying the nation from a variety of angles. Two such topics which have attracted scholarly attention are the foreign policy of South Africa both during apartheid, and subsequently after its demise in 1994, and the multi faceted activities of the liberation movements fighting against it. When looking at the international relations of South Africa from the end of the Second World War, through until the present day, it is almost impossible to analyse this dimension of South Africa's past without examining the lasting effects that the political mindset of apartheid had upon foreign policy decision making, and the international community. Likewise, the history of the liberation movements such as the ANC and the PAC were shaped by their attempts to defeat apartheid and the eventual end to the struggle. The histories of the ANC and South African foreign policy are inextricably linked, demonstrating the

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importance of what has, and is occurring in the country, creating a complex, but truly intriguing area of research for academics.

Conducting archival research on these two areas of interest is relatively easy in South Africa, with on the whole, well stocked, largely deserted, and easy to use archives located across the country. Based on my own recent experiences of archival work in South Africa, this paper aims to offer the reader an overview of five archives which contain sources that focus upon foreign policy and the ANC. The South African archives which will be reviewed are: 1) the ANC Liberation Archive; 2) the Mayibuye Archive; 3) South African History Archive (SAHA); 4) Historical Papers Archive; 5) and the Foreign Affairs Archive.

II

For academics researching any aspect of ANC history, the first port of call in South Africa must be the ANC Liberation Archive, located at the University of Fort Hare in the Eastern Cape Province. The archive is situated in a fitting home as the University of Fort Hare was the centre for African intellectual rebellion during apartheid, where notable leaders studied, such as Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo, and Robert Sobukwe, as well as current Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe. The archive contains all the officially declassified documents from the ANC's struggle and is the most wide ranging depository of available ANC documentation, with over 1,200 boxes of information available there. To gain access to the Liberation Archive it is essential to inform the archivist of your proposed visit and also what you intend to make use of. However, a word of warning to potential users is that the website containing the details of the collections is regularly inaccessible.

There is a large selection of information at Fort Hare broadly covering the external affairs of the ANC. This vast range of files is broken down into sub-sections and ranges from those of the Department for International Affairs, the various Chief Representatives around the world, the documents from the Headquarters in Lusaka, speeches from the ANC president Oliver Tambo, and Alfred Nzo, internal

ANC correspondences, as well as those with international organisations such as the Organization of African Union (OAU) and the United Nations. These predominately are in the form of mission or country reports, statements on issues, policy positions, press releases, communiqués, speeches, letters, and memos. This diverse array of documentation provides the researcher a broad insight into the workings of the ANC in exile, and the international activities it conducted in order to isolate and overthrow apartheid South Africa.

Despite the quantity of source material, there are several problems that arise from use of the Liberation Archive. Firstly it is the ANC's own archive and a private collection of information, so they are under no obligation to release documents, and subsequently it appears that it has been weeded of lots of information, with the vast majority still held under lock and key at Luthuli House. This assumption is partially corroborated by some documents I found in the archive, for example, one from Alfred Nzo, who had sent a memo to all chief representatives asking for a copy of every single outgoing correspondence to be sent to the headquarters at Lusaka, and another being a report on the political situation in Mozambique which stated that it was the forty-fourth in the ongoing series.² This would imply that any documents deemed unsuitable or potentially embarrassing have been removed or lost, but also indicates that the ANC had a large bureaucracy while in exile, and was meticulous in keeping its records. However, despite there being evidence of a substantial ANC bureaucratic system in exile from the files at Fort Hare, this is disputed in the most recent literature where it is claimed that by 1988 Oliver Tambo "continued to steer the ANC's ramshackle administrative ship."³ This indicates that the precise nature of the ANC in exile is still far from certain, but also that using the Liberation Archive can provide a more nuanced insight than even the most recent publication of documents.

²University of Fort Hare, Liberation Archives, ANC Mozambique Mission, Box 10, File 63: Reports 1986-1988.

³Gerhart, Gail M., and Clive L. Glaser, *From Protest to Challenge. Volume 6: A Documentary History Of African Politics In South Africa, 1882–1990, Challenge and Victory, 1980-1990* (Bloomington, 2010), 183.

Other issues to bear in mind if using Fort Hare is that many of the files concerning international relations are either high-level statements of solidarity, or denouncements of apartheid, which really don't provide that much information about what really occurred in exile. There are also very few documents which deal directly vis-à-vis ANC- foreign government relations. That said there are a number in which the movement criticises countries like Swaziland and Mozambique, which perhaps provides some sort of a reflection of ANC thinking towards Southern Africa. While these problems are not insurmountable to a thorough study of the ANC, they are definitely worth keeping in mind.

III

The Mayibuye Archive located at the University of the Western Cape, in Cape Town, is worth utilising for research on any aspect of the struggle for South African liberation. Unlike the Liberation Archive, the Mayibuye Archive is a substantial holding of information on the liberation struggle in South Africa, and one which doesn't solely focus on the ANC, containing over three hundred collections of individuals and movements' documents. Mayibuye has information on organisations as diverse as the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO), the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU), and the International Defence and Aid Fund (IDAF), and numerous papers from notable individuals such as Archbishop Tutu, Yusuf Dadoo, Govan Mbeki, and Kader Asmal to mention a few. The majority of the collections are in the form of reports, newspapers clippings, papers and publications, many of which were banned by apartheid in South Africa, or disseminated worldwide in order to attract international support for the anti-apartheid cause. There is also an extensive collection of photographic and audio visual material available at the archive, which can add weight to any research on the liberation struggles in Southern Africa. In advance of using the archive, its website is definitely worth using, as it provides an in-depth overview of the resources and collections available at Mayibuye.⁴

⁴<http://mayibuyearchives.org/> - accessed 11 May 2010.

A weakness of Mayibuye is that some of the deposits at the archive have yet to be fully catalogued, in particular the IDAF collection. Therefore a visitor to the archive must in some cases be prepared to be patient when using certain collections. However, for any scholar of apartheid era South African history, especially those which focus upon the liberation movements, the Mayibuye Archive is a highly recommended source of information due to the quantity and breadth of the sources available.

IV

The South African History Archive and the Historical Papers Archive, both of which are based in the William Cullen Library at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, are two excellent collections of information for researching South Africa's liberation movements. Between them, their extensive holdings cover many different aspects of the struggles in South Africa, including some areas of South Africa's foreign policy. The scope of material is vast, allowing an in-depth insight into a range of organisations and individuals involved in the fight for democracy in South Africa. Examples of the collections held include the submissions to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) from various organisations and individuals, the United Democratic Front (UDF) collection, the Dale McKinley papers (a prominent member of the South African Communist Party), and the Oliver Tambo and Nelson Mandela collections. A letter of introduction from a home institution or organisation is required for access to the campus and the archive, but otherwise use of both collections is simple. The websites of both archives are well maintained, detailed, and easy to use, which makes finding the information necessary for your research interests straightforward.⁵ However, a weakness of these collections is that some of the information held, particularly on the ANC, is replicated at Fort Hare, but this though can be an advantage as Wits is a far more accessible location.

⁵<http://www.saha.org.za/> - accessed 11 May 2010; <http://www.historicalpapers.wits.ac.za/> - accessed 11 May 2010.

V

For any scholar of South African foreign policy, then the Foreign Affairs Archive, at the new South African Department of International Relations and Co-operation (formerly the Department of Foreign Affairs) building in Pretoria is a priority. Unlike the other archives mentioned so far, the entire focus of this collection contains material from the Department of Foreign Affairs. However, due to the archive being located in a government building, access can be rather challenging, and it is imperative to contact the archivist in advance of your visit, as it is not particularly accessible to the public. In order to gain entry into the Department of International Relations and Co-operation complex, a letter from an institution or organisation stating the purpose of your visit is a necessity, along with your passport, and on provision of which, the guards will provide you with a swipe card which allows access. This process has to be repeated each day you wish to use the archive as the entry card is only valid for the day. After negotiating entry to the complex, the next challenge is to locate the Foreign Affairs Archive which is hidden down a non-descript concrete corridor, tucked away at the back of a mammoth underground car park, with no clear signage indicating its location.

The Foreign Affairs Archive contains all of South Africa's declassified reports, position papers, and recommendations from the apartheid government up until 1990. The archive is an excellent source of information for any researcher who is interested in the foreign policy of apartheid as it offers a unique insight into the ways in which the white minority regime attempted to break its international isolation, as well as an idea into the internal workings of the Department of Foreign Affairs. The collection spans the broad spectrum of work the Department conducted, with files containing information on specific countries such as Mozambique and Zambia, the actions of its "enemies" at the UN and closer to home, copious files on the ANC, and policy reviews. As the archive is normally deserted, and the reading room doubles as the archivist's office, the archivist is very attentive to requests, and will attempt to match specific files with your research interests.

While the Foreign Affairs Archive is an excellent resource for enquiry into South Africa's foreign policy, I will though strike some notes of caution. As Afrikaans was the language used during the apartheid government, much of the material in this archive is in Afrikaans, with very little of the documentation in English. If you can't read or understand Afrikaans then much of the content in this archive is effectively off-limits. The archive has in the last year relocated to this new site at the South African Department of International Relations and Co-operation building in Pretoria, and is still some way from functioning optimally. Some of the material is kept off-site and either has to be ordered in, or the researcher has to go to those files elsewhere in Pretoria. Also connected to the move, the exact location of some files is currently unknown, and that can be a problem if those documents are of some importance. Finally, like the Liberation Archive at Fort Hare, the information available at the Foreign Affairs Archive does not provide the complete picture of apartheid era foreign policy, as many of them were destroyed. In an interview with former South African diplomat Tom Wheeler, he admitted that the "files are deficient. Frankly they were purified. There was a process of going through them, taking off anything that was, would have been embarrassing to other people."⁶ This is a scenario all too familiar to many archives across the world, but it acts as a warning that the documents held in this specific depository must be supported by corroborating evidence.

VI

As can be deduced from this short review, the resources available to scholars who wish to conduct archival work in South Africa on its foreign relations or the various liberation movements, are bountiful. Spread throughout the country, predominantly found in the major urban centres of Cape Town, Johannesburg and Pretoria, South Africa's archives have a lot to offer researchers. Each of the five archives presented here has a unique selection of information on the

⁶Tom Wheeler, interview, SAIIA, Johannesburg, 31 March 2010.

two areas of focus which can be found no-where else in the world, providing academics with the opportunity to utilise an exclusive source of historical material. On the whole the ease of access to these archives, the well catalogued collections, the ease of reproducing the documents and the knowledgeable archivists makes research in South Africa a fruitful and rewarding experience.

However, as mentioned previously, archival work in South Africa is not without its drawbacks, and a key facet of this is the knowledge that a clear picture of South African foreign relations, as well as those of the ANC, cannot be fully revealed through these archives. Evidence indicates that both the Liberation Archive and the Foreign Affairs Archives are incomplete in their breadth, having been purged of many of its documents. For both the National Party and the ANC, this has been a conscious decision. Both political parties had engaged in a range of dubious practises, and by removing or destroying any offending evidence, they could guarantee that these would never be revealed, or at least without supporting documentary evidence. While they cannot censure authors and their opinions, they can ensure that the sources are not available. The common idiom would have it that “history is written by the victors,” and what can be witnessed in South Africa ever since the ANC were elected to power in 1994, is the concerted effort to ensure that the history written is acceptable to them. One method of doing just this is through limiting the amount of official material which is available to researchers. Unfortunately, this scenario has been mirrored elsewhere, and none less so than in the countries of Southern Africa governed by victorious liberation movements. While in one respect this is an understandable process as these new governments wished to assert their authority, redress the balance of colonial inequality and re-write history, it is a regrettable eventuality. By doing so, the result may be an “official” government line to the exclusion of alternative views of the post-colonial society in question. Researchers naturally need to be alert to the possibility, if not probability, that what survives in these archives has been subject to self-interested censorship.

Despite these negative themes I have touched upon, archival research is still a valuable and worthy endeavour, particularly in

South Africa. With such a rich selection of archival material to choose from, and so much more yet to be researched on foreign policy and liberation movements in South Africa, the country's archives offer a good entry point into these topics.

Bibliography

Gerhart, Gail M., and Clive L. Glaser, *From Protest to Challenge. Volume 6: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa, 1882–1990, Challenge and Victory, 1980–1990* (Bloomington, 2010).