The Liberation Struggle: Strategies and Heroes

AiCE Africanism & Pan-African Studies — Exile, solidarity, and internal uprising

The ANC in Exile: Building a State-in-Waiting

After the banning of the ANC and PAC in 1960, the ANC's external leadership — led by Oliver Tambo, who had escaped arrest and gone into exile — built what was effectively a government-in-waiting over three decades, operating from Dar es Salaam, Lusaka, and other frontline state capitals. The ANC's exile organisation was extraordinarily complex: it ran military training camps, schools, healthcare facilities, and diplomatic missions across the world; negotiated with foreign governments for support; and maintained the organisational cohesion and political direction of a movement whose internal leadership was imprisoned or underground.

Oliver Tambo — perhaps the most underappreciated figure in South African liberation history — led this exile organisation for thirty years with political skill, personal integrity, and strategic vision that made the eventual triumph of the ANC possible. While Mandela became the symbol of the struggle, Tambo was the architect of the organisation that conducted it: holding together a diverse, fractious coalition — communists and nationalists, Zulus and Xhosas, Black Consciousness advocates and multi-racialists — across three decades of exile, while building international support for the anti-apartheid cause.

International Solidarity: The Global Anti-Apartheid Movement

Apartheid was defeated not only by South Africans inside and outside the country, but by an extraordinary global solidarity movement that imposed economic, cultural, and diplomatic costs the South African government ultimately could not sustain — one of the most successful examples of transnational political solidarity in modern history.

Form of Pressure	Key Examples & Impact
Economic sanctions	UN arms embargo (1977); US Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act (1986); corporate divestment campaigns. Isolated South Africa economically; the rand collapsed; GDP stagnated through the 1980s.
Sports boycott	South Africa excluded from the Olympics from 1964; banned from cricket and rugby world competitions. Deeply felt by Afrikaner South Africans for whom sport was central to national identity.
Cultural boycott	Artists, musicians, and academics refused to work in South Africa under the UN Cultural Boycott, further isolating the regime.
Diplomatic isolation	South Africa expelled from the UN General Assembly (1974); most African and many other states severed diplomatic relations.
Armed frontline states	Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Tanzania hosted ANC camps and provided operational support adjacent to South Africa.
Debt crisis	International banks refused to roll over South African loans in 1985, precipitating a financial crisis that convinced the business elite apartheid was economically unsustainable.

The Internal Resistance: UDF and the Township Uprising

Inside South Africa, the 1980s saw a dramatic escalation of internal resistance that the apartheid state's security apparatus, despite its considerable resources, could not contain. The United Democratic Front (UDF), launched in 1983 as a broad coalition of trade unions, civic organisations, student movements, churches, and community groups, effectively became the internal face of the banned ANC, coordinating consumer boycotts, worker strikes, school boycotts, and community resistance across the country.

The township uprisings of 1984-86 were the most serious internal challenge to apartheid rule since Sharpeville. Black township residents, facing the combination of political oppression, economic deprivation, and the dompas system, rose in sustained revolt. The

ANC's internal structures — street committees, civic associations, youth organisations — made parts of the townships ungovernable. The apartheid state declared two states of emergency, detaining tens of thousands and deploying the army in the townships. The violence was immense on both sides — including, shamefully, the 'necklacing' of suspected police informers by township activists, a practice that shocked the world and that Winnie Mandela's controversial endorsement of brought her into deep disrepute.

But the state of emergency, and the systematic torture and murder that accompanied it in police detention — documented in testimony that would later come before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission — could not restore order. The apartheid state had won every previous military confrontation. It could not win this one, because this one was not a confrontation between armies. It was a confrontation between an entire government and an entire people, and the people, despite everything, refused to submit.

Key Takeaways

The liberation struggle combined the exile organisation Oliver Tambo built into a genuine state-in-waiting, an international solidarity movement of extraordinary reach and effectiveness, and an internal resistance through the UDF and township uprisings that made apartheid ultimately ungovernable. Together, these three fronts — external, international, and internal — converged by the late 1980s to make the system's collapse inevitable. The next lesson examines how that collapse was actually negotiated.