

“MK- Mandela’s Secret Army”. A Film by Osvalde Lewat. “South Africa’s Apartheid Parallels Israel’s Oppressive Measures”

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Revolutionaries are sometimes forgotten, despite their mission having been successful. Their struggle over, it’s often condensed to a single heroic figure, recast by history into a pacifist and a statesman. Nelson Mandela, for example.

Revolutionaries unable to overthrow their oppressor or if they build a state that doesn’t comply with Western interests, are dismissed as radicals, even terrorists. Shoved to the backside of history.

Mandela is rightly celebrated as a remarkable individual at multiple levels. None questions his crowning. Yet, among forgotten revolutionaries are his fellow militants, members of MK –*uMkhonto weSizwe*, People of the Spear. This was the militant wing of the African National Congress founded by Mandela himself (a fact often overlooked.) MK continued the costly yet essential armed struggle moving through stages of successful sabotage actions, then decline, exile, followed by revival and importance. It continued while Mandela was in prison.

Ms. Osvalde Lewat, the Franco-Cameroonian director of the 2022 film [MK-Mandela’s Secret Army, opening in New York](#), taps the memories and sentiments of veteran MK fighters. She weaves their gently-proud testimonies with (almost lost) footage of MK’s secret military training camps outside South Africa. The women and men interviewed here joined MK during the critical years after 1961. The Sharpeville Massacre that year marked a turning point

when ANC leaders Mandela and Oliver Tambo decided “the time has come that the black masses, all 25 million, should join in one determined offensive...”.

“...We tried to solve problems with other methods”, Tambo continues (in a archived clip in the film); “Since these were not forthcoming, we must solve problems with what is available to us; and the stage that’s been reached (that’s) ... available to us now, are those methods of violence...used against us, because the worst of all horrors in the world is to live forever as a slave, as hated, despised, subhuman; and this we reject”.

Words reinforced by Mandela’s assertion (also documented here) –

“...Armed struggle for the freedom of Black South Africans rose after years of unsuccessful mass demonstrations and after the white apartheid regime responded to (our) non-violent actions with increased violence.”

This film’s history of MK opens with rousing yet calm declarations sung by MK fighters, some no longer living, affirming:

“We are more powerful than apartheid”; “We come from the bush”; “We will defeat you”.

Ex-fighter Dudu Msomi recalls her mother’s response to her decision, when barely out of her teens, to join in armed resistance:

“Because anyway you living in this country, you are going to die”: “We have two choices: submit or fight... Submit or die”, asserts Zola Maseko, another veteran.

These statements cannot be heard without realizing the background, motive and logic of Palestinian resistance that is hardly uttered behind the flood of current news stories of the war presently underway in occupied Palestinian fields, homes and schools. Like the ineffective Black civil mass resistance that forced the shift to armed resistance led by MK’s militant cadres half a century ago, Palestinian resistance arose after Israel’s decades-long apartheid rule. This film’s images of beatings, jailings and shootings of Black protesters by South Africa’s apartheid troops, shocking to view, are surpassed by the genocide underway in Gaza today.

Accounts of terror imposed by South Africa’s apartheid forces parallel [Israel’s oppressive measures](#) (noted by Mandela’s grandson in 2019) that confine the population into ghettos, imprison and kill with impunity, humiliate, usurp land, and thwart economic independence – all carried out year-after-year without hope of relief or even a modicum of self-rule. In both places, resistance was labeled terrorist, its leaders denied a voice in international forums.

The decline and downfall of South Africa’s apartheid regime entered western consciousness after years of armed struggle, and then only within the boycott movement. ([Palestinian’s BDS drive](#) has limited parallels.) When the boycott of South Africa gained momentum, those joining as late as 1985 credited Pretoria’s policy change to their efforts. Meanwhile MK, Mandela’s Secret army’s ongoing role was subsumed. Veteran MK fighter Mac Maharaj explains that co-opting:

“The idea that Mandela should be portrayed as a pacifist is again to appropriate our history and place it in the model of a colonial mentality.” He continues to insist, “The

foremost truth about Mandela was that he was a freedom fighter”

In a recent [interview in Africultures](#), the filmmaker herself asserts

“It’s hard to remember that this (victory) was achieved at the cost of thousands of lives sacrificed; but it is essential to remember that it was not just the good conscience of the West (through embargo action) that suddenly woke up”.

Ms. Lewat explicit goal is to amplify and uphold *uMkhonto weSizwe*’s essential role in overturning the hated South African policy.

“In South Africa as elsewhere, their importance in the anti-apartheid struggle is little understood. This film is to fill this recognition gap” and “move away for the polite image of Nelson Mandela”.

It’s surprising to learn from Lewat of her difficulties in locating MK’s archives.

“... Lack of images reveals the lack of communication about the MK”. Footage shot in MK’s foreign-based training camps have recruits learning guerrilla tactics, topography, explosives, tank and gun operation, their rigorous training reinforced by dances and rallying calls, shouts and praises that sustained soldiers. (Their poetic compositions somehow relayed to Blacks at home helped inspire new recruits.) Gathering personal testimonies from veterans was more difficult than might be imagined. Lewat notes in her 2023 *Africulture* interview that many veterans were unwilling to discuss the disappointing aftermath of their struggle. After the peace agreement, they were marginalized and psychologically damaged. They found themselves economically destitute, especially when they refused to participate in the much-celebrated Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Nevertheless Lewat found seven men and women, all MK veterans, to join this film history. Moving, proud testimonies, even their delight in their earliest sabotage efforts that targeted electrical transmission towers and military bases, give an overarching reality to the struggle. Their quiet, reflective comments form the film’s backbone. With subdued bitterness they recall sustained torture and imprisonment, the lost comrades, the sacrifice of families, and their own dismay over fellow cadres having been cast aside. The pride and candor of their testimonies is surely their final effort to validate the role of armed struggle. And where is Mandela himself? Lewat makes clear that her motive was to reject MK-founder’s sanitized image, but to recognize “Nelson Mandela had been at the origin of the creation of an armed wing, that it was he who had pushed the ANC, which was a peaceful party, to violence.” This discovery was her motive for this new contribution to African history and resistance movements.

MK-Mandela’s Secret Army, premiers Nov. 26 at the African Diaspora International Film Festival in NYC is distributed by <https://ArtMattanFilms.com>.

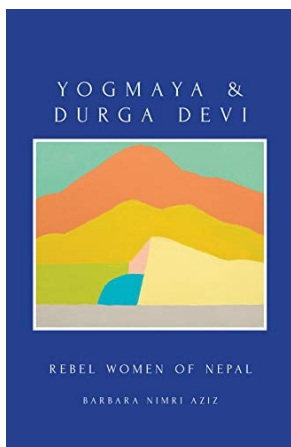
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Barbara Nimri Aziz whose anthropological research has focused on the peoples of the Himalayas is the author of the newly published [“Yogmaya and Durga Devi: Rebel Women of](#)

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[“Yogmaya and Durga Devi: Rebel Women of Nepal”](#)

By Barbara Nimri Aziz

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This book captures the daring political campaigns of these rebel women; at the same time it asks us to acknowledge their impact on contemporary feminist thinking. Like many revolutionaries who were vilified in their lifetimes, we learn about the true nature of these leaders’ intelligence, sacrifices, and vision during an era of social and economic oppression in this part of Asia.

After Nepal moved from absolute monarchy to a fledgling democracy and history re-evaluated these pioneers, Dr. Aziz explores their legacies in this book.

Psychologically provocative and astonishingly moving, “Yogmaya and Durga Devi” is a seminal contribution to women’s history.

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