



# South Africa's suspect suicides

*"I think of those heavy, felted, iron-hard prison blankets and wonder how a man, lacking any sharp instrument, could tear one into strips and hang himself within two hours of being arrested."*

By Hilda Bernstein

A man is taking a shower. He slips and falls. A few days later he dies. Three weeks later another man dies in similar circumstances, through injuries sustained after slipping on a piece of soap. Another man slips and falls down the last few steps of a flight of stairs. He lands on his buttocks and does not appear to be hurt; but eight days later he dies. Yet another man falls against a chair; soon he, too, dies. All of them died while being "detained."

In South Africa there are various laws that permit arrest and detention by the police without the necessity of any charge. The principal law is the Terrorism Act, Section Six of which authorizes any police officer to detain any person he believes is a "terrorist" or has information about "terrorists." Prof. van Mierkerk, professor of law at the University of Natal, has said that any act may become an act of terrorism. The Dean of Johannesburg, for example, was alleged to have committed an act of terrorism by providing a pair of spectacles to an old lady. Detention can be for an indefinite period and no court of law may pronounce upon the validity of any action taken under Section Six, nor order the release of any detainee.

Detention means the total and absolute exclusion of all contact with the outside world. The detainee is held in solitary confinement, incommunicado, without access to relatives, to lawyers or to the courts.

►Torture concealed.

The purpose of indefinite detention under such conditions is to practice—and to conceal the practice—of systematic torture. Such methods are justified as necessary for the security of the state.

From the time that detention without

trial came into general use (at first under the 90-day law, then the 180-day law, and now the Terrorism Act) until March of last year, there were at least 23 cases of unusual deaths while under detention. Since March, the number of deaths has accelerated and another 19 have died in detention.

Suicide by hanging is the most frequently reported cause of death in detention. It is routine in all South African jails to deprive prisoners of belts, shoelaces and similar articles of clothing when they are first brought into custody, and in the circumstances it might be thought difficult for those detained to be able to hang themselves. The means described are various. A Chinese, Ah Yan, was found hanging by socks from a waterpipe; one man was said to have hanged himself with his own jeans; another with a blanket torn into strips.

I think of those heavy, felted, iron-hard prison blankets and wonder how a man, lacking any sharp instrument, could tear one into strips and hang himself within two hours of being arrested. I do not know which is more terrible—to believe they died in the way the police say they died, the long incredible agony of a man strangling himself with socks on a pipe, the degree of despair that can make this possible; or to believe that death came in some other way than suicide by hanging.

►Banning the dead.

Looksmart Solwandle Ngudle, they say, committed suicide by hanging. His wife went to a lawyer and an inquest was held. Then the dead man was banned. [Eds. note: Under the 1950 Suppression of Communism Act, the Minister of Justice can "ban" opponents to apartheid. Banning prohibits a person from belonging to any association, from receiving visi-



Photos by Hilda Bernstein

(top) Students from Soweto demonstrate for the release of detainees. (bottom) South African police stand guard in Soweto.

tors, teaching, etc. Banned persons are required to report to the police regularly and are restricted to certain towns.]

Why should the Security Police wish to ban, and thus silence, a man already dead? Because it then became illegal to publish any statement made during his lifetime, and witnesses that Mrs. Ngudle's counsel wished to call to testify to Ngudle's allegations to them of torture were also silenced.

Counsel withdrew in protest. At a later hearing the magistrate ruled that evidence of electric shock torture was irrelevant and refused to permit witnesses to appear. Ngudle—strong, cheerful, brave, out-going—hanged himself, said the court, and that death was not the result of any act or omission on the part of any person.

Alpheus Mailbe was a man of my generation—a tough, black peasant from the Northern Transvaal who came to Johannesburg and became a political organizer. When the organizations he served were made illegal, and too many were in jail, and he was getting old, he disappeared from political activity. He went back to his own locality; and was detained; and then was reported dead—suicide by hanging.

Mapetla Mohapi, 28, a university graduate and secretary of SASO (the black students' organization) until he was banned, was taken from his home in Kingwilliamstown in August of last year. Mohapi was a man of great inner resources, confidence and commitment to his cause. According to the police, he hanged himself by his jeans.

Another brilliant student, a bursary-winner and Oxford graduate, Wellington Tshazibane, was detained under the Terrorism Act on Dec. 9, and two days later his family was informed that he was dead—suicide by hanging.

James Titya, Ah Yan, J.B. Tubakwe, James Lenkoe, Luke Mazwembe—the list is too long to record them all. Suicide by hanging.

An inquest was held on James Lenkoe's death. A pathologist testified to lesions and copper deposits on his skin, caused, he believed, by electrical burns. But the magistrate refused to allow counsel to bring witnesses testifying that Lenkoe had been given electric torture and refused to let counsel address the court on the evidence.

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## South Africa

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►No one would be blamed...

Nicodimus Kgoathe, the man who slipped in a shower and died, officially died from bronchial pneumonia. A doctor told the court at his inquest that he appeared to be suffering from the after-effects of concussion and that Kgoathe's injuries were the result of an assault: linear marks on the shoulders, u-formed wounds, a wound on his eye. The magistrate said no one could be blamed for his death.

The magistrate in the case of Solomon Modipane, who sustained injuries after slipping on a piece of soap, found that death was due to natural causes and said no inquest was necessary.

The detainees died after jumping out of windows. Suliman Saloojee was being interrogated in a roomful of Security Police when he suddenly leapt up, called out "Goodbye, Sir!", ran to the window and propelled himself through before anyone could stop him.

As he lay on a parapet, dying, a policeman later testified that he heard another officer ask Saloojee why he did it, and Saloojee managed to say—twice—"Foolish, tried to escape" before he died.

Ahmed Timol, also said to have died by leaping through a window, was a young teacher whose death sent a shock-wave through South Africa. He was being interrogated in a sound-proof room on the tenth floor of the new police headquarters in Johannesburg, rooms that after Saloojee's death were supposed to be designed to prevent such suicides. A lengthy inquest made headlines for weeks, but despite evidence of extensive injuries caused by blows before his death, the verdict was death by suicide.

►Could it possibly happen?

A medical student, William Tshwane, was arrested in June last year with other Soweto students. In October his family was told that he had died on the day of his arrest. His body was buried and could not be exhumed. Cause of death—undisclosed.

Fenuel Mogatusi, another Soweto schoolboy, was said to have died of suffocation during an epileptic fit. His family said he did not suffer from epilepsy and had never had a fit.

Dumisani Mbatha was 16 when he was arrested last September. According to the police he became ill in prison, was moved to hospital and died. 15,000 mourners attended his funeral. Police opened fire on the mourners, killing seven.

Luke Mzawembe was said to have hanged himself two hours after his arrest. Ernest Mamasila, hearing that the police were looking for him, voluntarily presented himself to them; some time later he was dead—suicide by hanging.

George Botha, a biology teacher, died five days after being detained. "He jumped down a staircase well next to the lift," sated the police.

Edward Mzolo, who died at Johannesburg Fort last October, was the third to die in detention at the Fort in two weeks; the cause of his death was never disclosed.

Joseph Mdluli died by the application of force to his neck; four members of the Security Police were charged with culpable homicide. They gave evidence that after an earlier scuffle he suddenly stood up while being interrogated, staggered, fell hitting the back of a chair with his neck or chest and died an hour later. In spite of the evidence of forensic experts that his injuries included a fractured cartilage, extensive bruising on neck, forehead, scalp and body, and three fractured ribs, and that he appeared to have been dead much longer than the period suggested, the four police were acquitted.

The Judge President of Natal, who had heard the case, said there was a conflict in

the evidence of police and doctors. If the police evidence was to be accepted, the four accused had left the room half an hour before Mdluli died. "If he had died of these injuries in the morning after a scuffle with the four accused, all the policemen in the building would have had to enter an elaborate conspiracy to conceal his death till that evening. The court could not accept that such a thing could possibly have happened."

►A conspiracy.

A conspiracy surrounds every single death in detention and the truth for most of them will never be known. For every accidental fall, jump through a window, suicide by hanging, conceals a number of terrible events in which an increasingly large circle of people play a part. Like ripples the circle extends and extends, and its outer edges touch every single white person in South Africa.

Many of those who die in detention have in the past survived prolonged detention and interrogation; and some have served prison sentences on Robben Island. As I write this, I add a new name to the list, that of Lawrence Ndzanga, formerly secretary of the Railway and Harbour Workers' union. He and his wife Rita were both detained in January of this year. It was not the first time.

They were both detained in May 1969 and for nine months they, and more than 20 others, were held incommunicado. During that period three died in detention: Michael Shivute on the night of his detention, death by suicide; Caleb Mayekiso, 19 days after being detained, cause of death unknown; and the Imam Abdullah Haron, four months after being detained, from a fall down some stairs.

After nine months the Ndzangas were charged and tried, but the state withdrew the indictment. They were acquitted and discharged, and then re-arrested and once more held in detention.

Relatives of those re-detained sought to obtain a court order to restrain the police from assaulting or torturing them and supported their application with affidavits they had given when they were still on trial.

►"Girl, you must talk."

Rita Ndzanga: "Major Swanepoel called me by a name. I kept quiet and did not reply.... Day and night is the same in this room because of the thick heavy planks covering the windows.

"I remained standing. It was late at night. One policeman came round the table and struck me. I fell to the floor. He said 'Staan op' and kicked me."

She was taken back a second time for questioning, then a third. They hit her. They made her stand, without shoes, on a pile of bricks, pulled her by her hair, dropped her on the bricks. "I fell down... the same man pulled me up by my hair again.... His hands were full of my hair. He washed his hands in the basin." She stood on the bricks, but when she fell off again they hit her. "They poured water on me. I could not stand the assault any longer. They said 'Meid, jy moet praat!' (Girl, you must talk.)"

Lawrence Ndzanga told how he was made to stand on the bricks for prolonged periods, that Maj. Swanepoel refused to let him go to the toilet and he was forced eventually to pass water where he stood.

But Mr. Justice Theron ruled the applications as being not urgent and thought the three men who had died in detention had died from natural causes.

The second period of detention in solitary confinement lasted for 5½ months; they appeared in court once more; and after several weeks of argument were again found not guilty. They were then banned for five years.

Some time last year, both Rita and Lawrence Ndzanga were arrested again, detained, interrogated. Both were to be charged under the Terrorism Act. Rita is still in jail and has been charged. Lawrence, according to the police, collapsed and died in January.

Hilda Bernstein was a journalist in Johannesburg until she and her husband were imprisoned by the government because of her anti-apartheid activities. She now lives in London.

# NATO rescued by Soviet arms scare

*It is scarcely surprising that a period in American foreign policy marked by "strengthening of traditional alliances" should be accompanied by a campaign of alarm over the "Soviet military threat" several decibels higher than has been heard for some time.*

By Diana Johnstone

Paris. What are NATO and the Warsaw Pact really for? At the start their ostensible function of defense against attack from each other was probably their primary function. The function of holding together their respective political and economic blocs may well have been secondary. But with the passage of time, that secondary function has surely become primary.

For many years now it has in practice been the only function. It has been seen blatantly in military intervention in Czechoslovakia; it has been keenly felt as a powerful inhibition on the Italian left. Since this secondary function by now considered indispensable by both the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. to the defense of their interests, cannot be openly admitted for political reasons, the primary function must be kept alive in the rhetorical level.

It's therefore scarcely surprising that a period in American foreign policy marked by "strengthening of traditional alliances" should be accompanied by a campaign of alarm over the "Soviet military threat" several decibels higher than has been heard for some time. Harder times and growing skepticism might make the American public more reluctant than in the past to give the shirt off its back to feed the insatiable military industrial complex, so Congressmen must be provided with patriotic excuses to vote huge appropriations by authoritative bodies such as the "Committee On the Present Danger" backed by the pessimistic Pipes report.

►Standardizing Europe.

From the French point of view, one of the purposes of this latest campaign was especially obvious. One of the themes of the American alarmists, French observers noted, was that NATO suffers from the major weakness of "arms incompatibility" and thus must rush to achieve "standardization" of military equipment in order to preserve Western civilization. The main source of this "incompatibility" is that not all NATO arms are of American manufacture.

In an article in *Le Monde*, Admiral Antoine Sanguinetti, retired early for his public criticism of the current French government's NATO-ward swing, observed that "every time NATO might loosen up, a well orchestrated campaign on the arms level of the Warsaw Pact is enough to re-tighten the bonds with the 'big protector' under the influence of a terror maintained with the greatest care." This time the campaign is particularly significant, because it coincides with a policy of consummating West Europe's political and economic unification so as best to serve the needs and interests of American-controlled multinational corporations.

"Merely on the economic level," Admiral Sanguinetti wrote, "one cannot overlook or pretend not to notice the old theme of 'standardization' which, on the valid pretexts of return on investment and logistic practicality, enables NATO to dismantle Europe's arms industries. Yet they are precisely the spearhead of modern research and technology, a factor essential to influence and penetration of the world market."

Once "standardization" is accepted as a necessary principle, past experience indicates one of two outcomes: either the contract will go to an American firm, thus shutting that bit of the European market to European manufacturers, or else joint

production will be arranged, in which the U.S. takes the technologically advanced part, reducing European industry to a subsidiary role.

Standardization looks like an enterprise for economic and industrial absorption," Admiral Sanguinetti wrote. The ideological cover for this enterprise is provided not only by the Soviet scare but also by the stress on "interdependence," an "international division of labor" and a "new world economic order."

►The new Clausewitzians.

As Murray Marder reported in the *Washington Post*, the pessimistic estimate of Soviet global strategy and military might produced by the top level team headed by Professor Richard Pipes of Harvard was based more on political than military assessment. Considering the political astuteness of the gentlemen involved, this is reassuring news to anyone who was beginning to worry.

Pipes said of his panel: "They know about weapons, they all know about politics. They view Soviet policy in Clausewitzian terms—which is the way the Soviets look at it." Marder explained that Pipes was referring to the dictum that war is "a continuation of political relations by other means," sanctifying war as a continuation of diplomacy.

Piercing to the very heart of things with the laser beam of this great truth, "the Pipes panelists, and fellow pessimists, contend that U.S. policy has been based on the erroneous belief that the Soviet Union shares the official American view that nuclear war is 'unthinkable,'" Marder reported. "On the contrary, they maintain, real Soviet policy, as distinct from declared policy, rules out no form of military might."

If this indeed represents the level of political analysis of the men running the U.S. there is real cause for alarm of another sort. It does quite obviously represent the level they can get away with, the political culture being what it is.

Assuming that war is a continuation of politics, assessment of the likelihood of any given power going to war would have to start with an analysis of the precise policy aims that could lead a power to the drastic "extension" of its policy into war. The panelists, who "know politics," did not tire themselves out with such an exercise.

Instead, they took Clausewitz, as philistines take Machiavelli, not for the insight, but for the moral opprobrium supposedly "believing" in such a theorist can cast on an adversary. The Soviets think in Clausewitzian terms, therefore they will stop at nothing, therefore they will do their worst.

This sums up the entire deduction of these knowledgeable political thinkers, who incidentally, as Pipes said, view policy in Clausewitzian terms themselves. So what is to keep them from stopping at nothing and doing their worst?

Nothing, of course, except that enormous complicated everchanging reality out there, which tends to get in the way of such fantasy whims as, "Since we've got so many bombs, let's conquer the world next Friday night." There is reason to believe that the Russian rulers are at least as aware of the obstacles contained in that reality as are the Pipes panelists.

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