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978-0-521-00782-5 - Robben Island and Prisoner Resistance to Apartheid

Fran Lisa Buntman

Excerpt

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I

Introduction*Prison as a Source of Politics*

If they had spread us right around the country, things would be taking a different turn now. . . . They thought we were so much poison we had to be kept and contained in one bottle, and that worked wonders. . . . It was one of the biggest gifts we ever got, that both liberation movements could have had. I think the minute we were put together, our survival was on the cards, we had to survive. It was not by any means axiomatic to begin with, but with time it was clear that we were going to be victors, which I think we have emerged being.¹

On the eve of Nelson Mandela's inauguration as South Africa's first democratic president, a daily Johannesburg-area newspaper commemorated the event with the headline, "From Prisoner to President."² Two years later, in 1996, the pivotal place of prison in President Mandela's own life, as well as in the country's history more generally, was recognized by placing, in the parliamentary buildings, a full-size replica of Mandela's Robben Island cell, where he lived for eighteen of his twenty-seven years in prison.³ Mandela and South Africa are not, however, unique in the role prison played in the political development of nation and individual; rather, they point to the role of prison in the political processes of many people and struggles. Imprisonment preceded national office for leaders ranging from Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah and Cuba's Fidel Castro in anticolonial struggles to Czechoslovakia's Václav

¹ Ernest Dikgang Moseneke, interview by author, tape recording, Pretoria, South Africa, 1987–1988.

² "From Prisoner to President," *The Star* (Johannesburg), 9 May 1994, 1.

³ "Down Memory Lane," *The Star*, 19 June 1996, 3; Pippa Green, "No Socks for Madiba," *Millennium Magazine*, August–September 1996, 28. Significantly, the reproduced cell did not have a bed or desk, which reflected the condition in which Mandela and other prisoners found the cells, rather than the small but not inconsequential improvements that occurred over the years. For example, like other prisoners, Mandela received a bed only thirteen or fourteen years after being placed in his cell in 1964 (author's conversation with Ahmed Kathrada, 27 October 1996). The model cell did include photos of the "improved" cell as it would have been in 1982, when he was removed to the mainland Pollsmoor prison.

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Havel and South Korea's Kim Dae Jung in the post-Cold War era.⁴ Nkrumah, like Mandela, went into prison as a self-conscious and publicly recognized political dissident; in other cases, however, jail cells have facilitated the development of political consciousness, as in the example of Malcolm X.⁵

Despite the centrality of imprisonment in ordering the political history of South Africa and elsewhere, analyses of the place of political imprisonment in political structures and trajectories are rare. Incarceration resulting from challenging the status quo or balance of power is often recognized as a credential for political status or even office. Aryeh Neier, for example, notes that "political prominence in the postcolonial period was hardly possible without a record of imprisonment during the struggle for independence."⁶ There has, however, been little to record or assess whether and how imprisonment itself has shaped activists' strategies, the nature of political movements, and articulations or theories of resistance or whether prisoners may have influenced how their captors (re)considered incarceration as state policy. These issues are the concern of this book.

Political imprisonment plays a vital role in shaping resistance movements and their methods. The strategies and histories of political prisoners require investigation as a part of broader (national) resistance movements and as a contribution to theories of resistance. Patterns of prisoner resistance further

⁴ Mandela actually saw Algeria's first president, Ahmed Ben Bella, welcomed back from prison after he was released and before he became independent Algeria's first premier. Anthony Sampson, *Mandela: The Authorized Biography* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers in conjunction with HarperCollins, 1999), 166. Sampson also pointed to other African prisoner-presidents; see 176 and 495.

⁵ Michael Eric Dyson, *Making Malcolm: The Myth and Meaning of Malcolm X* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). Another U.S. example of the development of political consciousness in prison is George Jackson. See George Jackson, *Blood in My Eye* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1990) and *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990). Within South Africa, those who became politically aware in prison include people like Amina Desai, not known among the broader public. A human rights monitor who visited Desai in the early 1970s in South Africa's Barberton prison commented that "prison makes people think politically who sometimes did not before." Mrs. Desai had been convicted of destroying evidence after an activist boarder of hers was arrested and she destroyed his diary to avoid being implicated. She came into prison "non-political" and even rather racist," her visitor recalled, initially "complaining of having to share meals with a black woman," in this case Dorothy Nyembe, a veteran opponent of apartheid. Over time, however, "Mrs. Desai was more fiery against apartheid than Dorothy!" Anonymous, letter to author, 10 January 1996.

⁶ Aryeh Neier, "Confining Dissent: The Political Prison," in *The Oxford History of the Prison: The Practice of Punishment in Western Society*, ed. Norval Morris and David J. Rothman (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 408. Neier argued that external resistance and protest movements are reducing the use of political imprisonment. Political imprisonment was effective "so long as the rest of the world went along with the tradition that what any state does within its own borders is not the proper concern of governments and citizens elsewhere." He consequently predicted that political imprisonment is increasingly likely to be "an anachronistic mode of repression." *Ibid.*, 424.

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point to the need to rethink aspects of political processes and historiography. I support these claims by examining the maximum security prison on Robben Island – hereafter Robben Island – in South Africa, the place of Robben Island in South African politics, the implication of resistance on Robben Island for theories of resistance, and, finally, examples of political imprisonment beyond the Robben Island case.

Robben Island has a long history as a site where outcasts and rebel opponents of various settler and colonial governments were abandoned and imprisoned.⁷ Under apartheid, however, Robben Island, often called the Island, was the prison in which most black male political prisoners who opposed the apartheid regime were incarcerated from 1962 to 1991. As such, it included inmates classified by apartheid as African, Indian, and “Coloured” and excluded white men and women of all races.⁸ The Island had the largest concentration of political prisoners over the longest period of time during apartheid rule. Symbolically, Robben Island became the jail most associated with apartheid’s incarceration of political prisoners. On a practical level, of the various sites of political incarceration, the prison played the greatest role in developing antiapartheid politics.

By focusing on Robben Island, this work focuses on South African prisoners who were tried and convicted, rather than the tens of thousands who were detained without trial. (Detention without trial was an almost inevitable first step before people were charged, sentenced, and imprisoned as convicted prisoners, although probably only the minority of detainees were ever charged with a legal offense.) For the purposes of semantic clarity, and in

⁷ The most recent histories of Robben Island were edited and written by Harriet Deacon. They are Harriet Deacon, ed., *The Island: A History of Robben Island, 1488–1990* (Cape Town: David Philip and Mayibuye Books, 1996), and Harriet Deacon, “A History of the Medical Institutions on Robben Island” (Ph.D. diss., University of Cambridge, 1994). Other sources include, but are not limited to, Simon de Villiers, *Robben Island: Out of Reach, Out of Mind; A History of Robben Island* (Cape Town: Struik, 1971) and James W. Fish, *Robben Island: The Home of the Leper* (Kilmarnock, Scotland: John Ritchie 1924), but I have also found references to “Robben Island” as *Robben Island: An Account of Thirty-Four Years’ Gospel Work Amongst Lepers of South Africa* and D. Moyle, “An Early History of Lunacy in South Africa” (Honours Thesis, University of Cape Town, South Africa, 1987).

⁸ As with most works dealing with South Africa, a clarification on racial terminology is necessary. Apartheid classified South Africans into four racial groups; whites, “Coloureds” (those of mixed race), Indians (sometimes referred to as Asians), and Africans (also called Natives, Bantus, Plurals, and Blacks at various times). Until the development of black consciousness philosophy and political organizations, those opposed to apartheid tended nevertheless to accept these divisions as facts of organizing. A crucial innovation of black consciousness was to argue that all the oppressed shared a common blackness, and were in that sense Black. I follow the black consciousness usage to term those people classified as Coloured, Indian, and African as black – note, however, the difference in capitalization – except where it is necessary to refer to people as whites, Coloureds, Indians, or Africans. All the terms remain fundamentally problematic both morally and intellectually, although inevitable for the foreseeable future.

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accordance with what was common usage in South Africa, this book will term those detained without trial “detainees,” and those tried, convicted, and sentenced to prison, “(political) prisoners.”

Robben Island is an important factor, albeit one largely neglected to date, in explaining key features of antiapartheid resistance in South Africa (and, moreover, certain characteristics of the transition to democracy and the early stages of democratic governance). This is not to claim that Robben Island, or prison politics in general, was more important than other, well-recognized aspects of the mobilization against white rule in South Africa. However, an understanding of resistance on Robben Island, as well as its impact on national politics, contributes to a new understanding of the political past, present, and future.

Appreciation of the role of Robben Island resistance and politics is indispensable to explaining South African political processes. On Robben Island, traditions, ideologies, and practices of South African liberation politics were kept alive when they had been successfully repressed and essentially eviscerated within the country for over a decade. As their sentences ended, released prisoners reinserted these ideas and organizational cultures of established liberation movements back into new political processes; released prisoners functioned as underground missionaries connecting new converts to an old faith, including the exiled movements outside the country. The harsh divides of generational politics that so often caused gaps and rifts in South African movements were generally overcome by those on Robben Island to advance the goals of liberation. Waves of younger prisoners inspired men whose years in prison had slowly turned into decades; new prisoners brought the current realities of national politics to old masters who gave the resistance of the recent arrivals a history and, often, a different future. Together, many generations and strands in the liberation movements forged common goals for day-to-day living, learning when to disagree and when to agree on strategies and tactics of struggle in and beyond the prison walls. The lessons learned on Robben Island were successively and successfully implemented by the waves of released prisoners who invigorated resistance politics on the outside, with new and renewed leadership, fresh assessments of the way forward, and a depth of political understanding few on the outside had the time or opportunity to acquire.

Robben Island’s impact resonated beyond antiapartheid opposition to the politics of negotiating a transition and creating and governing a democratic state. Prison life demanded constant negotiation with warders and other prison authorities. Prisoners thus developed a peculiar intimacy with the apartheid state. This familiarity with the enemy taught prisoners about the strengths and weaknesses of the regime they sought to destroy and prepared them for negotiating with it.

Although some prisoners planned escape, the Robben Islanders realized that one kind of escape was to use the prison against itself – to survive as

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individuals and organizations but also to craft a society based on a social code of their creation, not the regime's, to forge a new polity in and from the prison. The place of former Islanders in South African democratic politics, prominent in government and in the new economic and political elite, cannot be reduced to a reward for endurance and long service. In South African politics, political imprisonment, especially on Robben Island, provided a formal credential, a symbol of sacrifice. But of infinitely greater importance, through their resistance, prisoners on Robben Island began to build a polity and even a nascent parliament in their prison long before a replica of a prison cell, even the president's, could be placed in the parliament over which they came to preside. The copy of Nelson Mandela's cell in the democratic parliament hints at how the practices and choices of political prisoners, especially on Robben Island, shaped the path from politics in prison to a prison cell in parliament.

Overview

This book examines prisoner resistance on Robben Island between 1962 and 1991. I show how Robben Island, designed as an institution of repression, was continually transformed by its political inmates into a site of resistance. The explanation for this transformation is that, where material conditions permit, resistance, when fully articulated and elaborated, is a constructive political act that attempts fundamentally to alter existing relationships of power, including through the elaboration of alternative political institutions and structures.

This project focuses on four key concerns. The first identifies and reconstructs the processes through which Robben Island was transformed by prisoners from a brutal "hell-hole"⁹ to a "university" for activists and political leaders. The account of this transformation examines the post-1962 struggles of political prisoners on Robben Island and is the central empirical and historical focus here; it is covered in Chapters Three through Six. Chapter Three traces the conditions Robben Islanders faced when they first arrived en masse in the early 1960s, and how these circumstances changed over time, mostly – if unevenly – for the better. Prisoner resistance is identified as the most important, although not the only, reason for improvements in the treatment of inmates. The prisoners sought more than the amelioration of conditions, however, and inmates articulated aspects of the foundation of a transformative politics by developing a complex of educational and sporting institutions and practices, as examined in Chapter Four. Chapter Five analyzes the reestablishment of the nation's outlawed liberation organizations on Robben Island, and Chapter Six explores relations among and

⁹ Moses Dlamini, *Hell-Hole, Robben Island, Prisoner No. 872/63: Reminiscences of a Political Prisoner* (Nottingham, Great Britain: Spokesman, 1984).

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within the various political organizations and the establishment of other structures, initiatives, and processes that crossed organizational lines. The patterns and relevance of social and political organization are inferred and analyzed.

Second, I examine how resistance on Robben Island sheds light on political processes. The effect of prisoner resistance on South African politics is examined in six chapters. Chapters Three and Four identify how Islander resistance shaped the possibility and fact of a viable political community on Robben Island. Chapters Five and Six explore the effect of political incarceration on political conscientization, the relationships among different political organizations, prisoner struggles for organizational and ideological hegemony, and confrontations among different generations of inmates inside the prison. Chapter Seven studies aspects of the impact of Robben Island on antiapartheid politics within South Africa and to a lesser extent, the role of Robben Islanders in the post-1990 transition and the post-1994 democratic government. To date, historical and political analysis of relevant South African resistance is incomplete and flawed because it has failed to examine the role Robben Island played both as an arena and aspect of resistance in itself, and in terms of released Islanders actively reinserting themselves into oppositional politics upon release. Important aspects of the antiapartheid struggle and the nature of the emerging postapartheid polity cannot be understood without reference to the place of Robben Island and the way the Islanders have shaped South African politics. Chapter Eight probes the state's perception of and attitude toward Robben Island and political imprisonment. Evidence demonstrates that prisoner resistance, combined with reformist tendencies in the Prisons Service and increasing pressures on the regime, made political imprisonment both a site of state reform and an arena for the government to explore various reformist alternatives.

The third concern is theoretical. Building on the previous chapters, key examples in the literature of resistance are discussed to show that the notion of resistance is inadequately specified or theorized. Chapters Six and Nine theorize resistance in two different ways. On the one hand, a distinction is drawn between what I term "categorical resistance" and "strategic resistance," two logics of resistance offered by prisoners on Robben Island. These two forms of resistance can be crudely identified with an emphasis, respectively, on principle and on realpolitik as guiding the *raison d'être* of challenges to the state. On the other hand, but also continuing from and consistent with the arguments about categorical and strategic resistance, I argue that the notion of resistance must account not only for subjects who resist but also for subjects who consciously and intentionally remake the political environment. The men on Robben Island used resistance as a baseline for a more far-reaching project, namely fundamentally reshaping existing power relations within the prison and the society outside the prison. That is, I argue

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that resistance is the necessary first step in creating space to rearticulate key relationships of power. As such, resistance is a beginning of a process and continuum that aims at more far-reaching resignification¹⁰ or emancipation in the polity. Prisoner resistance in its most advanced elaborations attempted to alter relationships of power in the society beyond the prison walls by constructing a nascent political order on Robben Island itself, at least within the material constraints allowed by the realities of incarceration. To use the lexicon of Louis Althusser,¹¹ the prisoners began to develop their own ideological state apparatuses as well as methods of sanction and discipline within the regime's repressive state apparatus. Resistance, perhaps most often associated with a negative baseline refusal that is commonly or conventionally its minimum definition, is then a means to the end of resignification, a positive act of remaking and reconstruing the dominant world.¹²

Fourth, the Robben Island experience invites a crucial question that applies well beyond the South African context: how did (and does) incarceration in political prisons affect liberation struggles, social movements, and the actors within them? In this regard, my project is less an intervention into an established academic discourse than an argument for the opening up of such an arena of research and analysis. This study suggests the need to analyze the politics of political prisons beyond Robben Island and the South African case. With the important disclaimer that "scholarly exhaustiveness is more unattainable than ever,"¹³ I note that, other than prison memoirs, literary critical examinations of prison writing, and analyses of Northern Ireland's political imprisonment,¹⁴ no significant literature examining prison resistance was identified. The final, comparative chapter considers discussions of other prisons and national contexts that suggest that the Robben Island case study is applicable to or has comparable aspects with other countries, peoples, and struggles. This final chapter outlines other examples

¹⁰ I borrow the term "resignification" from Bonnie Honig, who used it in a talk on dilemmas and the dilemmatic at the Department of Government at the University of Texas at Austin in 1993.

¹¹ Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971).

¹² Cornel West, "Marxist Theory and the Specificity of Afro-American Oppression," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

¹³ Sherry B. Ortner, "Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37, no. 1 (1995): 176.

¹⁴ See Begoña Aretxaga, "Dirty Protest: Symbolic Overdetermination and Gender in Northern Ireland Ethnic Violence," *Ethos* 23, no. 2 (1995): 123–149; Allen Feldman, *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991); and Kieran McEvoy, *Paramilitary Imprisonment in Northern Ireland: Resistance, Management, and Release* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

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that confirm the relevance of my argument beyond the Robben Island case study.

Contributions

This book makes at least three critical interventions in social and political “science.” First, the broad subject matter of the research and argument – prison politics – calls attention to a neglected aspect of political analysis. This work shows that processes within (political) prisons are relevant and, at times, critical to a range of concerns in the study of politics. These topics include the internal struggles of subordinate groups, the relations among resistant and dominant groups, the influence of (repressive) state strategies on the resistance of the opposition, the relationship among international and national civil society and pro-democracy groups, and the fact that events and patterns within prisons can and do shape political dynamics beyond the prison walls.

A second contribution of this study of prison politics is to theories of resistance. This book promises to “theorize resistance,” but this term is in fact shorthand for a commitment to theorizing the *continuum of resistance* from survival and refusal to resignification and reconstrual as a means and method toward emancipatory and transformative goals. In this understanding, in its most far-reaching articulations, we must also grapple with the problems of power, governance, and government if we are to understand resistance. That is, resistance raises concerns with “how to establish a system of order and order itself,” which, David Apter noted, “is, after all, what most of politics is about.”¹⁵ This work analyzes forms of resistance as well as the principles that underscore the paradox of a site of repression being used to undo the material and symbolic origin of the power of the repressive apparatus.

Third, this book contributes to analyses of South African political processes by shedding light on both liberation movements and the state. Using new research and previously undocumented information, this project reveals the underground functioning of liberation movements within prison and demonstrates how the former prisoners used their political education in prison to influence anti- and post-apartheid politics. Although “society-centered,” this project also examines the state and offers both analytical insight and new information to show how state reform efforts became inextricably linked to and even defined by political imprisonment under apartheid. Prison politics reveals a world heretofore largely hidden from view. The study of Robben Island examines and portrays a world of liberation politics, explores and conceptualizes the theory and practice of resistance, and shows how the Island profoundly shaped the nature and outcome of politics in South Africa.

¹⁵ David E. Apter, ed., *The Legitimization of Violence* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), vii.

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Methodology

The main source of primary research material was the oral testimony of former Robben Island prisoners, members of the then government, and other relevant actors. Archival and other primary materials are also employed (see Appendix II), as is a large range of secondary materials, from autobiographies to theoretical analyses. Notwithstanding the wealth of information the sources used allow for, there are notable limitations in this, as any, methodology. As David William Cohen has noted, understandings of the world are produced by acts of commission and omission, by forgetting and remembering, and by repressing and highlighting events and emotions, interpretations and interests.¹⁶ Like other information, political history is produced by “the power to cover and veil knowledge from inspection, but also the power to restore it to practice.”¹⁷ The availability of knowledge is shaped by information offered, information denied, information pursued or not pursued, and the interpretation of these accounts. Two examples illustrate some of the tensions in this enterprise; the first examines contradictory interpretations, and the second examines how research choices may shape knowledge production.

Inconsistent, contradictory, and missing information provides a useful illustration of the difficulties in achieving accurate dating and periodization. Various sources reveal that Jimmy Kruger, as minister of prisons, visited Nelson Mandela in prison. What is less clear is when this visit occurred. Further, interpreting the political significance of the visit is profoundly affected by when it happened. This problem is one of different and contradictory memories, as well as the absence of state archival information, which may have resolved the questions. In his autobiography, Nelson Mandela¹⁸ noted that in 1976 he received an “extraordinary visit” from Kruger. Two years later, in an interview in London, Mac Maharaj, a younger but senior member of the African National Congress (ANC) who had been in prison for twelve years in the single cells with Mandela and others, said that Kruger had visited Mandela but also met with a “deputation from the single cells which I led” in December 1973.¹⁹ This latter version is closer to that offered by a Mandela biographer, who noted that Kruger visited in December 1974 and then a month later.²⁰ When this contradiction was mentioned to another senior ANC member in the single cells, Ahmed Kathrada, he was quite certain that both Maharaj and Mandela were wrong, and that Kruger had

¹⁶ David William Cohen, *The Combing of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 246.

¹⁸ Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1994): 418.

¹⁹ Mac Maharaj, in *Nelson Mandela, The Struggle Is My Life: His Speeches & Writings, 1944–1990*, ed. Nelson Mandela and Mayibuye Books (Cape Town: David Philip Publishers, 1994), 254.

²⁰ Sampson, *Mandela: The Authorized Biography*, 241.

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come in 1977 or later. His memory was based on remembering that black consciousness leader Saths Cooper, who had arrived on Robben Island in December 1976, had wanted to speak to Kruger, but the minister refused to meet with him.²¹ This version is, however, incompatible with Maharaj's account because Maharaj left the prison in 1976.²²

Different dating of Kruger's visit affects an analysis of regime behavior. In 1973, despite some minor upsets on the labor front and in Southern African decolonization efforts, the apartheid state was secure and faced few challenges. In contrast, however, after 1976, the schoolchildren of Soweto and elsewhere had put apartheid into newspaper headlines and on televisions throughout the world, and the state was facing multiple challenges. A cabinet minister's visit to prisoners in each of these contexts has different implications and invites different interpretations.

State records, from prison bureaucrats to cabinet ministers, may clarify some of these historical questions. But there is also no guarantee that these records exist, at least in full, or that they contain the relevant or correct information. James Gregory noted, for example, that prisoners' letters were sometimes thrown away and that he was told to destroy a 1984 fax explaining that, from then on, political prisoners were eligible for contact visits.²³ Furthermore, there was probably a wholesale destruction of many state archives, both because the law allowed for this and because people have wanted to hide the apartheid past.²⁴ There is, however, more information available in or from state archives than (former) apartheid officials or politicians concede. An anonymous source who had obtained access to the files the Prisons Service kept on him found a huge volume of material – from copies of letters he had sent from Robben Island, to security evaluations, to smuggled

²¹ Ahmed Kathrada, conversation with author, 11 April 1996.

²² Heidi Holland wrote that Kruger visited Robben Island to “hold talks with Mandela” in 1973 and 1978. In her popular history of the African National Congress, Holland described aspects of life within the prison, rather than the effect of the Island on resistance politics. Heidi Holland, *The Struggle: A History of the African National Congress* (New York: George Braziller, 1990), 176, 157–177.

²³ James Gregory with Bob Graham, *Goodbye Bafana, Nelson Mandela: My Prisoner, My Friend* (London: Headline Books, 1995), 127, 222.

²⁴ Regarding the “legal” destruction of documentation, my request to examine a particular document listed in the National Archives database was met with the reply that it “had been destroyed in accordance with the disposal authority no 23-B40 of 13 May 1986, as authorized by the Director of Archives” (M. George, Chief Intermediate Archives Depot, letter to author, 8 May 1996). More generally, in the wake of South Africa's first democratic elections, the issue of access to apartheid's archives (as well as discussions of future archival policies), drew increasing attention from journalists, academics, politicians, and those investigating the apartheid past. See, for example, Justin Pearce, “Search for Missing Cabinet Papers,” *Mail and Guardian* (South Africa), 24–30 May 1996, 8; “State to Reveal '76 Secrets,” *The Star* (Johannesburg), 20 September 1996, 6; and Adrian Hadland, “Evidence Points to ‘Wholesale Destruction’ of Apartheid Files,” *Sunday Independent* (South Africa), 6 October 1996, 1–2.