

Cambridge University Press

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

Fran Lisa Buntman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Robben Island and Prisoner Resistance to Apartheid

Robben Island prison in South Africa held thousands of black opponents of apartheid, including Nelson Mandela. This book reconstructs these political prisoners' resistance strategies to show how these men created a political and social order behind bars. Survival was their first goal; challenging apartheid was their true aim. So although Robben Island was designed to repress, it was continually transformed by its political inmates into a site of resistance. The book theorizes that, where material conditions permit, the most far-reaching and effective forms of resistance involve constructive political action that seeks to remake existing power relationships. This theory is demonstrated in three focuses of the book: the activism of Robben Islanders, the effects of political prisoner resistance on the apartheid state machinery, and comparative cases that illustrate various international instances of political prisoners' shaping both prisons and political orders.

Fran Lisa Buntman is Assistant Professor of Sociology at The George Washington University. Her research interests and publication topics include African politics, criminal justice, law, race, and imprisonment. Her recent work concerns policing in South Africa, race and U.S. constitutional interpretation, and juvenile probation in the United States.

Cambridge University Press

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

Fran Lisa Buntman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Cambridge University Press

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

Fran Lisa Buntman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Robben Island and Prisoner Resistance to Apartheid

FRAN LISA BUNTMAN

The George Washington University



Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-00782-5 - Robben Island and Prisoner Resistance to Apartheid
 Fran Lisa Buntman
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

32 Avenue of the Americas, New York NY 10013-2473, USA

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521007825

© Fran Lisa Buntman 2003

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2003

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Buntman, Fran Lisa, 1965–

Robben Island and prisoner resistance to apartheid / Fran Lisa Buntman.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 0-521-80993-2 – ISBN 0-521-00782-8 (pb.)

1. Political prisoners – South Africa – Robben Island – Political activity. 2. Blacks – South Africa – Robben Island – Political activity. 3. Prisons – South Africa – Robben Island. 4. Robben Island (South Africa) – Social conditions. 5. Anti-apartheid movements – South Africa – Robben Island. 6. Government, Resistance to – South Africa – Robben Island. 7. Apartheid – South Africa. I. Title.

HV9850.5 .B86 2003

323'.044'096809045 – dc21

2002031407

ISBN 978-0-521-80993-1 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-00782-5 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press

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

Fran Lisa Buntman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

To Barbara and John Buntman, my parents

And to Manuel Orozco, my husband

Cambridge University Press

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

Fran Lisa Buntman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	page ix
<i>Foreword by Ahmed M. Kathrada</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xiii
1 Introduction: Prison as a Source of Politics	1
2 Politics and Prison: A Background	14
3 Resistance for Survival	33
4 Resistance Beyond Survival	61
5 Prisoner Politics and Organization on Robben Island	81
6 Debates and Disagreements	112
7 Influencing South African Politics	146
8 Political Imprisonment and the State	193
9 Theorizing Islander Resistance	236
10 Beyond Robben Island: Comparisons and Conclusion	272
<i>Appendix I: Diagrams of Robben Island Prison</i>	293
<i>Appendix II: Methodological Notes on Oral and Archival Sources</i>	295
<i>Appendix III: Capsule Biographies of Interview Respondents</i>	299
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	313
<i>Index</i>	329

Cambridge University Press

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

Fran Lisa Buntman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Cambridge University Press

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

Fran Lisa Buntman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Abbreviations

ACOA	American Committee on Africa
ANC	African National Congress
APDUSA	African People's Democratic Union of South Africa
APLA	Azania People's Liberation Army
ARM	African Resistance Movement
AZAPO	Azania People's Organization
AZASO	Azania Students' Organization
BCM	Black Consciousness Movement
BOSS	Bureau of State Security
BPC	Black People's Convention
CC	Coordinating Committee
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CO	Central Organ
COSAS	Congress of South African Students
DC	Disciplinary Committee
DMI	Directorate of Military Intelligence
DP	Democratic Party
EPG	Eminent Persons Group
FOSATU	Federation of South African Trade Unions
FRELIMO	Front for the Liberation of Mozambique
HO	High Organ
HRC	Human Rights Commission
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDAF	International Defense and Aid Fund
IDT	Independent Development Trust
INLA	Irish National Liberation Army
IRA	Irish Republican Army
ISA	ideological state apparatus
MFA	Makana Football Association
MK	Umkhonto we Sizwe

Cambridge University Press

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

Fran Lisa Buntman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

x

Abbreviations

MP	member of parliament
MWASA	Media Workers Association of South Africa
NACTU	National Council of Trade Unions
NAYO	National Youth Organization
NECC	National Education Crisis Committee
NEUM	Non-European Unity Movement
NICRO	National Institute for Crime Prevention and Rehabilitation of Offenders
NIS	National Intelligence Service
NGO	nongovernmental organization
NLF	National Liberation Front
NP	National Party
NUM	National Union of Mineworkers
NUMARWOSA	National Union of Motor Assembly and Rubber Workers of South Africa
NUSAS	National Union of South African Students
OAU	Organization of African Unity
PAC	Pan Africanist Congress
PIRA	Provisional Irish Republican Army
PEBCO	Port Elizabeth Black Civic Organization
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organization
PP	political panel
PRO	public relations officer
RSA	repressive state apparatus
SACC	South African Council of Churches
SACP	South African Communist Party
SACTU	South African Congress of Trade Unions
SAIRR	South African Institute of Race Relations
SAPA	South African Press Association
SASM	South African Students' Movement
SASO	South African Students' Organization
SAYRCO	South African Youth Revolutionary Council
SC	section committee
SWAPO	South West African People's Organization
UAW	United Automobile, Rubber and Allied Workers' Union of South Africa
UDF	United Democratic Front
UNISA	University of South Africa
ZAPU	Zimbabwe African People's Union

Cambridge University Press

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

Fran Lisa Buntman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Foreword

Robben Island and political imprisonment played a significant role in South Africa's struggle against apartheid and for democracy. Today, Robben Island prison is a museum and World Heritage Site which receives tens of thousands of visitors from around South Africa and the world. Having served a term of imprisonment on Robben Island, and as chairperson of the Robben Island Museum Council, I find Fran Buntman's book a welcome addition to the much-needed literature on apartheid prisons.

Robben Island and Prisoner Resistance to Apartheid is invaluable in explaining why thousands of political prisoners who spent years in prison for the cause of liberation found the experience enriching and a source of pride. There was no room for bitterness, hatred, anger, or revenge. Although there are many valuable memoirs by former Islanders and political inmates of other apartheid prisons, this book offers an original scholarly account of the apartheid years in Robben Island's prison. Buntman's book makes a vital and innovative contribution to showing how and why political prisoners were able to survive and, in many ways, to flourish. It shows how we used our imprisonment to resist apartheid and contribute to a free and democratic South Africa.

The research for this book is both broad and deep. Fran Buntman identifies and explains the significance of the many complex aspects of prison life. These themes range from comparing the impact of confinement in the single cells and general cells, to identifying changes and continuities over time, to demonstrating how the apartheid regime was itself influenced by its political prisoners. *Robben Island and Prisoner Resistance to Apartheid* documents and analyzes the role and development of the different political organizations in prison as well as looking at our cooperation and mutuality. The focus ranges from sport and studies to politics and privation and draws the connections among the apparently divergent facets of Robben Island life. Indeed, our prisoner community was proud that we always remained united against our

Cambridge University Press

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

Fran Lisa Buntman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xii

Ahmed M. Kathrada

common enemy, despite our diverse organizations and perspectives and even our sometimes heated debates.

It is my hope that this book will inspire readers to visit Robben Island and influence additional scholars and writers to add to the knowledge of apartheid prisons. We especially need to know more about the experience of political prisoners incarcerated in prisons other than Robben Island, including our white and female colleagues who were jailed elsewhere. This thorough, insightful, and well-written work shows that the antiapartheid struggle can better be understood by taking into account the role of political prisoners in shaping resistance and democracy, protest and political change.

Ahmed M. Kathrada

Chairperson, Robben Island Museum Council

Cambridge University Press

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

Fran Lisa Buntman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Acknowledgments

This book is the product of profoundly enriching and deeply rewarding interactions with many people to whom I owe an enormous debt of gratitude. My research was possible only because they shared their accounts of Robben Island and its significance. For the generosity with which they shared their testimony, I therefore thank the following people, whom I had the honor of interviewing: Dr. Neville Alexander, Ntoto Babenia, Fikile Bam, Vronnda Banda, Dr. Niël Barnard, Hennie Botha, Henk Bruyn, Lazarus (Lassie) Chiwayo, Kobie Coetsee, Dr. Saths Cooper, Eddie Daniels, Jean de la Harpe, Aubrey du Toit, Malcolm Dyani, Denis Goldberg, Michael Green, Harry Gwala, John Harding, Themba Hlatswayo, Dr. Seddick Isaacs, Ahmed Kathrada, S'thembele (Mike) Khala, Ntemi Khame, Phambili Ka Ntloko, Mkatali Loliwe, Father Gerard Lorriman, Mzwabantu Donald (Ace) Lumkwana, Saki Macazoma, Penuell Maduna, Mac Maharaj, Mandla Makwetu, James Mange, Andrew Mapheto, M. J. Maqungo, Petros (Shoes) Mashigo, Amos Masondo, Velaphi (Thomas) Masuku, Luhamile Mate, Morontshi Matsobane, Vumile Gladstone (Rharha) Matthews, Lombard Mbatha, Vusumzi Mcongo, Kwedi Mkalipi, Thami Mkhwanazi, Johnson Mlambo, Fezile Mlanda, Reverend Stanley Mogoba, Silas Mogotsi, Nkosi Patrick Molala, Eric Molobi, Murphy Morobe, Dikgang Moseneke, Kgalema Motlanthe, Peter Mthembu, Curnick Ndlovu, Soto Ndukwana, Pandelani Nefolovhodwe, Eric Ngeleza, James Ngqondela, Pumlaneni Ngqungwana, Hector Ntshanyana, Colbert Nyobe, Dullah Omar, Samuel Peter, Jeff Radebe, Simon Ramogale, Martin "Magalies" Ramokgadi, Dr. Jan Roux, Albie Sachs, Jacob Seatlholo, Judy Sexwale, Siphoshe Shabalala, Mark Shinnars, Joe Shithlibane, Walter Sisulu, Moses Sithebe, Lizo Gladwell Sitoto, Jacob Skundla, Freddie Songwingi, Richard Stengel, Raymond Suttner, Helen Suzman, Zifozonke Tshikila, Menziwa Esau Tsholoba, Naledi Tsiki, Denmark Tungwane, Sonny Venkatrathnam, Klaus von Lieres, Trevor Wentzel, Willie Willemsse, Thomas Winslow, Jabulane Zakwe, and Jacob Zuma. In addition, I thank those

Cambridge University Press

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

Fran Lisa Buntman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

people who wished to remain anonymous but shared their insights informally or off the record. To all those I interviewed, my most grateful thanks for your time and your personal account of national political history. I hope I have done justice to your perspectives and testimonies.

To the former Robben Islanders, those men who made Robben Island “habitable,” I especially thank you for the privilege of spending time with you and learning from your painful experiences. I also pay tribute to your families, who suffered with you and shared the costs of conviction, as well as to all who suffer the injustices of incarceration. Since my interviewing them, former Islanders Nattoo Babenia, Vronda Banda, Harry Gwala, Phambili Ka Ntloko, Andrew Mapheto, Lombard Mbatha, Hector Ntshanyana, Samuel Peter, Martin “Magalies” Ramokgadi, Walter Sisulu, and Freddie Songwingi have passed away. I offer my respects to these men and their loved ones.

I interviewed so many people who were extraordinarily generous with their time – often when facing great pressure and responsibility themselves – and so helpful in assisting me with my research that it is difficult to single out particular individuals. Nevertheless, I would fail were I not to acknowledge, in particular, that Fikile Bam, Hennie Botha, Petros “Shoes” Mashigo, Johnson Mlambo, and, above all, Ahmed “Kathy” Kathrada not only allowed me to interview them but also consistently made themselves available for questions as my research and writing progressed. They further provided considerable assistance in facilitating the variety of tasks my study involved. I offer an additional thank-you to Kathy for spending so much time with me on Robben Island, for coming to speak in Akron, Ohio, and for keeping in touch with me from afar. Khehla Shubane was responsible for my initial awareness of Robben Island politics and how Islanders shaped South African resistance politics and has always been a very good friend to this project as well as to me.

One of the truly noble dimensions of academia is that all scholars are all too aware that their ideas and research rely on the scholarship of others. I am especially aware of this legacy because this project was conceived, nurtured, challenged, shaped, and explored in numerous universities and by many academics and intellectuals who have fostered it in many ways. This book began a long time ago, in 1987, as my Honours thesis at the University of the Witwatersrand. There it benefited from the guidance of the late David Webster, Tom Lodge, and, most especially, Peter Hudson, whom I was especially privileged to have as a teacher. Tom encouraged me to continue with this work, arranged for me to have institutional affiliation at Wits in 1994, and – unbeknown to me until much later – was an anonymous but most supportive reviewer of my manuscript for Cambridge University Press.

I returned to my study of Robben Island in 1993 at the University of Texas at Austin. My dissertation chairs, Barbara Harlow and Julius Ihonvbere, will have my eternal gratitude for their constant motivation, encouragement, help, and guidance, and Barbara’s endless reading of drafts and continuing

Cambridge University Press

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

Fran Lisa Buntman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Acknowledgments*

xv

friendship. Barbara and Julius too epitomize the moral and activist commitment to using scholarship to serve the marginalized, the imprisoned, and the oppressed of the world. Julius helped provide me passage and protection through the sometimes difficult waters of academia. Barbara, together with my mother, another Barbara, and Gail Gerhart never wavered in their determination that this book be published. No book could have more persistent midwives and friends than Barbara, Barbara, and Gail.

I also offer my grateful thanks to Sheldon Ekland-Olson, Catherine Boone, Henry Dietz, and Camille Busette, who served on my dissertation committee. Camille also offered intellectual interventions and personal support at a critical point. In Barbara Harlow's dissertation discussion group, I found many readers who provided critical feedback and comradeship; thanks go to David Alvarez, Nandi Bhatia, Aimé Ellis, Zjaleh Hajibashi, Susan Harris, Mary Harvan, Salah Hassan, Rachel Jennings, Katie Kane, Joey Slaughter, Karen Steele, and Shoba Vasudevan. I also thank Mark Graber and Sheila Walker for supporting me at two very different stages of this research. My fellow student and colleague Tong-yi Huang encouraged me with his interest and motivated me to apply for a Ford Foundation grant with him. I thank Ford for this assistance. The University of Texas at Austin too provided employment and other financial support, which made my study in Austin possible.

I thank André Odendaal, variously of the Robben Island Museum and the Mayibuye Centre at the University of the Western Cape, for providing me with essential financial support as well as encouragement. It was always a pleasure to spend time in the Mayibuye Centre, where the engrossing archival sources were matched by the warmth of those who ran the Centre, especially Bertie Fritz and Felicia Siebritz. Anthea Josias and the Mayibuye Centre have been very helpful and generous in sharing images from their collection and allowing me to reprint these. I also thank Eddie Daniels for giving me permission to use his diagram of Robben Island prison. In many ways and at various points I've benefited from the help of and exchanges with many people at the Robben Island Museum, including Harriet Deacon, Ashley Forbes, Neo Lekgotla *laga* Ramoupi, and Juanita Pastor-Makhurane.

Two extraordinary scholars and wonderful people who have offered me so much to facilitate the research and writing of this book are Gail Gerhart and Tom Karis. By any criteria, Gail Gerhart and Tom Karis set new standards in their remarkable generosity and in sharing their time, insights, and the unique sources they have collected. I cannot imagine having done my research, especially in 1994, without Gail's guidance. No tribute is too great to Gail and Tom as scholars, friends, and mentors.

The Department of Political Science at the University of Akron generously facilitated my attendance at numerous conferences in the United States and South Africa, where I had the opportunity to present portions of this work. David Louscher also enabled me to invite Ahmed "Kathy" Kathrada to speak

Cambridge University Press

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

Fran Lisa Buntman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

in Akron and share his letters and the inspiring lessons of Robben Island and South Africa with a small corner of the Midwest. Bill Lyons and Chris Banks at Akron were always supportive of my work, and our friends in Akron and Cleveland as well as many of my colleagues and students made my three years there happy and fulfilling.

In Johannesburg, I got to know Penny McKenzie through her expert assistance in this project, and found a friend and colleague who sustains and encourages me from near and far. Penny and Carin Favero have since put in thousands of hours of work readying the interview transcripts for donation to the Robben Island Museum so that they may be widely available as a scholarly and public resource. Carin also provided invaluable last-minute fact-finding assistance, in turn helped greatly by Mac Jerry Lesufi, Thokozani Magwaza, and, especially Lefty Solwande. I extend my thanks to all.

I thank Robben Island Museum for providing the funds to make this donation possible and Harriet Deacon and Andre Odendaal in particular for supporting this venture. This Barbara and John Buntman Robben Island Museum Memories Project Archive honors the unstinting support my parents have shown me and this project since its inception. In Austin, Sabine Wimmer translated from German, procured with the help of her very gracious father, General Siegbert Kreuter, a range of materials on Austrian prisoner-of-war interaction, and typed in hundreds of corrections to interview transcripts, as well as being a good friend.

Transcripts and other materials were also typed by Oupa Makhalemele, Judy Paukett, and Kate and Nina Shand: thank you. Tanya Brown, Victoria Coleman, and Nate Bigelow, three University of Akron students, too provided valuable assistance, for which I am most appreciative. In a range of ways, and in many contexts, large and small, the following people helped me define elements of my work, present or publish work in progress, procure interviews, or make my research and writing easier: I thank Russell Ally, Lissa August, Mary Benson, Colin Bundy, Beth Goldblatt, David Jammy, Shaun Johnson, Robin Lee, Dick Levin, Hugh Lewin, Russell Martin, Deborah Matthews of the Alan Paton Center, Popo Molefe, Debra Patta, Rehana Razack of the Cape Archives Depot, Marcy Ribetti, Howard Sackstein, Claudia Schadeberg, Immanuel Suttner, Randolph Vigne, and all those from the Special Pensions Office who facilitated my Eastern Cape trip – Trevor Wentzel, Sithembile, Luyanda ka Msumza, and Constance “Smallie” Maqungu.

Special thanks are due to Jacques Moreillon, formerly of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Dr. Moreillon demonstrated his diplomatic skills by carefully balancing his enthusiastic support for this project in accordance with the traditional discretion the ICRC permits when answering my questions. I am very grateful to Russ Kubisiak in 1997 and Barré Klapper in 2002, both of whom worked under great pressure to help me

Cambridge University Press

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

Fran Lisa Buntman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Acknowledgments*

xvii

include the diagrams of Robben Island in this book. Lewis Bateman has been a patient and gracious editor as I completed this book during a particularly tumultuous time of my life. Janis Bolster and Sara Black provided meticulous production and copy editing and much-appreciated flexibility in my manuscript preparation. I thank Seth Kroop for a careful and thorough index.

The demarcation between intellectual, personal, and spiritual growth and stimulation is, like most lines of division, rather arbitrary. My happiness at the University of Texas at Austin was in no small part due to my wonderful friends – Terri Davis, Barré Klapper, Azza Layton, and Amalia Pallares – who supported me through multiple trials and tribulations and made sure life’s pleasures were and are enjoyed. They have continued to bring joy and insight to my world and work. In Austin, I was also tremendously enriched and centered by Connie Deutsch’s wisdom, compassion, and guidance.

I thank the publishers of some of my previously published articles for allowing me to reuse portions of these works. Parts of Chapter 6, “Debates and Disagreements,” appeared in *Social Identities* (<http://www.tandf.co.uk>) as “Categorical and Strategic Resistance and the Making of Political Prisoner Identity in Apartheid’s Robben Island Prison” (vol. 4, no. 3, 1998, pp. 417–40) and as two chapters – “Resistance on Robben Island 1963–1976” and “How Best to Resist? Robben Island after 1976” – in *The Island: A History of Robben Island*, edited by Harriet Deacon and published by David Philip, Claremont, South Africa.

If I have failed to acknowledge anybody else who has helped me, please accept my thanks for your help and my apologies for my omission.

My brothers, Ari and Daniel, have long encouraged me in this project and provided great richness and love in my life, together with Laurice, Zach, and Rose. Our concern with political imprisonment, human rights, and using research for *Tikkun Olam*, repair and healing of the world, was part of what brought Manuel Orozco, my husband, and me together in Austin. Manuel has always believed in me and this book. I thank him for that and very much more, including frequently traveling to and within South Africa in the quest of yet another interview, being my teacher and my friend, helping me shape key ideas in this project, fixing my computer, sharing this endeavor with me, and of course, not least, loving me. With this book behind me, my Spanish training lies ahead. Muchas gracias, mi compañero.

This book could neither have been researched nor written without the constant and unstinting support – personal, ethical, political, and financial – of my parents, Johnny and Barbara Buntman. The values they taught me from the earliest age lie at the core of this project, whether it was my father’s oft-repeated aphorisms – “have the courage of your convictions” and “if you don’t ask, you don’t get” – or my mother’s insistence that I recognize and renounce racism and injustice from my earliest moments. They have, in similar

Cambridge University Press

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

Fran Lisa Buntman

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xviii

Acknowledgments

and different ways, further provided day-to-day practical and material support in Johannesburg, Cape Town, Austin, Akron, and Washington, D.C. My mother made and wrote hundreds, perhaps thousands, of phone calls, e-mails, and faxes and accompanied me on numerous research and library trips and conferences to make this book possible. Moreover, my parents' own diverse achievements are a constant source of inspiration. I dedicate this book, with love and thanks, to Manuel and my parents.