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

Fran Lisa Buntman

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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.

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FRAN LISA BUNTMAN

The George Washington University



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To Barbara and John Buntman, my parents

And to Manuel Orozco, my husband

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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, Vronnda 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.

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