



Remembering those who were

BANNED

It is estimated that 1,400 South African were banned between the 1951 imposition of the *Suppression of Communism Act* and 1985 when the last person was banned. The true numbers will never be known; records were only kept from 1958, and the decline in the number of bannings under the Act from the middle of the turbulent 1980s indicated the deployment of more effective weapons of oppression under state of emergency regulations. PAULA ENSOR introduces a remarkable on-line archive of interviews, transcripts and videos of a special group of people who were determined to oppose apartheid, and suffered a heinous assault from the state in response.

CLOCKWISE: George Naicker (trade unionist, Natal Indian Congress, SA Communist Party, uMkhonto weSizwe), Florence Matamela (ANC Women's League), Ruth First (Congress of Democrats, SACP, ANC), Joe Gqaba (journalist, ANC, MK), Josie Palmer (CPSA, later SA Communist Party, ANC, FEDSAW).

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Introduction

We value South African oral histories for the richly different ways in which they bear witness to life under apartheid. In every case, they preserve for posterity the stories of individuals about their experiences of historical events, which might otherwise be lost. Invariably they allow the voices of ordinary, less famous people to enter into the process of history creation, enabling us to move beyond the stark facts of oppression to grasp everyday personal experiences and emotional responses to them. In every case they enable us to place individual experiences within a larger political and social context, and understand both better.

These were the reasons that the South African Banned Persons Memory Project (SABPMP) was initiated by Eric Abraham (himself banned and house arrested in the 1970s) and funded by the Common Humanity Arts Trust. Personal stories were collected from formerly banned people from different racial groups and varying ethnic, linguistic, and social class backgrounds. Some of these people have achieved fame, many have written autobiographies, but the majority are more ordinary. The aim of the project was to find as many of the foot soldiers in the struggle against apartheid as possible – the poor, marginalised and in many cases forgotten – who had been banned for their activism. Unfortunately, the vast majority of those we hoped to find – nearly 900 formerly banned people – had passed away long before the project was initiated. But what all these people shared, from whatever walk of life or political affiliation they came, was unflinching commitment to end the oppression of apartheid. The archive pays tribute to their courage and sacrifice. In November 2025, the University of Cape Town Libraries launched the archive of the SABPMP, a collection of 179 interviews, written and other testimonies, recorded in the period 2019 to 2021, of those still living who were banned under the Suppression of Communism Act, No 44 of 1950, (later incorporated into the Internal Security Act after the 1976 uprising).

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The banning of persons, in contrast to the banning of publications and organisations, has received relatively little attention in the literature on apartheid security measures, despite the significant number of people who were banned. In bringing the banning of persons to the fore, the archive highlights banning as a weapon of oppression and human rights abuse. While the interviews focus on banning, and the impact of banning orders on individual activists, they also enable us to understand the circumstances and pressures that framed political and ethical commitments and drove activists into struggle.

The first banning order under the Suppression of Communism Act was imposed in 1951, the first house arrest order in 1962, and the last recorded banning published was in 1985. The large majority (around 70%) of those banned were black African people.

The archive consists of

- A comprehensive introduction to the collection, which describes the process of identifying formerly banned people, locating them, and the challenges associated with interviewing them in the context of Covid lockdowns. The introduction also discusses the evolution of the Suppression of Communism Act over time and how waves of struggle pressured the regime to tighten its provisions until it was amalgamated with other repressive legislation to emerge as the omnibus Internal Security Act in 1982.
- A number of spreadsheets: the first lists people banned and banished (under the Suppression of Communism Act) and banishments (under the Native Administration Act, no 38 of 1927); the second lists people banned; the third lists those formerly banned people who were alive at the time of interviewing; and a fourth spreadsheet lists those who agreed to be interviewed. Locating people who were previously banned proved to be a major challenge.
- A copy of the interview questions used to guide the conversations.
- A total of 179 interviews, which include a number of written submissions and summaries made of brief interviews/interactions which were not recorded. Most of the interviews were recorded in face-to-face encounters, but because of Covid lockdowns between 2020 and 2021, some were conducted via Zoom or telephone.
- Transcriptions of each interview.
- A short biography of each person interviewed.
- Examples of four banning orders: Helen Joseph, Albie Sachs, Weizman Hamilton, and Phil Mtinkulu.



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CLOCKWISE: Albertina Sisulu (Federation of SA Women, ANC, ANC Women's League, United Democratic Front), Alcott Gwentshe (ANC Youth League), Azhar Cachalia (Transvaal Indian Congress, UDF), Amina Cachalia (Transvaal Indian Youth Congress, FEDSAW, Federation of Transvaal Women, ANCWL, UDF), Achmad Cassiem (Pan Africanist Congress, Qibla), Blanche la Guma (Communist Party of SA, later the SA Communist Party, FEDSAW, ANC).



Banning under the Suppression of Communism Act

The Suppression of Communism Act, no 44 of 1950, was the first major piece of legislation introduced by the National Party in South Africa to curb political opposition and limit freedom of speech. Banning of individuals was a key provision of the Act. The experience of banning highlights the way in which much of apartheid oppression was conducted through law (passed by an all-White Parliament), precisely in order to remove banning from legal remedy.

Banning as a device of the apartheid state was used, in Pincus's words, "to restrict freedom of association, assembly and movement, and to suppress opposition groups and the expression of criticism of government policy" (1966, pp. 283-284). The bans, explains Pincus, were "drafted under one or several sections of the Suppression of Communism Act, signed by the Minister of Justice and delivered to the individual by the police" after they were "tailored to the individual's special circumstances" (1966, pp. 283-284). While they were usually operative for one, two, three or five years, it was not uncommon for individuals whom the state particularly wished to target to be served with multiple successive banning orders.

The effect of banning, as Mathews observes, was that the individual's "right to participate in the public life of the country [was] abolished by a stroke of the ministerial pen and he (sic) [was] thereby condemned, without open trial, to a ghostly social existence" (Mathews, 1971, p. 66). Nelson Mandela, in his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, described banning as "walking imprisonment". Bannings were intended to remove activists from the struggle against apartheid, and weaken the organisations in which they worked. It was, as Mandela says, "a strategy designed to remove the individual from the struggle, allowing him to live a narrowly defined life outside politics" (1994, p. 155). Initially, this worked to some degree. As Mandela comments further:

My bans drove me from the centre of the struggle to the sidelines, from the role that was primary to one that was peripheral. Though I was often consulted and was able to influence the direction of events, I did so at a distance and only when expressly asked. I no longer felt like a vital organ of the body – the heart, lung or backbone – but a severed limb. (1994, p. 187)



CLOCKWISE: Barathanathan 'Thumba' Pillay (Natal Indian Congress), Donald Woods (newspaper editor), Adelaine Hain (SA Liberal Party), Yusuf Cachalia (South African Indian Congress, ANC).

In terms of the banning notices served on them, anti-apartheid activists were variously prohibited in terms of the Act from attending gatherings (including social gatherings); restricted to magisterial areas (to their homes in the case of house arrest); forbidden to enter designated spaces such as factories, offices, railways, harbours, educational institutions, and publishing institutions; forbidden to belong to specified organisations, such as trade unions, or hold public office, or be quoted. The aim of the restrictions was to hamper anti-apartheid organisations by stripping away their leadership and hobbling them politically.



What began as a law designed to inhibit the spread of communism by means of restrictions on speech, movement, organisation, publication, and congregation of activists, over time became sharpened and widened in scope. By 1982, this law had transformed into an omnibus piece of legislation used by the apartheid state to direct its arsenal of security measures against an increasingly insurrectionary population. The Internal Security Act, no 74 of 1982, incorporated Act 44 of 1950 as well as key elements of other security laws, resulting in the repealing of all or parts of 28 other Acts. This 1982 Act went beyond bannings to include detentions without trial and the criminalising of political opposition by casting it as subversion, treason, and terrorism, crimes which carried heavy prison sentences.



CLOCKWISE: Dulcie September (Unity Movement, Teachers' League of SA, African Peoples Democratic Union of Southern Africa, Yu Chi Chan Club, National Liberation Front, Anti-Apartheid Movement in London, ANC Women's League, ANC), Francis Board (trade unionist, Federation of SA Women, ANCWL, South African Congress of Trade Unions, United Democratic Front), Fred Carneson (Communist Party of SA, later SA Communist Party, Springbok Legion, editor of Guardian, New Age, uMkhonto weSizwe, Anti-Apartheid Trade Union Committee, ANC), Pravin Gordhan (Natal Indian Congress, ANC, MK, SA Communist Party).



The interviews illuminate the ways in which individuals coped with the restrictions of banning: the loneliness, the isolation, the difficulties of finding work and earning an income, the strain on their families, and above all, the impact on their political activities.

It is difficult to establish how many people were banned under the Suppression of Communism Act from the time it was passed in 1950, until 1985 when the last person (Trevor Manuel) was banned. The names of banned persons were only published in the *Government Gazette* from the early 1960s, and the earliest bannings recorded are from 1958. The archive thus constitutes a small portion of the approximately 1,400 banned activists whose names were published in *Government Gazettes*, and an even smaller proportion of the total of those banned.

Nonetheless, the archive provides a glimpse of the rich diversity of those who were banned. Over the years, banning orders were served on trade unionists, educationists, religious leaders, lawyers, medical professionals, journalists, students, and political activists engaged in a range of different parties, associations, movements, and organisations.

The highest number of bannings took place in 1966, with the next highest number in 1963. The number of bannings decreased after 1966, continued through the 1970s, and tapered off towards the mid-1980s. This reduction in the number of bannings did not signal a retreat on the part of the state security apparatus. Rather it signalled the deployment of new weapons at its disposal: detentions in terms of Act 74 of 1982 and detentions and bannings under the state of emergency regulations, which were enabled by the Public Safety Act, no 3 of 1953. These provisions were administratively easier to implement. As Mathews put it, “the guiding principle of government action in the sphere of internal security” had shifted from “if it moves, ban it” to “if it moves, detain it” (Mathews, 1986, p. 101). Detentions continued throughout the 1980s, of trade unionists, journalists, school and university students and staff, church leaders, and political leaders of varying political persuasions.



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CLOCKWISE: Jessie Duarte (ANC, SA Communist Party), Lillian Ngoyi (trade unionist, ANC Women's League, Federation of SA Women, ANC), Fatima Seedat (Communist Party of SA, Natal Indian Congress), Neville Alexander (Teachers' League of SA, Unity Movement, Yu Chi Chan Club, National Liberation Front, Black Consciousness Movement, Workers' Organisation for Socialist Action), Hilda Bernstein (SACP, FEDSAW, ANCWL, ANC, Anti-Apartheid Movement in London), Lillian Diedericks (trade unionist, FEDSAW), Rowley Arenstein (Congress of Democrats, SACP, SA Congress of Trade Unions).



Living under apartheid and the experience of banning

The primary focus of the SABPMP archive of interviews was to record each individual's experiences of banning, their early years living under the harsh and unjust conditions of apartheid, and what drove them into political activism. In so doing, the interviewees go well beyond a focus on banning to tell of their experiences of the imposition of the Group Areas Act; the impact of forced removals and the tearing apart of multi-ethnic communities; the segregation of facilities such as hospitals, beaches, places of worship; the imposition of the pass laws; the horrors of detention and torture; the precariousness of living that came from grinding poverty; as well as the everyday humiliations and cruelty of White supremacy. In addition, the archive holds the stories of White activists, in the main (but not entirely) socially and economically privileged, and traces the development of their political consciousness and how they came to align themselves, in one way or another, with the struggle against apartheid.

The interviews provide valuable insights into the role of interviewees in the activities of a wide range of political organisations such as the African National Congress (ANC), the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), the Congress Alliance, the South African Communist Party (SACP), the Liberal Party, the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM), the United Democratic Front (UDF), the African People's Democratic Union of Southern Africa (APDUSA), the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM), as well as the emergence of the independent trade union movement from the early 1970s. They also dwell on the forms of punishment meted out to them: detention without trial, interrogation, torture, imprisonment, and banning.

The interviews illuminate the ways in which individuals coped with the restrictions of banning: the loneliness, the isolation, the difficulties of finding work and earning an income, the strain on their families, and above all, the impact on their political activities. As Thenjiwe Mtintso puts it:

...it was a terrible thing. That thing of not being able to socialise. Not being able to go and find a job. Not being able to write as you'd want to write. Not being able to address meetings. By this time I was an activist. Not being able to address meetings. Not being able to attend meetings. And you'd have to really go ... People would have to arrange meetings in certain places just for you to interact with them. And your views being heard by others. You'd have to risk the lives of



others because you also wanted to participate. But comrades of that time were prepared and ready to accommodate the fact that they should also be an activist. (2020)

Gender framed these experiences, of both repression and resistance, in profound ways. Mtintso shares her experiences in this way:

[...] the police, they found me quite stubborn. And I think many of us were. But one of the things that they could not tolerate, which was quite dangerous, was the fact that you are an African woman and as an African woman what right do you have of thinking that you can fight for your country? What right, because fighting for a country is the monopoly of men. They could even tolerate African men and probably understand African men trying to be men, to be masculine and fight for their country. But an African woman, that they could not tolerate.

And, therefore, they would then dehumanise you by calling you a prostitute, a whore. All these names that you are not really a freedom fighter. You are just servicing these men. And because there were fewer of us as women at that time who were getting arrested and arrested and arrested, they tend, in my view, they tend to be very harsh. Very, very strong against women, African women activists. (2020)

As an educator myself the archive has provided me with profound insights into the struggle for quality education and the impact of the Bantu Education Act. The dismantling of mission schools, the ethnic separation of schools, the degrading of the curriculum, and the introduction of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction provoked intense and sustained rebellion by students, and often by their teachers. Through many interviews we come to see the significant role of teachers in broadening the political understanding of their students, whether they were members of the Teachers League, or expelled university students schooled in Black Consciousness who became teachers in Soweto schools. We are reminded of the significance of forward-looking and progressive school principals in defending their students, and again and again the steadfast determination of parents and children to secure a decent education. Sibongile Mkhabela puts it like this:

My mother was uncompromising on education. You could do anything else wrong. The one thing you wouldn't do is not go to school or not to do well at school. And this was not a woman with an education. This was a woman that we taught to read and write, and she valued education very much. (2021)



She goes on to say the introduction of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction "contradicted everything that my mother valued, which was education and all of us going through education. [...] So, the taking away of the privilege, last privilege, even if you like, the last frontier that people had to defend themselves against apartheid, was education."

DRUM, NOVEMBER 1964 89

The Effects of New Laws: 2

BANNED MEN

DURING the last few months, nearly all the South African have been advised in their newspapers and electronic media of those who have been called upon to resign their positions in the National Congress of the African National Congress. Many of them have been forbidden to attend any gatherings or to exercise leadership activities in the Union.

Albert Lutshuli, the president,

president of the African National Congress, is forbidden to move away from his own district in Capetown, Natal. He cannot visit the shops in Durban, liberty unions away or attend the cathedral church.

Many of the bans are in force for five years, after which time they may be renewed, some have already been renewed.

The bans take effect under the Suppression of Communism Act of 1950. This allows the Minister of Justice to prohibit from gatherings or organizations anyone suspected of furthering the aims of Communism. "Communism" is defined under the act as aiming to bring about social economic or political changes in the country.

Many of those arrested or banned under the Suppression of Communism Act are not Communists in the strict sense of the term, but Workers' Communist who occur within the definition of the act.

Dr. Alan M. Molema, ex-treasurer, ANC.

Mauri Cachalia, ex-secretary, Tel. I.C.

J. Mavuso, ex-Treasurer ANC leader.
Nona Sita, ex-president, Transvaal I.C.
Dan Tshobane, ex-leader, ANC.
Flag Raxhila, ex-leader, Transvaal ANC.
N. Thandray, ex-Tel. secretary, I.C.
Moisa Seperepe, ex-leader, ANC.

Frank Mergent, ex-president, Cape F.W.J.
Joseph Muthoni, ex-president, ANC V.A.
Robert Mard, ex-secretary, Cape ANC.
Malibon Mhomo, ex-leader, ANC.
Ismael Bhehla, ex-sec, Tel. Indian VC.
Harrison Mathons, ex-secretary, Tel. V.A.

Full-page feature published in Drum, November 1964. Of course it was not only men who were banned, as this New Agenda article, and the SABPMP, clearly demonstrates.



Conclusion

Education is a strand in the archive that has most fascinated me, but there are many other compelling points of departure for those interested in researching South African history: the turn to armed struggle across a spectrum of political organisations after the Sharpeville massacre, the emergence of the Black Consciousness Movement and of the independent trade union movement from the early 1970s in Cape Town and what was then Natal and the Transvaal, the development of the United Democratic Front, the role of school and university students as well as teachers and academics in the opposition to apartheid, the role of the churches, and the struggle for a free press. None of the testimonies provide a complete account of any of these themes, but all dramatically flesh out and provide deeper meaning to what we already know from existing published work.

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INTERVIEWS

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NOTE TO READERS

The [South African Banned Persons Memory Project](https://ibali.uct.ac.za/s/sabannedpersons/page/welcome) archive is housed in the Audiovisual Archive of UCT Libraries' Special Collections. Most interviews in this collection are available in audio and transcript formats, with some in video formats, and a selection can be seen on their showcasing platform, *Ibali*, an isiXhosa word for "story". The website warns viewers that these oral history interviews may contain personal accounts of traumatic experiences, including police brutality, violence, torture, hate speech, and derogatory language. The archive can be accessed at <https://ibali.uct.ac.za/s/sabannedpersons/page/welcome>

BIOGRAPHY

Paula Ensor is Emeritus Professor in the School of Education at UCT. She holds Masters and PhD degrees from the University of London (now UCL Institute of Education). She was banned under the Suppression of Communism Act in 1973, along with other National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) leaders, and lived in exile in England and Botswana for 15 years, returning to South Africa in late 1991. Between 2004 and 2013 she was Dean of Humanities at UCT and after her retirement worked with others to set up the Tshisimani Centre for Activist Education in Mowbray. She was one of the co-leaders of the SABPMP project.



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