

Anti-Apartheid and Human Rights

An Enquiry into the Role of Human Rights within the *Anti Apartheids
Beweging Nederland*

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1. Introduction

After receiving the Ambassador of Conscience Award in 2006, Nelson Mandela stated the following: “Like Amnesty International, I have been struggling for justice and human rights, for long years. I have retired from public life now. But as long as injustice and inequality persist in our world, none of us can truly rest. We must become stronger still.”¹ This statement stands in sharp contrast with the fact that, in the 1960s, Mandela was dropped by Amnesty International as a Prisoner of Conscience for advocating violence. Thus, the actual strife back then seems to belie the current narrative of affirming anti-apartheid as being by definition a human rights struggle. This example suggests that the connection between anti-apartheid and human rights has more of a complex history than we retrospectively assume. Therefore, I will scrutinize the relations between the anti-apartheid struggle and human rights in this thesis. This will be done by looking at the *Anti Apartheid Beweging Nederland* (AABN), which was one of several solidarity organisations in the Netherlands focusing on the struggle against apartheid.

Thus, my research question will be: *How did the AABN attempt to fight apartheid, and what role did the concept of human rights play in this endeavour?* By answering this question, I will shed light on how the proliferation of this concept occurred and how it affected the AABN’s activism. This focus on an organisation in the Netherlands is not to suggest that the Global North was the epicentre of the anti-apartheid struggle. In fact, one should be sceptical of giving the solidarity organisations too much credit for helping bring about the end of apartheid.² Nonetheless, I would argue that an exploration of this organisation, and of the way in which its activists grappled with the concept of human rights, has the potential to complicate accounts of global changes of ideas, by showing how those changes play out at the local level. In doing so, I will engage with existing literature on human rights on the one hand, and literature on anti-apartheid on the other. I will start with an exploration of what exactly is known about the changing role of human rights in the post-war period.

The Historiography of Human Rights

Human rights history nowadays constitutes a vibrant field of academic debate. It would be difficult to overstate the importance of Samuel Moyn’s *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in*

¹ Amnesty International, ‘Nelson Mandela and Amnesty International’, 18-7-2014. <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/nelson-mandela-and-amnesty-international>, accessed 9-7-2019.

² Jan van Eckel, ‘Verschlungene Wege zum Ende der Apartheid: Südafrika in der internationalen Menschenrechtspolitik 1945-1994’, *Zeithistorische Forschungen* 13 (2016), p. 312.

History (2010) in sparking this newfound interest in the history of human rights, and its subsequent establishment as a new field of historical enquiry.³ In his monograph Moyn sought to challenge long-held notions of human rights as being deeply rooted in history. He argues that it is only in the late 1970s that human rights – a social movement based on an utopian idealism – first came into being. What characterises human rights then is that it is an ideal based on internationalism; human rights as superseding the previously dominant notion of state sovereignty. Thus, it is only from this moment onwards that appeals to supranational institutions and international legal protections became truly important. What made this breakthrough possible was a disenchantment with previous utopian visions like Marxism and anti-colonialism. As Anthony Anghie has argued, it might be illuminating to view Moyn’s argument as a challenge to the law-dominated view of human rights history as developments of legal principles and structures that have gradually progressed to what they are nowadays.⁴ Seen in this light, Moyn’s book is an attempt to uproot this narrative of gradual legal progress by arguing for the suddenness of the breakthrough of human rights in the global imagination in the 1970s.⁵

Moyn’s account, however, has not gone unchallenged. For example, Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann locates the breakthrough of human rights at a later stage than Moyn. He claims that it was only in the 1990s, after the end of the Cold War, that an emphasis on human rights as individual and pre-state emerged.⁶ This was mostly as a result of the ethical turn in the “global nineties” that was spurred on by humanitarian catastrophes – especially the siege of Sarajevo and the massacre of Srebrenica in former Yugoslavia. In this view, human rights coexisted in the 1970s and 1980s with concepts like “solidarity” which were still very much indebted to Marxism and anti-colonialism. It was after the epochal ruptures of the late twentieth century that human rights began to establish itself as “a contested, irreplaceable and consequential

³ Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, Mass., 2010).

⁴ Antony Anghie, ‘Whose Utopia? Human Rights, Development and the Third World’, *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences*, 22(1) (2013), pp. 63-80.

⁵ Interestingly, in the same year in which Moyn published *The Last Utopia*, Michael Cotey Morgan produced a remarkably comparable account, detailing the rebirth of human rights in the 1970s. Similarly to Moyn, Morgan details the emergence of a “global consciousness” in the 1970s spurred on by Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO’s) with a human rights mission – especially Amnesty International. However, Morgan does not buy into the radical nature of this change and explicitly contends that this process was not a revolution but occurred gradually. See: Michael Cotey Morgan, ‘The Seventies and the Rebirth of Human Rights’, in: Niall Ferguson, Charles S. Maier, Erez Manela and Daniel J. Sargent (eds.), *The Shock of the Global: The 1970’s in Perspective* (London, 2010), pp. 237-250.

⁶ Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, ‘Human Rights and History’, *Past and Present* 232 (2016), pp.279-310. Hoffmann, however, is less absolute in his assessment of the emergence of human rights than Moyn. To Hoffmann, the proliferation of human rights in the 1990s does not come out of nowhere, but draws upon traditions of caring about distant suffering that date much further back. Thus, in some ways it is more of a re-emergence.

concept of global politics”.⁷ Moving not forward but backward in time, Steven Jensen has criticised Moyn’s account of the suddenness of the breakthrough of human rights in the 1970s.⁸ According to Jensen, Moyn overlooks the importance of the 1960s in his account of the proliferation of human rights. The importance assigned to the 1970s reveals a viewpoint that overlooks the agency of post-colonial states, as, a decade earlier, countries from the Global South already advocated a notion of human rights revolving around race and religion in the United Nations (UN) that facilitated the breakthrough that Moyn discusses so extensively.⁹

Some have taken this criticism of Moyn’s account as Western-centric even further. Joseph R. Slaughter, although agreeing with Moyn’s revisionism in that it challenges old romantic notions of progress of human rights since the Atlantic revolutions, forcefully criticises Moyn’s account for its Western centrality.¹⁰ Similarly to Jensen, Slaughter argues that Moyn’s contention that human rights activism in the 1960s by the Global South was not truly about human rights is disregarding their agency in developing notions of human rights.¹¹ However, Slaughter tells a radically different account of the relation between the activism of the 1960s and that of the 1970s. It is not that the activism of the 1960s laid the groundwork for the breakthrough in the 1970s, but rather that in the 1970s the West “hijacked” the discourse of human rights in an attempt to wrestle away the moral high ground from recently decolonised nations. What happened then was that Western actors dictated human rights to be individual civil, economic and political rights, disregarding claims of self-determination and economic justice voiced across the Global South. The breakthrough described by Moyn was then a mere neo-colonialist attempt to take back control through a neoliberalisation of human rights. Thus, in Slaughter’s view, the “breakthrough is part of the rollback”.¹²

There is certainly something to be said for this portrayal of Western actors as keen to occupy a moral high ground, a move that might indeed be marked by a disproportionate focus on individual rights, a neglect of questions of economic development and a disregard for the plight of recently decolonised nations – or for that matter nations still suffering from

⁷ Ibid., p. 282.

⁸ Steven L.B. Jensen, *The Making of International Human Rights. The 1960s, Decolonization and the Reconstruction of Global Values* (New York, 2016).

⁹ Similarly, Roland Burke, in his study of the entanglement of decolonization and human rights in the 1960s and early 1970s, argues that post-colonial states were at the forefront of the human rights debates in the 1960s. Those states played key roles in establishing the rights of individuals to petition to the UN. See: Roland Burke, *Decolonization and the Evolution of International Human Rights* (Philadelphia, PA., 2010).

¹⁰ Joseph R. Slaughter, ‘Hijacking Human Rights: Neoliberalism, the New Historiography, and the End of the Third World’, *Human Rights Quarterly* 40(4) (2018), pp. 735-775.

¹¹ Antony Anghie develops similar lines of argument, although he is arguably less vehement in his criticism of Moyn. See: Anghie, ‘Whose Utopia’.

¹² Slaughter, ‘Hijacking Human Rights’, p. 761.

colonisation.¹³ However, the characterisation of the West as forcefully ejecting the nations of the Global South from the moral high ground overlooks the changes that took place within (the discourse of) the post-colonial nations themselves throughout the 1960s. For, as Roland Burke has argued, the countries of the Global South that had once embraced the Universal Declaration, including its individual rights, increasingly questioned its legitimacy in the late 1960s.¹⁴ It was at the International Conference on Human Rights of 1968 in Tehran that this change crystallised. Most of the post-colonial states were at this points adherents to authoritarian systems of government which seemed more than glad to replace a consensus about the balance of political and social rights with a full on focus on national liberation and assertion of the primacy of economic development. As Burke aptly states: “Double standards and selectivity, which had been cautioned against [before], began to threaten the credibility of the UN program”.¹⁵ Furthermore, one might question the extent to which the 1970s was truly characterised by the emergence of a homogenous Western hemisphere whose focus on an individually centred human rights truly meant a total disregard for questions of economic relations and development across the globe. For whereas the 1970s was indeed the period which saw actors from the Global South advocate economic development initiatives at international institutions to no avail, it was also a period in which activists, especially within the West, were invoking human rights as a way of advocating a more ethical capitalism and fairer trade practices – albeit with limited results.¹⁶ Thus, Slaughter’s sharp contrast between the human rights of the Global South in the 1960s and that of the Global North from the 1970s onwards, is, if not disproved, at least complicated by more fine-grained historical narratives.

What certainly becomes clear from the discussion above is that issues regarding periodisation – and connected to that the idea of a breakthrough moment – occupy a rather dominant position in the history of human rights debate. This is something that has not gone unnoticed by some of the scholars involved. Burke and Jensen, writing on research methods in human rights, have characterised recent human rights history as “somewhat addicted to the

¹³ Julia Dehm, for example, has highlighted how scholars and advocates from the Global South advocated, in the 1970s, a more structural approach to human rights that would pay more attention to economic inequalities within and between nations. See: Julia Dehm, ‘Highlighting inequalities in the histories of human rights: Contestations over justice, needs and rights in the 1970s’, *Leiden Journal of International Law* 31 (2018), pp. 871-895.

¹⁴ Burke, *Decolonization*.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

¹⁶ Jennifer Bair, ‘Taking Aim at the New International Economic Order’, in: Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe (eds.), *The Road from Mont Pèlerin* (Cambridge, Mass., 2009), pp. 347-385; Tehila Sasson, ‘Milking the Third World? Humanitarianism, Capitalism, and the Moral Economy of the Nestlé Boycott’, *The American Historical Review* 121(4) (2016), pp. 1196-1224.

notion of breakthroughs and ‘human rights moments’ ”.¹⁷ They consequently worry that this fixation might lead scholars to devote less attention to historical processes and trends over time than they ought to. Making a similar point, Robert Brier argues that it makes little sense to put too much energy in locating a neat moment of breakthrough for human rights. In fact, too much of a focus on a particular period as a defining moment might come pretty close to replicating the “idol of origins” approach that human rights history originally intended to challenge. The strength of human rights history ought to be its consistent historical approach; by fixating on the idea of a breakthrough we might put ourselves at risk of cutting off a phenomenon from its historical origins.¹⁸ The problem is then not periodisation itself, for indeed it would be difficult – not to say impossible – to write history without in one way or another constructing (or engaging with constructions of) periods in time.¹⁹ The point with regard to human rights is then not that it is wrong to identify certain time periods as transformative, but that an undue focus on such moments prevents the exploration of richer and more nuanced understandings of the way human rights evolved across the globe.²⁰

This is not to say that there are not already substantial debates underlying all of these discussions on periodisation. I already sketched the existence of the substantial disagreement between how to interpret the relation between self-determination and individual human rights; the tensions between the minimalist nature of human rights and the broader concern of economic development and justice; and, connected to both of those, the delicate question of how we do justice to the influence of the Global South without essentialising notions of human rights as either Western or non-Western. I am convinced that a fruitful way of studying these different tensions is to look at anti-apartheid activism. Although of course in many ways a unique case, anti-apartheid activism is a potentially rich avenue of research, not only spanning a large time period, but also harbouring the potential to bring to the fore the connections between the Global North and South.

¹⁷ Steven L.B. Jensen and Roland Burke, ‘From the normative to the transnational: methods in the study of human rights history’, in Bard A. Andreassen, Hans-Otto Sano and Siobhán McInerney-Lankford (ed.), *Research Methods in Human Rights. A Handbook* (Cheltenham, 2017), p. 124.

¹⁸ Robert Brier, ‘Beyond the Quest for a ‘Breakthrough’: Reflections on the Recent Historiography on Human Rights’, *European History Yearbook 16* (2015), pp. 155-173.

¹⁹ For a concise exploration of the long-standing engagement of the historical profession with this notion, see: David Blackbourn, ‘The Horologe of Time: Periodization in History’, *PMLA 127*(2) (2012), pp. 301-307.

²⁰ Jensen and Burke, ‘From the normative’, p. 124.

Human Rights and the Anti-Apartheid Movement

Although human rights has not been a focal point of attention for academics studying the anti-apartheid movement(s), their studies nonetheless often implicitly provide insight into questions asked by those studying human rights. For example, sociologist Håkan Thörn, studying anti-apartheid as a social movement, has argued that the anti-apartheid movement played an important role in the emergence of a “global civil society” from the early 1960s onwards.²¹ Adapting Benedict Anderson’s renowned concept, originally used to understand the creation of nations, Thörn argues that *an imagined community of solidarity activists* emerged; a shared sense of community among people dispersed within different nations came into being. Thus, notions of human rights and anti-apartheid solidarity can both be interpreted as components of the emergence of a global sense of belonging – at least for the people engaged in those forms of activism. Yet, understanding anti-apartheid as above all a transnational or global phenomenon has not enticed everyone. First of all, we should emphasise that anti-apartheid was above all else a specific national (albeit with important regional and global implications) struggle taking place in South Africa. However, not even the many activists outside of South Africa can just be viewed as mere parts of a global community. Simon Stevens, for example, has used the case of Britain to argue that domestic reasons were paramount in leading Britons towards engagement with campaigns against apartheid. It is his contention that campaigners hoped their actions would not only transform the political order of South Africa, but also that of Britain itself.²²

We should not overemphasise this contrast between approaching anti-apartheid from a predominantly national or transnational angle. It seems undeniable that any depiction of the anti-apartheid movement should take seriously both its role in the national context and the transnational connections it partakes in.²³ The difference then, is mostly one of degree.²⁴ Nonetheless, we should not just ignore concepts like national and transnational, because they still help us understand different aspects of a phenomenon. It seems important to realise, for example, that even though anti-apartheid activism is a transnational phenomenon, in that it showcases connections between networks of activists around the world, it is in practice also acted out in a specific national context. As two prominent theorists of social movements have

²¹ Håkan Thörn, *Anti-Apartheid and the Emergence of a Global Civil Society* (Basingstoke, UK, 2009).

²² Simon Stevens, ‘Why South Africa? The Politics of Anti-Apartheid Activism in Britain in the Long 1970s’, in: Samuel Moyn and Jan Eckel (eds.), *The Breakthrough: Human Rights in the 1970s* (Philadelphia, PA., 2014), pp. 204-225.

²³ As can be seen in both Steven’s article and Thörn’s book.

²⁴ See also: Robert Skinner, ‘Struggles on the Page: British Antiapartheid and Radical Scholarship’, *Radical History Review* 119 (2014), p. 216.

stated, “it takes place, quite literally”.²⁵ Without ignoring the Dutch national context, my research will nonetheless focus mostly on the transnational nature of the AABN’s activism. Since Roeland Muskens, in his monograph *Aan de Goede Kant: Biografie van de Nederlandse Anti-Apartheidsbeweging 1960-1990* (2014), has already outlined the Dutch anti-apartheid scene in great detail, this research will add to our knowledge of the Dutch involvement in anti-apartheid by trying to make sense of the changes in the AABN within the context of changing global norms and ideas.²⁶

Even though anti-apartheid united activists across the globe, thus seemingly suggesting a shared globality of consciousness with human rights as Moyn defines it, we should not just see them as two faces of the same coin. In fact, Moyn sees the anti-apartheid struggle – at least until the late 1970s – as in essence an anti-colonial struggle. Whenever anti-apartheid activists used human rights before the breakthrough moment it was merely a strategic appeal to the concept, masking the demand for self-determination.²⁷ Furthermore, Moyn hints at the possibility that the change in the global imagination in the late 1970s could be reflected in the fight against apartheid.²⁸ This idea of human rights language masking the true underlying goal of anti-colonialism and national liberation is something that is also suggested by several academics specifically looking at the role of human rights in anti-apartheid activism. One reviewer of recent literature of anti-apartheid activism, came to the following conclusion regarding the relation between human rights and anti-apartheid: “The term Human Rights has also become an effective buzzword that anti-apartheid movements have been able to use, regardless of whether activists actually sought universalistic values.”²⁹ Similarly hinting at the strategic use of human rights discourse, Jan Eckel has noted that anti-apartheid activists readily mixed human rights discourses with anti-colonial and anti-fascist language.³⁰

On the contrary, Robert Skinner has argued that anti-apartheid activists did in fact use the language of human rights – albeit instrumentally and sporadically – as something different

²⁵ Stefan Berger and Holger Nehring, ‘Introduction: Towards a Global History of Social Movements’, in: Stefan Berger and Holger Nehring (eds.), *The History of Social Movements in a Global Perspective: A Survey* (London, 2017), p. 7.

²⁶ Roeland Muskens, *Aan de Goede Kant: Biografie van de Nederlandse Anti-Apartheidsbeweging 1960-1990* (Soesterberg, 2014).

²⁷ Moyn, *Last*, p. 109.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

²⁹ Detlef Siegfried, ‘Internationale Reaktionen auf Südafrikas Apartheid. Neuere Literatur zu einem globalen Konflikt in der zweiten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts’, *H-Soz-Kult* (11 February, 2016). Accessed at: <https://www.hsozkult.de/literaturereview/id/forschungsberichte-1229>. (My own translation.)

³⁰ Jan Eckel, ‘The Rebirth of Politics from the Spirit of Morality: Explaining the Human Rights Revolution in the 1970s’, in: Jan Eckel and Samuel Moyn (eds.), *The Breakthrough: Human Rights in the 1970s* (Philadelphia, PA., 2014), p. 240.

than just a synonym of anti-colonialism and self-determination.³¹ In line with Burke, Skinner argues that, during the process of decolonisation, the construction of institutional structures – most importantly the UN – around human rights did in fact help to provide support for the fight against apartheid, while also reflecting broader concerns about individuals around justice, imprisonment and the rights of those engaging in armed struggle.³² Focusing especially on the 1960s, he argues that infringements upon the rights of political activists within South Africa were critical points fuelling the anti-apartheid campaigns.³³ To Skinner, human rights was then not just an “empty vessel” into which anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist ideas could be poured, but played in fact a constitutive role in the anti-apartheid activism of the 1960s. Furthermore, this relation between human rights and anti-apartheid was reciprocal; apartheid also served as a critical point of reference that helped determine the parameters of human rights discourse locally and globally.³⁴ Taking these studies into account, I will use the case of the Dutch anti-apartheid organisation AABN to try to shed further light on the connections between anti-apartheid and human rights. But before I will do so, I will first try to clarify what it is we do when we look at human rights.

On the Concept of Human Rights

As can be grasped from the previous historiographical discussion, the question regarding the nature of human rights is less straightforward than it initially seems. Human rights is not one uncomplicated phenomenon that shows through in the traces of the past. It is a concept that was employed by a multitude of actors at particular places and particular times in history. This is something also argued by Marco Duranti, who emphasises the malleability of the concept of human rights to understand how in the immediate period after World War II an European alliance of national conservative parties – led by those in France and the United Kingdom – were turning to the transnational platform of the European Court of Human Rights to promote their agenda.³⁵ Thus, Duranti shows that an initial flexible reading of human rights can help us better understand how historical actors turned a particular concept to their own political advantage. I would argue that a similar approach is a potentially fruitful way of understanding

³¹ Robert Skinner, ‘The Dynamics of Anti-Apartheid: International Solidarity, Human Rights and Decolonization’, in: Andrew W.M. Smith and Chris Jeppesen (eds.), *Britain, France and the Decolonization of Africa: Future Imperfect?* (London, 2017), p. 113.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 114-115.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 118-119.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

³⁵ Marco Duranti, *The Conservative Human Rights Revolution. European Identity, Transnational Politics, and the Origins of the European Convention* (New York, 2017).

the emergence and development of human rights concerning anti-apartheid.³⁶ In the following research, I will therefore start from a similar flexible vantage point by first trying to understand how the activists of the AABN themselves used and grappled with the concept of human rights. In a way, I will thus also follow in Jan Eckel's footsteps, who introduced the idea of "multiple chronologies" precisely to complicate the picture of human rights, arguing that at different times and differing places human rights came to develop into important phenomena. Additionally to the spatial and temporal differences, those manifestations of human rights were also defined by their particular forms of appropriations and differing levels of commitment.³⁷ This approach differs from Moyn in that it does not focus on human right as a particular transnational utopian ideal, but that it assumes human rights to be a malleable concept, with the potential to be deployed in dissimilar ways by different actors.

Adopting this way of looking at human rights will mean that my research will be driven by the attempt to understand the particular way(s) in which these activist employed human rights, and subsequently try to discern what, if any, consequences these adoptions had for the nature of their activism. This does not mean that I will be paying attention only if they explicitly mention the term human rights. The end goal is not to come to some sort of quantitative overview of the increase of the use of human rights, but to try to understand the role of human rights within the larger framework that was their activism. Thus, although I will try to gain an understanding of the evolution of human rights, I am convinced such an understanding is only possible if we treat the concept as one of many possible components that could play a role in the act of being against apartheid. This means that it also important to acknowledge that the concept of anti-apartheid itself belies the heterogeneity of the different groups of activists that were fighting apartheid. As one scholar has observed, a multitude of different ideologies informed anti-apartheid activists, including, but not limited to: radical anticolonialism, antiracism, socialism, liberation theology, Pan-Africanism and a vaguer form of solidarity.³⁸ Moreover, one can often substitute the term anti-apartheid for Southern African solidarity, for

³⁶ One can see the multitudes of different interpretations of human rights simply by looking at how different scholars write about it. Thus, one reviewer of a volume on human rights in the 1970s, ironically co-edited by Moyn, identified five different definitions of human rights in just that one volume. See: Richard J. Wilson, 'Book Review: The Breakthrough: Human Rights in The 1970s (Jan Eckel & Samuel Moyn eds.)', *Human Rights Quarterly* 36 (2014), pp. 915-930.

³⁷ Jan Eckel, 'The Rebirth of Politics from the Spirit of Morality: Explaining the Human Rights Revolution in the 1970s', in: Jan Eckel and Samuel Moyn (eds.), *The Breakthrough: Human Rights in the 1970s* (Philadelphia, PA., 2014), pp. 226-259.

³⁸ Peter Limb, Richard Knight and Christine Root, 'The Global Antiapartheid Movement: A Critical Analysis of Archives and Collections', *Radical History Review* 119 (2014), p. 163.

there was a connectedness across liberation movements within Southern Africa, that was fed into by the destabilising influence of South Africa on the states around it.³⁹

Placing human rights in a broader perspective opens up the possibility of grasping different aspects and implications of the concept. Such an endeavour might benefit our understanding of human rights by opening up avenues of comparison between human rights movements and different forms of solidarity, thus producing a view that integrates broader historical developments that have contributed to particular forms of solidarity into the narrative, without insisting on a clear linear progression. Along these lines, Mark Philip Bradley has argued that particular moments in the twentieth century, such as the explosion of mass circulated images depicting the lives of the disadvantaged and oppressed in the 1930s; and the bestseller status of Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* in the early 1970s in which he recounts the personal horrors of being locked up in a Soviet camp, Americans started to feel the suffering of strangers nearly as if it was their own.⁴⁰ It is in these sorts of developments then that we should identify the emergence of a global human rights imagination. An imagination that offered new ways of seeing and being in the world, and thus provided new ways of identifying with others.⁴¹ As Lynn Hunt has argued, aversion against cruelty and the concern for the plight of others is something that has to be learned; there can be no human rights without "imagined empathy".⁴² In relation to the notion of a breakthrough moment, it is interesting to note that Roland Burke has emphasised the importance of emotion not only in the human rights effort of the UN commission and assembly, led by countries of the Global South, which was canalized into a vengeful crusade against apartheid, Israel and residual colonialism in general in the 1960s, but also in the transnational NGO-led human rights crusades of the late 1970s that appealed directly to the heart by reviving the power of pity.⁴³ Thus, both the anti-colonialist motivated human rights and the human rights as identified by Moyn stood out as moments in time that were particularly focused on the power of emotions. (In Chapter 3, we will see that within the AABN in the late 1970s, emotions also played an outsize role.)

³⁹ Ibid., p. 162.

⁴⁰ Mark Philip Bradley, 'American Vernaculars: The United States and the Global Human Rights Imagination', *Diplomatic History* 38(1) (2014), pp. 1-21.

⁴¹ This identification was (necessarily) partial. As Bradley states: "Some human rights in some places mattered. Other modes and locales did not." See: Bradley, 'American Vernaculars', pp. 20-21

⁴² Hunt's core argument is that in the 18th century some kinds of suffering came to be widely regarded as unacceptable where they had not been perceived as such before. She suggests that this change originates in changing cultural practices that ranged from the increasing differentiation of domestic space to reading epistolary novels. See: Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York, 2007); Lynn Hunt, 'The Long and the Short of the History of Human Rights', *Past and Present* 233(1) (2016), pp. 323-331.

⁴³ Roland Burke, 'Flat affect? Revisiting Emotion in the Historiography of Human Rights', *Journal of Human Rights* 16(2) (2017), pp. 123-141.

The potential of this research lies then above all else in its open-ended approach to human rights. Anti-apartheid activism is a particularly good case study to try to understand human rights precisely because you can expect the concept to play a role without it being the predominant focus. This will help us recognise its relations to other concepts and forms of activism.

Regarding Method

Although I ought not to discount those who do not, most historians seem to prefer the crafting of a riveting narrative to the construction of a meticulous research plan. Historians of human rights are no exception. As Jensen and Burke have noted, most human rights history has been written without its authors being particularly self-conscious about their study design. This lack of self-reflectivity has allowed a certain confusion to linger: for exactly what kind of human rights history is being told? Thus, Jensen and Burke have concluded that historians of human rights should pay more attention to their methodology, without of course sacrificing the attention to narrative – for that is arguably one of the main assets of the historical discipline.⁴⁴ Taking their conclusion to heart, the following section will detail the design of this research.

Before going into the precise details of my research design, I should stipulate some more theoretical aspects of what it is I will be doing in this thesis. In essence I will be paying close attention to the language used by the activists of the AABN. The theoretical origins of this focus on language is somewhat eclectic.⁴⁵ It replicates assumptions underlying the projects initiated by Michel Foucault, Reinhart Koselleck and Quentin Skinner. Although their methodological prescriptions differ sharply in some way, they are probably the most important historians that have pointed to the importance of language, not as a mere description of reality, but as an inherent part of it. What the methodology of Foucault, Koselleck and Skinner have in common is then the notion that written sources, the mainstay of the historian, are not just reflections of a bygone moment, but were fundamental parts constituting those moments.⁴⁶ This insight in the nature of textual sources challenges the illusion that archival sources are innocent and guides the historian to the importance of sensitivity to context. In doing this research I will not strictly

⁴⁴ Jensen and Burke, 'From the normative to the transnational: methods in the study of human rights history', pp. 128-129.

⁴⁵ I cannot resist the temptation to quote Pasi Iahlainen, who, during a lecture on the historian and her method in his capacity as visiting fellow of Leiden University, told a group of students (of which I was one) that "it is alright to be eclectic and proud of it".

⁴⁶ Sebastian Hunhholz, 'Bielefeld, Paris und Cambridge: Wissenschaftsgeschichtliche Ursprünge und theoriepolitische Konvergenzen der diskurshistoriographischen Methodologien Reinhart Kosellecks, Michel Foucaults und Quentin Skinners' in: L. Gasteiger, M. Grimm, B. Umrat, *Theorie und Kritik: Dialoge zwischen differenten Denkstilen und Disziplinen* (Bielefeld, 2015), pp. 161-163.

follow the method of one of these schools. I will not follow Skinner's project of scrupulously excavating individual intent that underlie "speech-acts"; nor will I adopt Foucault's structural understanding of "discourses" creating our very reality; and neither will I create a genealogy of concepts as per Koselleck's *Begriffsgeschichte*.⁴⁷ What I will do however, is to keep their insight into the historicity of language in the back of my mind.

While keeping these theoretical origins in mind, the practice of this research will entail – like most historical research – the analysis of archival sources. I will be looking at the AABN's journal, the minutes of their meetings, their publications, their acts of protest, the letters they wrote and much more. Like any sound historical research, grappling with these sources means thinking about the reliability of its contents. It should be noted that all the archival material of the AABN was selected and archived by a member of this organisation. This is not necessarily problematic, as I am anyway very much interested in their way of looking at things. Nonetheless it is something that should be taken into account; acknowledging that these sources provide us with a particular perspective. The analysis of these sources will be an explication of the evolution of the AABN with concern to their activism, and especially their relation with human rights. My thesis will thus be sketching a picture of the changes occurring within the organisation, rather than a careful look at the individuals that moved within this organisation. This does not mean that I will be blind to the fact that an organisation like AABN could be the stage of debate between (groups of) activists. I will try to show these tensions whenever relevant. Nonetheless, as James Laidlaw has recently argued, the supposed duality of agency and structure belies a complex reality, in which agency is something historically constructed.⁴⁸ Thus, trying to find a neat historical method that focuses solely on the individual or one that traces changes in structures without taking into account individual contributions, is flawed from the onset.⁴⁹

Taking my cues from the research design outlined above, the following chapters will be an examination of the developments of the AABN's activism in the period of 1971-1994 – its entire duration of existence. In doing so, I will try to establish the nature of their activism, and especially its relation to human rights. I will also pay particular attention to the curious role of

⁴⁷ See for example: Quentin Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas', *History and theory*, 8(1) (1969), pp. 3-53; Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London, 2005), Preface xix-xxiv; Reinhart Koselleck, 'Begriffsgeschichte and Social History,' in *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, transl. Keith Tribe (New York, 2004), pp. 75-92.

⁴⁸ James Laidlaw, *The Subject of Virtue : An Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom* (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 179-212.

⁴⁹ A similar point is made by British historian E.H. Carr, in his concise monologue *What is History?* See: E.H. Carr, *What is History?* (London, 1990), p. 31.

the AABN as an undeniably Western actor that nonetheless for most of its time took its cue from actors in the Global South. These foci will – hopefully – lead me to shed some light on the nature of the evolution of human rights in the global consciousness.

2. The Difficult Struggle Against “White Capital”, 1971-1977

The start of the phenomenon of anti-apartheid in the Netherlands should be situated in a multitude of earlier connections between South Africa and the Netherlands. Many Dutch felt a sense of kinship with the Afrikaners, who not only descended from Dutch (and German) colonisers, but also still shared their language. After World War II this sense of kinship had been complicated by the fact that large swaths of the Afrikaner population had expressed sympathy with, and connection to, Nazi Germany.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, this uneasiness did not translate in a large denunciation when the National Party began instituting apartheid in 1948, transforming existing racially discriminatory policies of both the Dutch and British colonial administrations into a system that classified all South Africans into racially separate groups and systematically favoured whites. In the beginning the *Communistische Partij Nederland* (CPN), the Dutch communist party, was the lone voice in the wilderness that was denouncing apartheid. In the late 1950s – with the Dutch’s own colonial involvement in Indonesia lying more in the past – a more widely shared critical attitude towards South Africa began to take root, with the Sharpeville massacre in 1960 in South Africa further cementing this development.⁵¹ Although the late 1950s and 1960s did see some Dutch organisations emerge that took an interest in the plight of the Black South Africans, it was only the beginning of the 1970s that saw an escalation of activism with regards to South Africa.

The establishment of the AABN in the end of 1971 was part of this wider proliferation of activism within the Netherlands with regards to South Africa. The AABN came into being after radical anti-apartheid group *Pluto*, which was composed of a group of students centred around South African exile Berend Schuitema, a white South African studying in Amsterdam, merged with the *Comité Zuid-Afrika* (CZA). The CZA, established in 1957, was an organisation that mostly eschewed protest and preferred dialogue as a way to try and change the attitude of the Dutch government towards South Africa.⁵² In reality, the merger was more of a friendly take-over. Minutes detailing the discussion on the future of the CZA show acknowledgement of the need to become a more openly political organisation. To not just denounce apartheid, but

⁵⁰ A.M. Fokkens, ‘Afrikaner Unrest within South Africa during the Second World War and the Measures Taken to Suppress it’, *Journal for Contemporary History* 37(2) (2012), pp. 128-129.

⁵¹ Maarten Kuitenbrouwer, *De Ontdekking van de Derde Wereld: Beeldvorming en Beleid in Nederland, 1950-1990* (The Hague, 1994), pp. 207-214.

⁵² See: Muskens, *Goede*, pp. 57-105.

to also publicly support liberation movements.⁵³ Pluto's more radical approach, as can be grasped from an act of protest in which they attempted to force the cancellation of a tour of a South African water polo team by throwing smoke and paint bombs stood in sharp contrast with the CZA.⁵⁴ The perceived need for an escalation of activism meant that, even though the meetings discussing the merger were at times emotional, an agreement was eventually reached that finalised the transformation.⁵⁵ In addition to the AABN, the beginning of the 1970s also saw the creation of two other national anti-apartheid organisations: *Boycot Outspan Aktie* (BOA) and *Kairos*. The former led by another South African exile, Esau du Plessis, the latter an ecumenical organisation inspired by South African preacher and anti-apartheid activist Beyers Naudé.

This multitude of organisations against apartheid – more would be established later – was to be a core component of the anti-apartheid scene in the Netherlands. This has led some scholars to characterise the Dutch anti-apartheid movement as pillarised, adopting the term widely used to describe Dutch society as being separated into groups by religion and associated beliefs for a large part of the twentieth century. Roeland Muskens has partly challenged this notion by noting that most people involved in activism against apartheid did not really understand the differences between the organisations, and it was only the people at the top of these organisations that can be characterised as belonging to different pillars.⁵⁶ However, the addition of this caveat to the use of the term pillarisation leaves one to wonder if maybe it is better to just not use the term to describe this phenomenon.⁵⁷ This does not mean a total disregard for the differences among organisations involved in anti-apartheid activism, but simply an acknowledgement that these differences did not sprung naturally from the particular sections of Dutch society they supposedly represented. What is left then is a more nuanced and complicated picture, in which the existence of, and strife between, these different organisations can be explained as resulting from a host of different factors, such as clashes between different personalities, differences of convictions and differing appraisals of the potential of particular protest strategies.

⁵³ Minutes, Aims and Organisation CZA-DAF, 18-8-1971, Archive AABN, Box 1, International Institute of Social History (IISH).

⁵⁴ Muskens, *Goede*, pp. 132-135.

⁵⁵ Conny Braam, *De Bokkeslachter* (Amsterdam, 1993), pp. 122-123.

⁵⁶ Roeland Muskens, *Aan de goede kant: Een geschiedenis van de Nederlandse anti-apartheidsbeweging 1960-1990* (2013) (PhD-thesis University of Amsterdam), pp. 315-316.

⁵⁷ For a more detailed criticism of the concept of pillarisation, see: Peter van Dam, 'Een wankel vertoog: Over ontzuiling als karikatuur', *Low Countries Historical Review* 126(3) (2011), pp. 52-77; Peter van Dam, 'Voorbij verzuiling en ontzuiling als kader in de religiegeschiedenis', in: Peter van Dam, James Kennedy and Friso Wielenga (eds.), *Achter de zuilen: op zoek naar religie in naoorlogs Nederland* (Amsterdam, 2014), pp. 31-53.

The emergence of these organisations resembled a larger shift in the political climate in the 1970s in the Netherlands, as people started to become more actively involved with the world around them. A lot of this energy was progressive and anti-capitalist, with activists often taking a dim view towards both the parliamentary system in particular, and those in power more broadly.⁵⁸ This activism was not just regarding domestic issues, but was also concerned with issues across borders. Many regarded international solidarity with left-wing movements as important. These trends fit into broader global developments, with the world becoming increasingly interconnected. It is indeed no coincidence that Niall Ferguson has characterised the 1970s as the period of “the Shock of the Global”.⁵⁹ This chapter will trace the evolution of the AABN in this globalisation-fuelled period, investigating its anti-capitalist roots and its initial disregard for human rights.

Comrades against Apartheid

The creation of the AABN was formalised on December 22 1971. The official statute of the organisation defined the following goal: “The organisation has the aim to contribute to the abolition of societal discrimination, on the basis of race or other differences, in light of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaimed by the General Assembly of the UN on 10 December 1948, especially with regards to Southern Africa.”⁶⁰ However, this seemingly minimalist utopia of upholding universal human rights stipulated by this statute masks the rather different ideological conviction that invigorated the AABN at its start.⁶¹

In fact, the AABN’s radicalism entailed a rather unambiguous Marxist interpretation of apartheid. Their unequivocal starting point was that apartheid, and neo-colonialism more generally, were integral parts of a global capitalist system. In doing so, they were inspired among others by Ruth First, a South African academic, activist and member of the outlawed *South African Communist Party* (SACP), whose analysis of apartheid in South Africa can be best summarised succinctly by her statement that “the race laws are merely outgrowths of an economic system”.⁶² What logically followed from this analysis was that any change in South Africa was contingent on a change in the structure of the global economy. In a supplement to

⁵⁸ Muskens, *Goede*, pp. 128-131.

⁵⁹ Niall Ferguson, Charles S. Maier, Erez Manela and Daniel J. Sargent (eds.), *The Shock of the Global: The 1970’s in Perspective* (London, 2010).

⁶⁰ Statutes Anti Apartheidsbeweging Nederland, 22-12-1971, Archive AABN, Box 131, IISH. (These and subsequent quotations are translations from Dutch by this author.)

⁶¹ To follow Moyn’s interpretation of the utopia of human rights

⁶² Ruth First, *South West Africa* (Baltimore, MD., 1963), p. 231; Braam, *Bokkeslachter*, p. 123.

the *Anti-Apartheid Nieuws*, the bimonthly journal the AABN inherited from the CZA, they argued this position as follows:

The apartheid in South Africa is not an isolated phenomenon caused by a group of uneasy whites. It is an integral part of what our white capital does in the Third World. Our free market economy has positioned its tentacles all around the world. [...] We cannot ask the white South Africans to do justice to their black countrymen without getting rid of the exploitation inherent in our own economy. This means a plea for a socialist society, a society in which the purposes of production and consumption are determined by working people and not by competition of privately owned capital in a free market. Thus, protest against apartheid gains an important domestic political purpose.⁶³

The support of these activists for the struggle against apartheid was then not only seen as an act of international solidarity, but also as an act of protest that could ultimately help to transform not only the structure of South African society, but that of the Dutch society as well.

A large portion of the AABN's early activism was focused on unearthing the involvement of Dutch businesses in Southern Africa. The AABN activists worked meticulously to illuminate the connections between Dutch multinationals and the racist regimes in Southern Africa. Detailing their findings not only in their journal, but also in their bimonthly *Kommunikee*, a periodical providing more factual information and news on Southern Africa, they clearly meant to influence the flow of information regarding Southern Africa. They were successful in doing so to a certain extent, as internal documents from Foreign Affairs characterise them as quite well informed, although also adding that they were under complete influence of the CPN.⁶⁴ The *Kommunikee*, which from 1974 onwards also had an English version, brought mostly economic news, clearly emphasising the role of Western actors in upholding apartheid and racism in Southern Africa. By revealing the complicity of Dutch multinationals AABN activists were obviously lending credence to their Marxist interpretation of apartheid. The front cover of *Anti-Apartheid Nieuws* of May 1972 (*see image 1*), an issue that was predominantly devoted to detailing investments of companies in Southern Africa, reflects this view.⁶⁵ Two white hands, representing several Dutch multinationals with economics ties to Southern Africa, are tightening around the body of a black African, literally obtaining money out of his physical destruction. The AABN was quite successful in detailing

⁶³ Poster 'Het ontstaan van de Anti-Apartheids Beweging Nederland', *Supplement Anti-Apartheids Nieuws* 54, February 1972.

⁶⁴ De Boer, *Van Sharpeville*, p. 276.

⁶⁵ *Anti-Apartheids Nieuws* 55, May 1972, pp. 5-6.

the existing links between multinationals and the economies of Southern Africa. For example, in 1973, going through the waste of the trade firm Zephir, Schuitema and other activists of the AABN managed to uncover hard evidence that Dutch companies were trading with Rhodesia.⁶⁶ Publishing these discoveries in cooperation with Dutch and English national newspapers, the AABN managed to bring across the fact that these companies were bypassing the embargo of Rhodesia that was instigated by the UN and supported by the Dutch national government.⁶⁷

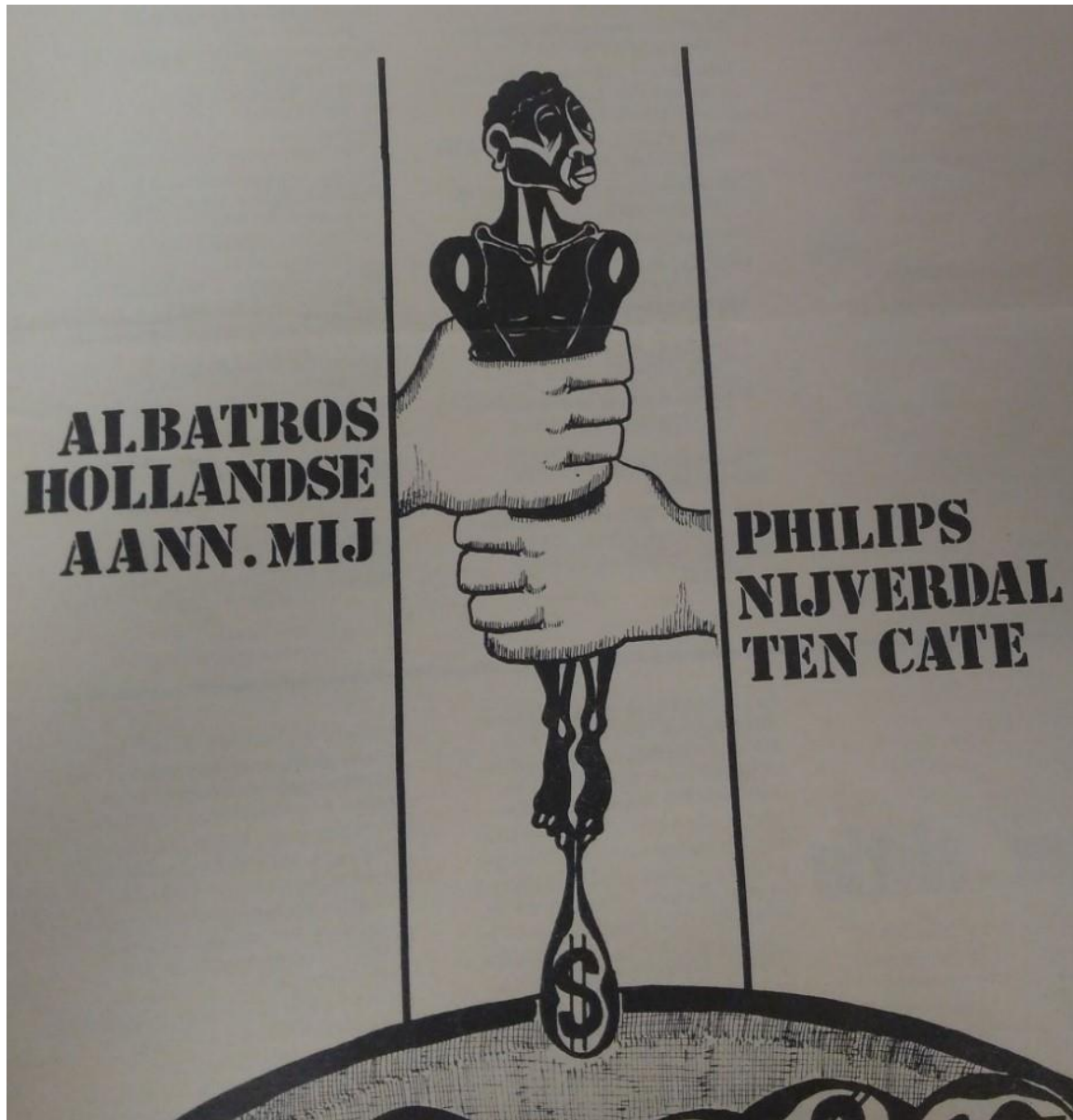


Image 1: Frontpage cover of Anti-Apartheid Nieuws 55, illustrating complicity of Dutch multinationals in apartheid.

⁶⁶ *Anti-Apartheids Nieuws* 64, December 1973, pp. 3-9.

⁶⁷ Muskens, *Goede*, p. 149.

This particular reference to the UN was not a fluke. In fact, the UN was often referred to by the activists of the AABN as a moral high ground. Keeping a close eye on the developments at the multilateral arena of the UN, the AABN was keen to portray the Dutch government as out of step when it failed to back UN resolutions that took a more critical stance towards the Southern African regimes.⁶⁸ Additionally, the AABN was invited to participate in the UN Special Committee Against Apartheid, bringing them into closer contact with other anti-apartheid organisations across the world.⁶⁹ Thus, the stage of the UN, at which, by 1973, 12 percent of all General Assembly resolutions were devoted to attacking apartheid, provided a welcome point of reference for these Western activists.⁷⁰

In addition to showing the interconnectedness of the economic activity in the Western hemisphere with that of Southern Africa, the AABN's activism was accompanied by a more practical commitment to solidarity with the liberation movements in Southern Africa. Since they regarded the uprising of "coloured people in the Third World" as a form of counter-violence against the havoc created by white capital, the activists of the AABN defined solidarity as a near unconditional support for the liberation movements and their chosen means to achieve this goal – including violence.⁷¹ Although the AABN proclaimed to support the entirety of the South African people in their fight against apartheid, this lofty goal never really worked in practice. Initially, the AABN proclaimed their desire – both publicly and privately – to support both the *African National Congress* (ANC) and the *Pan African Congress* (PAC), the two main exiled South African liberation organisations.⁷² However, ties with the ANC quickly established itself, and the earlier proclaimed desire to support not only the ANC, but also PAC quickly disappeared. Contacts with the ANC representatives in London were formed quickly. Already in April of 1972, Reginald September, the ANC's Chief Representative for the United Kingdom and Western Europe paid the AABN a visit. During the visit the practicalities of cooperation were discussed, with the ANC putting Amsterdam on a list for their European tour. Furthermore, they agreed to a meeting in London twice every year between representatives of the AABN and ANC and instituted more regular means of coordination.⁷³ The large percentage

⁶⁸ See for example: *Kommunikee AABN*, October 1974, Archive AABN, Box 151, IISH; *Kommunikee AABN*, November/December 1974, Archive AABN, Box 151, IISH.

⁶⁹ *Kommunikee AABN*, June 1974, Archive AABN, Box 151, IISH.

⁷⁰ Glenda Sluga, 'The Transformation of International Institutions: Global Shock as Cultural Shock', in: Niall Ferguson, Charles S. Maier, Erez Manela and Daniel J. Sargent (eds.), *The Shock of the Global: The 1970's in Perspective* (London, 2010), p. 230.

⁷¹ Poster 'Het ontstaan van de Anti-Apartheids Beweging Nederland', *Supplement Anti-Apartheids Nieuws* 54, February 1972.

⁷² *Ibid.*; Minutes Pleno 12-1-1972, Archive AABN, Box 1, IISH; Minutes Pleno 8-3-1972, Archive AABN, Box 1, IISH.

⁷³ Minutes of the meeting with Reginald September, 21-4-1972, Archive AABN, Box 2, IISH.

of SACP members within the external mission of the ANC in London, of which September was one, were sure to have paved the way for smooth contact. The word comrade quickly established itself as the go-to way to address each other.

Although South Africa was definitely seen as a particularly apparent manifestation of the devastation of white capital, the AABN's focus was on Southern Africa more broadly. Already in the first edition of *Anti-Apartheid Nieuws* the struggle of South African and Namibian workers was mentioned in the same breath.⁷⁴ Additionally, the AABN merged with a committee focused on the situation in Zimbabwe, the *Rhodesië Komitee*, at the end of 1972, incorporating its activities.⁷⁵ Thus, the AABN supported not only the ANC, but also the Namibian liberation organisation SWAPO and the Zimbabwean (Rhodesian) ZANU/ZAPU.

In light of their economic analysis, solidarity with the liberation movements was done with the conviction that these movements represented not just a desire for national liberation, but also for a liberation of workers from the vices of uncontrolled capitalism. For example, in September 1974 the AABN organised a three day workshop titled "Liberation struggle/Worker's struggle". The AABN explained the phrase as follows: "This title is no coincidence. In our view the workers struggle in South Africa, Rhodesia and Namibia is an essential component of the liberation struggle in these countries."⁷⁶ This view of the liberation movements' quest as essentially aligning with workers' interests also implied forging alliances between liberation movements in Southern Africa and sites of resistance against capital in the Netherlands. Internal documents show that the AABN quickly established that their main goal was to initiate close connections with the Dutch trade unions, the CPN and the left flank of the Dutch labour party (PvdA). The need to look for support in these swaths of society made perfect sense considering their interpretation of apartheid: "In a capitalist society only the labour movement has the potential to establish enough power to break the capitalist structure of such a society. A mass movement, separate from the labour movement, is inconceivable."⁷⁷ Thus, the AABN regarded itself as a previously missing link, forging connections between Southern African liberation organisations and Dutch workers.

The AABN managed to facilitate some connections between trade unions and liberation organisations. For example, with regards to *Industriebond NVV* (IB-NVV), a union for Dutch industrial workers, the AABN managed to facilitate the forging of bonds of solidarity with trade

⁷⁴ *Anti-Apartheids Nieuws* 54, February 1972, pp. 4-5.

⁷⁵ *Anti-Apartheids Nieuws* 57, September 1972, p. 8.

⁷⁶ *Anti-Apartheids Nieuws* 67, July 1974, p. 12.

⁷⁷ Minutes of discussion day on policy determination, 16-12-1972, Archive AABN, Box 2, IISH.

unionists of the Namibian SWAPO. Not only did the IB-NVV inform its members of the struggle for the liberation of Namibia in order to raise money for the Namibian trade union, but they also gave a sizable contribution to facilitate the training of three SWAPO-members in the Netherlands. In cooperation with the AABN and the Institute of Social Studies in the Hague, the IB-NVV arranged for them to spend a month in the Netherlands to study “the role of worker’s resistance in the Namibian liberation struggle”.⁷⁸ The stated aims of the program also clearly show the aforementioned desire to forge bonds between Namibian and Dutch workers. Not only by providing “the participants with such knowledge and experience of Dutch trade unions as will enable them to improve relations and solidarity in the future”, but also by encouraging the participants to communicate to “the Dutch public [...] (where possible) the experiences and needs of Namibian workers, thus making their own specific contributions to knowledge of trade unionism in the Third World”.⁷⁹

The AABN devoted much of their journal to detailing (their efforts in forging) the connections between Dutch trade unions and unions allied to the liberation movements, often expressing the hope that such small acts of solidarity would ultimately manifest themselves in concrete and adequate support of Dutch trade unions to black workers in Southern Africa.⁸⁰ Reflecting on their efforts to create bonds of solidarity between Dutch worker’s and liberation movements, *Anti-Apartheid Nieuws* stated the following on January 1976:

There is an increasing solidarity of European workers with the worker’s struggle in Southern Africa. In 1975 the Rhodesia boycott became a great success due to the active participation of the workers of the port of Rotterdam. In the same year the members of the union of the Hoogovens [Dutch steel producer] declared their opposition to the investments of their company in South Africa and organised a propaganda meeting for the SACTU [trade union aligned with the ANC].⁸¹

Positive declarations like these, however, belied a more complex reality. The truth was that their ideological interpretation of both Dutch workers and Southern African liberation movements as victims of the global capitalist structures, and thus consequently as natural allies, was not a message that saw widespread acceptance. In fact, members of the AABN were aware of this. Already at the organisation’s beginning they had noticed that they failed to attract mass support among workers, even though – in theory – these workers were the natural allies of

⁷⁸ Letter to Marja Kroef, 3-6-1976, Archive AABN, Box 307, IISH.

⁷⁹ Namibia Program, May 1976, pp. 2-3, Archive AABN, Box 307, IISH.

⁸⁰ See for example: *Anti-Apartheids Nieuws* 71, February 1975, p. 7.

⁸¹ *Anti-Apartheids Nieuws* 77, January 1976, p. 10.

liberation movements. At the end of 1972, when discussing their strategy, they summarised this as follows: “What we have been doing [...] up until now is nothing more than mobilising a minority within the privileged class (new leftists, progressive liberals, progressive intellectuals, etc.).”⁸² Although it was certainly not for a lack of trying, the following years did not do much to further their revolt against the capitalist system. Dutch labour unions were quite hesitant towards the AABN’s efforts, not necessarily seeing solidarity with Southern African liberation movements as one of their main priorities.⁸³ They might have made small inroads, but nothing in the form of a mass movement among working class people materialised. A clear example of these differing priorities was the cancellation of a week of activities in the beginning of 1976 relating to the solidarity with Southern African liberation movements that was supposed to be organised by the FNV (the largest Dutch labour union). The activities were foregone because of the ongoing fight over wages in the Netherlands.⁸⁴ Even though they still organised an information night later on, the occurrence is telling.

The Practicality of Solidarity

The failure to make clear inroads into an overthrow of the wider capitalist structures did not mean a disillusionment with anti-apartheid activism more generally. In fact, the AABN had always paid attention to factors that were not purely economic: they had advocated for a boycott of all cultural connections to the South African regime; called for the boycott of South African sports teams in the Netherlands; and organised demonstrations against violence inflicted on black South Africans by the police.⁸⁵ These sorts of activities became increasingly more frequent and received more coverage in their journal, which acquired the new name *Zuidelijk Afrika Nieuws* at the end of 1976, reflecting the reality that the AABN’s focus had been Southern Africa more broadly.⁸⁶ Additionally, halfway through the 1970s, the activism of the AABN started to become increasingly centred around practical solidarity with the liberation movements. This practical solidarity entailed increasing events that were geared towards raising funds for the ANC and other liberation movements. This trend also implied increasing efforts to build coalitions with other organisations. Through these activities the AABN forged alliances with other national anti-apartheid groups (although these contacts were often tension-ridden),

⁸² Minutes of discussion day on policy determination, 16-12-1972, Archive AABN, Box 2, IISH.

⁸³ See also: Muskens, *Goede*, pp. 173-175.

⁸⁴ *Anti-Apartheids Nieuws* 77, February 1976, p. 3.

⁸⁵ See for example: *Anti-Apartheids Nieuws* 58, November 1972; *Anti-Apartheids Nieuws* 60, April 1973; *Anti-Apartheids Nieuws* 79, June 1976.

⁸⁶ *Anti-Apartheids Nieuws* 80, Augustus 1976.

local anti-apartheid groups and (youth wings of) political parties and other organisations. The AABN also made use of World Shops to spread knowledge of their activities to the wider public.⁸⁷ These World Shops were not only places in which one could buy fair trade products, but also served as hubs of activism, of which the cause of anti-apartheid was just one of many.⁸⁸

This shift was not radical in nature. It was a slow evolution in which the focus on research of economic connections and the forging of ties of solidarity between Dutch and Southern African workers were beginning to lose its prominence as the main activity of the AABN. These changes did not occur simply because the efforts to overthrow the capitalist structure showed little progress, but also because of practical demands from the liberation movements, especially the ANC. The first half of the 1970s had seen a South Africa in which the ANC was almost entirely absent, obliterated through seemingly effective forms of repression. For many contemporary observers it seemed as if there was little opposition against apartheid within South Africa. This especially appeared so to those that relied on information from traditional opposition parties like the ANC. However, outside of the limelight the Black Consciousness Movement was taking up the sceptre of protest within South Africa.⁸⁹ This change came to the fore with the Soweto uprising of 1976, in which black students, supported by the wider Black Consciousness Movement, protested against the introduction of Afrikaans as the medium of instruction in schools. As the images of the violence inflicted by the South African police on these students spread across the world, the ANC was taken by surprise by the events.⁹⁰ Yet, after Soweto, the ANC nonetheless managed to incorporate the event within their narrative of resistance, taking up the mantle of representing the South African resistance. Consequently, these changes called for more intense support from solidarity organisations like the AABN.

⁸⁷ *Landelijk Wereldwinkel Bulletin* 5(5), June 1974, Archive AABN, Box 160, IISH.

⁸⁸ Peter van Dam, *Wereldverbeteraars: Een Geschiedenis van Fair Trade* (Amsterdam, 2018), pp. 92-93.

⁸⁹ Saul Dubow, *Apartheid, 1948-1994* (New York, 2014), p. 156.

⁹⁰ Dubow, *Apartheid*, pp. 182-183.

3. The Mahlangu Moment, 1978-1980

As we have seen in the last chapter, the AABN slowly changed its vocal anti-capitalist message to one that was focused more on practical solidarity with the ANC. This process was moved along by the changing situation in South Africa. Following the Soweto uprising in 1976, the ANC managed to capitalise on a wave of potential new recruits that fled South Africa after the Soweto Uprising. Although these exiles were mostly influenced by the Black Consciousness Movement, most of them eventually joined the ANC, adapting to the practical reality that the ANC had already developed the foundations of a political organisation in exile.⁹¹ Invigorated by this legion of new recruits the ANC changed its strategy from rural warfare to guerrilla warfare in more urban areas, inevitably leading to more clashes and confrontations. Additionally, they combined this strategy with attempts at mass political mobilisation. In turn, the South African government adopted the so-called “total strategy”, as they feared that the situation was slipping out of their control. This meant that repression of political dissent reached new highs within South Africa.⁹² Hence, the end of the 1970s was characterised by an escalation of conflict. The activists of the AABN welcomed the new strategy of the ANC, arguing that “it is absolutely clear that armed struggle will be a necessary part of the liberation struggle in South Africa”.⁹³ Although the acceptance of the necessity – and inevitability – of the use of violence to end apartheid had always been a part of the convictions of the activists of the AABN, the increasing visibility of the result of this violence was something they would increasingly have to defend. Thus, in practice, anti-apartheid for the AABN entailed not just denouncing apartheid, but also putting forward the ANC and its methods as the only alternative.

At this point in time the concept of anti-apartheid did not necessarily carry much meaning anymore. In fact, outside of South Africa it would be difficult to find someone who was explicitly pro-apartheid in 1977. As Saul Dubow has argued, anti-apartheid had little proponents from the mid-1970s onwards; however, there was “anti-antiapartheid”. With this concept Dubow intends to show that the emphasis of pro-South African propagandists was no longer about defending apartheid itself, but by “deflecting, confusing and denouncing anti-apartheid narratives.”⁹⁴ What followed from this new reality then, was that the AABN’s mission

⁹¹ Dubow, *Apartheid*, pp. 182-184.

⁹² Nancy L. Clark and William H. Worger, *South Africa: The rise and fall of apartheid* (New York, 2016), pp. 92-94.

⁹³ *Zuidelijk Afrika Nieuws* 83, February 1977, p. 7.

⁹⁴ Saul Dubow, ‘New Approaches to High Apartheid and Anti-Apartheid’, *South African Historical Journal* 69(2) (2017), p. 319.

was not so much about convincing the public that apartheid was a bad system, but was predominantly about convincing the public that the ANC was the best bet to fix it. As governments across the Western world were increasingly critical of South Africa, the AABN was keen on upholding the liberation movements as the only alternative.⁹⁵ However, presenting the ANC as *the* legitimate alternative for South Africa was not necessarily a straightforward task. This can be glanced from a letter from a critical reader of *Zuidelijk Afrika Nieuws*, who voiced his intention to cancel his subscription for the following reason: “Even though I sympathise with the liberation struggle of the peoples of Zimbabwe and South Africa and regard our solidarity with them as absolutely necessary, I cannot, out of matters of principles, share the apparent enthusiasm of the AABN for the armed struggle over there.”⁹⁶ Although the editors managed to salvage his subscription, they failed to convince him of their justification to support the ANC’s call to arms.⁹⁷

Ironically, it were the efforts to save the life of one of the combatants of this type of controversial armed struggle that, at the end of the 1970s, managed to rouse a scale of activism that the AABN had not experienced before. This success was achieved by the campaign to save the life of the imprisoned Solomon Mahlangu.

Changing Needs, Changing Activism

The campaign to save the life of Mahlangu was not the first time the activists of the AABN had engaged in acts of protests on behalf of political prisoners. On 26 September 1975, for example, they held a national manifestation on behalf of political prisoners in South Africa in Amsterdam. Working together with *Defence and Aid Fund Nederland* (DAF) and several cultural organisations, they followed up the manifestation with an exposition that could be viewed across the country.⁹⁸ Additionally DAF and AABN published a book together detailing the plight of the prisoners of apartheid.⁹⁹ However, events like these were more exception than rule. The activists of the AABN saw highlighting the plight of political prisoners in South Africa as occasionally useful, but not really their sort of activism. In fact, the start of AABN also meant more independence from DAF, which had for years been aligned with the CZA, AABN’s predecessor. Contrary to AABN, DAF presented itself not as an anti-apartheid organisation, but

⁹⁵ Minutes of the discussion among the staff in preparation for the Pleno, 2-3-1978, Archive AABN, Box 3, IISH.

⁹⁶ Letter from W. Vaas, 31-8-1977, Archive AABN, Box 156, IISH.

⁹⁷ Letter from W. Vaas, 7-9-1977, Archive AABN, Box 156, IISH.

⁹⁸ *Anti-Apartheids Nieuws* 73, July 1975, p. 6.

⁹⁹ AABN en Defence and Aid Fund Nederland, *Gevangenen van de apartheid* (1975), Archive AABN, Box 160, IISH.

as a humanitarian initiative that helped with financing the legal counsel of those that challenged apartheid. Modelled on its international counterpart *International Defence and Aid Fund*, DAF was explicitly focused on raising money on behalf of victims of apartheid. They managed to raise almost 8 million Dutch Guilders until its folding in 1990. The organisation was able to achieve this feat by consciously choosing not to seek the limelight with outright political acts.¹⁰⁰ These diverging paths were spurred on by conscious decisions. Whereas discussions about the founding of the AABN showed a desire to become more explicitly political, DAF was envisioned as having “a more reserved and ostensibly neutral political alignment”.¹⁰¹ Although DAF continued to publish on its activities in the periodical of the AABN until 1977 and the two organisations were on friendly terms, they nonetheless mostly went their separate ways.¹⁰² Thus, the AABN simply did not focus much on the plight of prisoners in Southern Africa before 1977.

However, the changing needs of the ANC had an effect on the activism of the AABN. An inevitable consequence of the increasing escalation of the ANC’s armed resistance was that more of those guerrilla fighters were subjected to capture by the South African government. This in turn fuelled efforts by the ANC to focus attention on the situation of those detainees. In 1977, the AABN participated in the campaign “Freedom for the Pretoria 12”, an effort initiated by the ANC to demand the freedom of twelve (ANC) freedom fighters. *Zuidelijk Afrika Nieuws* of October 1977 contained as an appendix an “international petition to the United Nations and the governments of the world”. The goal of this petition was to collect signatures that would be presented to the UN and the Dutch government on 10 December that year, on International Day of Human Rights. Fearing for the possibility of death penalties for the accused, the petition contained the following demands: freedom for the Pretoria 12; an end to all political trials; an end to the torture and murder of prisoners; and freedom for all political prisoners.¹⁰³

These efforts focusing on the rights of prisoners seem to suggest an instrumental adoption of human rights within anti-apartheid activism. The ANC realised the symbolic value of handing in a petition for the rights of prisoners on International Human Rights Day, but it remained a pragmatic political organisation aimed at overthrowing the apartheid regime. It did not change the nature of its activism. Similarly, the AABN remained focused on solidarity with the liberation movements; human rights was merely a practical means of embedding a particular

¹⁰⁰ Muskens, *Goede*, pp. 92-94.

¹⁰¹ Minutes, Aims and Organisation CZA-DAF, 18-8-1971, Archive AABN, Box 1, IISH.

¹⁰² The last contribution of DAFN to the periodical was: *Zuidelijk Afrika Nieuws* 83, February 1977.

¹⁰³ *Zuidelijk Afrika Nieuws* 86, October 1977, p. 7; *Kommunikee AABN*, November/December 1977, p. 9, Archive AABN, Box 151, IISH.

demand that could help bring apartheid to an end. These observations might be obvious – but they should nonetheless be highlighted. There was no breakthrough in the late 1970s making human rights the highest moral standard for the activists of the AABN. Nonetheless, as the next section will show, the new sort of activism that made its entrance with the campaign to save Mahlangu’s life shared a remarkable resemblance with the activism of human rights organisations like Amnesty International, which Moyn (and others) see as being at the heart of the human rights revolution.¹⁰⁴

Save the Life of Solomon Mahlangu

Solomon Mahlangu’s story was not unlike many of his generation that joined the ANC. He was born in Mamelodi in 1956 and became involved in anti-apartheid activism in the context of the student uprisings of Soweto in June 1976. He joined the ANC in October 1976 and left South Africa to be trained as a member of *Umkhonto we Sizwe*, the armed wing of the ANC. In June 1977 he returned to carry out a series of guerrilla missions on behalf of the ANC.¹⁰⁵ The precise circumstances of what happened remains unclear, but after being pinned down by police, his partner in the mission, Motlounge, fired a gun and killed two white South Africans. Reportedly, Motlounge suffered brain damage following his subsequent arrest, leading him to be declared insane and thus unfit to stand trial. Mahlangu, however, was convicted of complicity in murder and given the death penalty, even though – as was confirmed by the judge – he himself did not fire a gun.¹⁰⁶ The conviction reflected the growing escalation of conflict; not necessarily because Mahlangu got the death penalty, for it was a common sentence in South Africa, but because he was the first to get such a sentence in a political context. Although there was an undeniably racial dimension to these sentences – all but one of the 132 detainees that were executed in 1978 were non-white – Mahlangu was the first to receive a death sentence for a politically-related offence since the mid-1960s.¹⁰⁷

The AABN received word of Mahlangu’s sentence and the desire of the ANC to campaign to save his life on March 9 1978. The generic letter stated the following:

¹⁰⁴ For an analysis of the success of Amnesty International in the Netherlands specifically, see: Bastiaan Bouwman, ‘Outraged, yet moderate and impartial: The rise of Amnesty International in the Netherlands in the 1960s and 1970s’, *Low Countries Historical Review* 132(4) (2017), pp. 53-74.

¹⁰⁵ Sabine Marschall, ‘Pointing to the dead: victims, martyrs and public memory in South Africa’, *South African Historical Journal* 60(1) (2008), pp. 107.

¹⁰⁶ *Trouw*, 5-4-1979, p. 7.

¹⁰⁷ Amnesty International, ‘The Death Penalty: Addenda and update to the Amnesty International report’, 26 September 1979, p. 10, accessed at: <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/204000/act500031979eng.pdf>.

We of the African National Congress of South Africa vehemently condemn this barbarous conviction and sentence. We demand that the racist regime of Vorster complies with the newly introduced Geneva conviction which states that guerrillas captured in the war of liberation be treated as prisoners of war. [...] On the eve of the launching of the international year Against Apartheid – we say to the international community this is the time to act and Solomon Mahlangu’s life must be saved.¹⁰⁸

The AABN quickly broadcasted this message. In *Zuidelijk Afrika Nieuws* of April that same year they announced the start of the campaign to “save Mahlangu”. They described South Africa as a country engulfed in political repression; a country where bad treatment of prisoners was endemic; and a country clearly out of step with global norms. Additionally, they emphasised the repeated acknowledgement by the UN of the right of the South African people to take up arms against the apartheid regime. Finally, they portrayed the proposed activities in the Netherlands as being part of a global campaign to save Mahlangu’s life.¹⁰⁹

The ensuing campaign to save Mahlangu’s life was characterised by demonstrations, vigils and the writing of letters and postcards. The message of the ANC to save his life had been woven into broader demands for the liberation movement, as they had proclaimed not only that “Solomon Mahlangu must be saved from the gallows” by protesting and sending petitions, but also that one should “give material and political support to the ANC; support [the] armed struggle in South Africa; [and finally,] demand the release of all political prisoners and an end of all political trials in South Africa”.¹¹⁰ The AABN also framed the demand to save Mahlangu in the broader context of supporting the liberation movements. However, in practice, all of these demands were placed in the background. Similarly to the campaigns by Amnesty International around Prisoners of Conscience, the effort to save Mahlangu made headway with its immediacy and simplicity. As Petra Quant, who had only just started with volunteering for the AABN and was in charge of processing thousands of request for protest-postcards, could attest to:

Why did she feel so connected to this particular campaign? ‘That was because this was a campaign aimed at one particular person, which made it more appreciable. It also concerned me that the boy was just sitting there in his cell, while being innocent, and that his mother was his only link between him and the outside world. I also saw day to day that the campaign was starting to catch on, because at a certain moment people started requesting postcards for a second time.’¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ Letter from the ANC, 9-3-1978, Archive AABN, Box 62, IISH.

¹⁰⁹ *Zuidelijk Afrika Nieuws* 90, April 1978, p. 19.

¹¹⁰ *Sechaba*, Second Quarter 1978, p. 2.

¹¹¹ *Zuidelijk Afrika Nieuws* 100, December 1979, p. 16.

The campaign caught on precisely because the main message of the campaign seemed so impartial. It was to save the life of a young person.

This does not mean that these activities unfolded spontaneously. The activists of the AABN put a lot of effort in trying to bring across the poignancy of the situation. It was not a given that people would care about Mahlangu. Practical matters mattered. It was only in June of 1978 that the ANC sent an actual picture of Mahlangu to the AABN to help the campaign to save his life function more effectively.¹¹² For would people care so strongly about a faceless man? The strength of the campaign was that people could get directly involved. As essayist Susan Sonntag has argued: “Compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or it withers.”¹¹³ The AABN provided the opportunity for action by offering postcards which could be sent to prime minister Vorster of South Africa and minister of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands van der Klaauw. These postcards were intended to put pressure on those who could decide the fate of Mahlangu. It took hard work by the activists of the AABN to get the story of Solomon Mahlangu out there.¹¹⁴ Eventually, people responded in droves and tens of thousands of postcards were sent.¹¹⁵ The letters and the related protests did result in van der Klaauw ordering his department to bring across his worries about the death penalty for Mahlangu to the South African government. He nevertheless refused to explicitly call Mahlangu a freedom fighter (which would mean he would fall under the protections of the Geneva convention). As a small measure of progress he did not call him a “common criminal” anymore, as he had done before.¹¹⁶

Of course, the fact that the campaign revolved around the immediacy and seemingly apolitical act of saving Mahlangu’s life did not mean that the activists saw the campaign as unconnected to the broader goal of ending apartheid. As can be glanced from the cartoon from *Zuidelijk Afrika Nieuws* of October 1978, the activists of the AABN saw the campaign as challenging the very heart of apartheid (*see image 2*). The drawing depicts South African prime minister Vorster trying to row the boat of apartheid through open water. He is on troubled waters, however, as a powerful wave composed of letters – clearly referring to the Mahlangu postcard-protest – appears to be on the verge of capsizing the apartheid vessel. While the boat of apartheid is on the verge of destruction, Dutch minister of Foreign Affairs van der Klaauw

¹¹² Letter from H. Rabkin, 18-6-1978, Archive AABN, Box 62, IISH.

¹¹³ Susan Sonntag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York, 2003), p. 101.

¹¹⁴ Minutes Pleno, 3-5-1979, Archive AABN, Box 4, IISH.

¹¹⁵ Annual Report AABN 1979, Archive AABN, Box 4, IISH.

¹¹⁶ *Zuidelijk Afrika Nieuws 90*, October 1978, pp. 3-4.

is trying to hold onto the bow of the ship. In the background of the drawing, a dark storm, with within it the black fist that represents the liberation movement, seems to be waiting for the boat to be thrown their way. Thus, the campaign's widespread support was seen as a vehicle which could be used to further the interests of the ANC and to ultimately bring the end of apartheid somewhat closer. The involvement of the efforts of organisations like Amnesty International, The Dutch Reformed Church and Pax Christi – although initiated separately from the AABN – was seen as a good avenue to bring a larger portion of the Dutch people into the fold of anti-apartheid activism.¹¹⁷

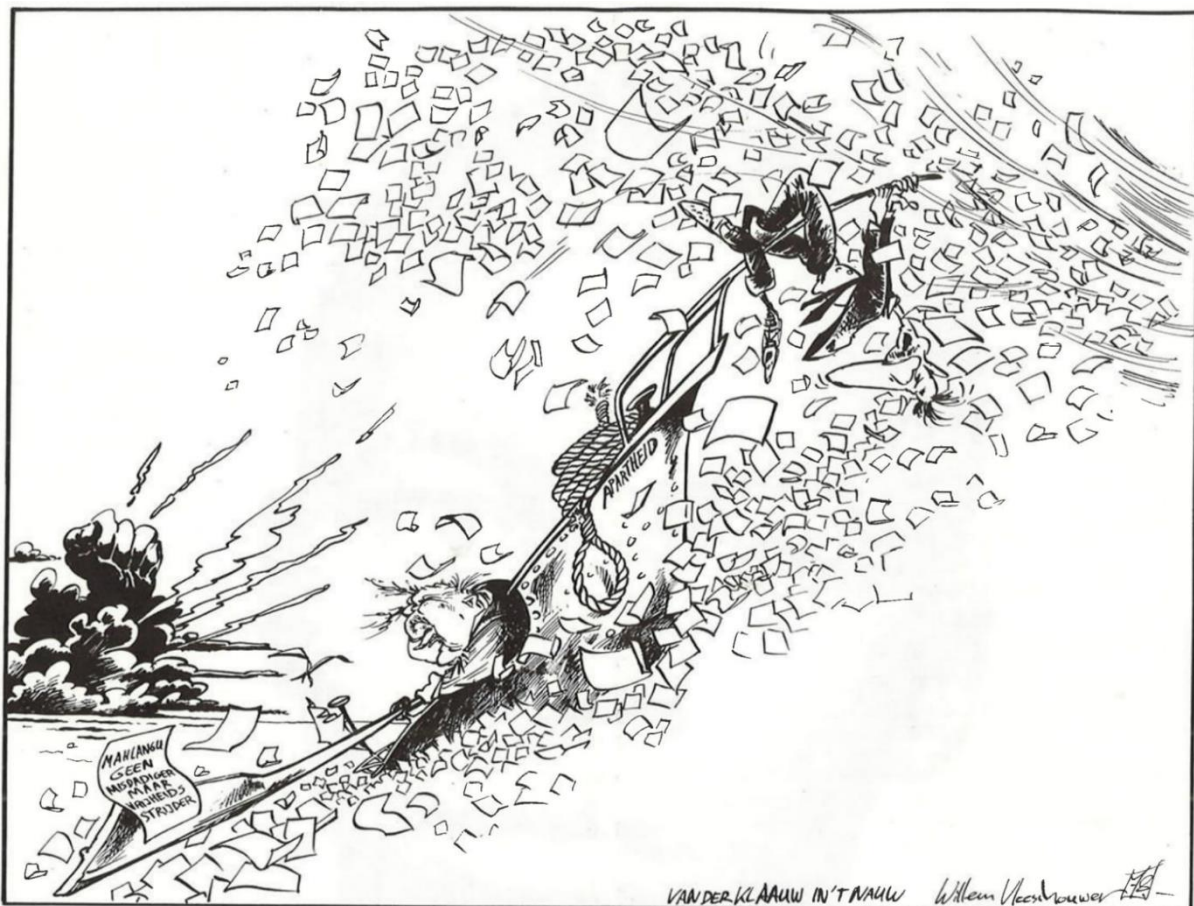


Image 2: Cartoon in *Zuidelijk Afrika Nieuws* 90, illustrating the campaign to save Mahlangu's life.

Evocations of the personal suffering of Mahlangu were fuel to the effort. Speaking of the activities undertaken to save Mahlangu's life, the following message in *Zuidelijk Afrika Nieuws* was meant to relay his resistance to hardship: "Solomon Mahlangu, who has been held in a death cell for months, remains unbroken. He has full confidence in the effort. He knows that, all around the world, people are supporting him, and despite suffering torture he is still

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 4.

filled with spirit.”¹¹⁸ A letter sent in the beginning of 1979 to update the ANC on the state of the campaign reflected this feeling of personal connection, stating that: “Solomon Mahlangu has got many friends in Holland now!”¹¹⁹ It seemed that the campaign had also very much affected the activists themselves. This was also the moment in which the ante was raised. The AABN called on people to send postcards to Solomon and his mother Martha Mahlangu. Relaying a message of the ANC, the AABN wrote the following: “Send a message to Martha Mahlangu, the mother of the young freedom fighter Solomon Mahlangu. We are sure this will make her feel supported.”¹²⁰ Two months later *Zuidelijk Afrika Nieuws* updated its readers on the efforts by quoting from the South African newspaper *Post*: “From nine countries across the globe Martha Mahlangu received mail. She showed us letters, postcards and telegrams from England, the US, Canada, France, Denmark, The Netherlands, Belgium, Brazil and Sri Lanka. Ms Mahlangu told us, that although suffering from poor health – she felt empowered by the messages from abroad.”¹²¹ However, it was doubtful that Solomon himself was allowed to see his letters. Nonetheless, as the article continues, “during her visits to Solomon in his death cell, Ms Mahlangu could at least tell him that the struggle they were waging was not a lonely fight, but that all across the globe people were on their side.”¹²²

In the end the actual effort to save Mahlangu’s life proved futile. The AABN did initiate a last-ditch effort upon hearing of his impending execution: “We heard [that he was to be executed] on Tuesday April 3, at the beginning of the afternoon. From that moment onwards we dropped all our other activities. Day and night, [...] we did everything we could in the Netherlands to save the life of Solomon.”¹²³ The night before his execution the AABN organised a demonstration in Amsterdam that attracted more than a thousand people, some even staying at a vigil throughout the night. Across the Netherlands similar – albeit smaller – protests were organised.¹²⁴ At the international stage neither an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council the night before, nor a personal appeal from President Jimmy Carter of the United States to stay the execution proved effective.¹²⁵ Solomon Mahlangu was hanged on the morning of April 6 1979, at the age of 22. It was reported that Mahlangu uttered the following message to his mother before his execution: “Do not cry for me mother, but keep your courage. My

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Letter to Y. Zungu, 23-2-1979, Archive AABN, Box 64, IISH.

¹²⁰ *Zuidelijk Afrika Nieuws* 95, February 1979, pp. 4-5.

¹²¹ *Zuidelijk Afrika Nieuws* 96, April 1979, p. 10.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid., pp. 8-9.

¹²⁴ Annual Report AABN 1979, Archive AABN, Box 4, IISH.

¹²⁵ Marschall, ‘Pointing’, pp. 107-108.

blood will nourish the tree that will bear the fruits of freedom. I am not afraid of dying. Tell my people that I love them, and that they ought to continue the struggle.”¹²⁶ The AABN similarly used his death as a reason to increase the activism against the apartheid-regime. Denouncing the execution as a “foul, disgraceful act”, *Zuidelijk Afrika Nieuws* proclaimed the following message: “A year-long fight to save the life of Mahlangu and the subsequent cold-blooded murder of this young fighter of apartheid have taught us that Vorster and his fascist regime can only be brought down with force. A TOTAL BOYCOT OF SOUTH AFRICA, NOW!”¹²⁷

The Power of Individual Suffering

Whereas the campaign’s ultimate purpose was not achieved, the effort did reveal that protest around individual suffering had its power. The core message of the campaign, to save the life of one person, managed to attract widespread support. A good example exploring the power of such a minimalist message was the cartoon published in *De Volkskrant* on the day before Mahlangu’s execution (See image 3). It showed Vorster pulling up a rope in preparation for the execution of Mahlangu. An observer, representing “global public opinion”, demands him to stop. Vorster defers and tells her: “continue walking, dirty communist”. The cartoon clearly relays a picture of the desire to stay the execution as a minimal, almost apolitical demand shared by almost all across the globe. This was something that was also recognised by the activists of the AABN themselves. Minutes of a discussion on May 3 1979, during which the leaders of the organisation looked back on the whole campaign, show that there was a realisation that the activities surrounding Mahlangu’s imprisonment and death sentence brought a lot of sympathy and support from outside the organisation. Not only in terms of the individuals who supported the efforts in large amounts, but also in terms of the support of several other organisations, who sometimes worked jointly with the AABN (political parties, youth organisations and the trade movement) and sometimes operated separately (churches, Amnesty International). Among all of these new contacts and relations had formed since the Mahlangu campaign.¹²⁸ As mentioned before, the similarity of this campaign with the ones that were regularly initiated by Amnesty was remarkable. However, it is interesting that even an organisation that definitely did not share a similar profile with regards to its moderateness or impartiality could manage to tap into some of the same support.

¹²⁶ *Zuidelijk Afrika Nieuws* 96, April 1979, p. 9.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹²⁸ Minutes Pleno, 3-5-1979, Archive AABN, Box 4, IISH.

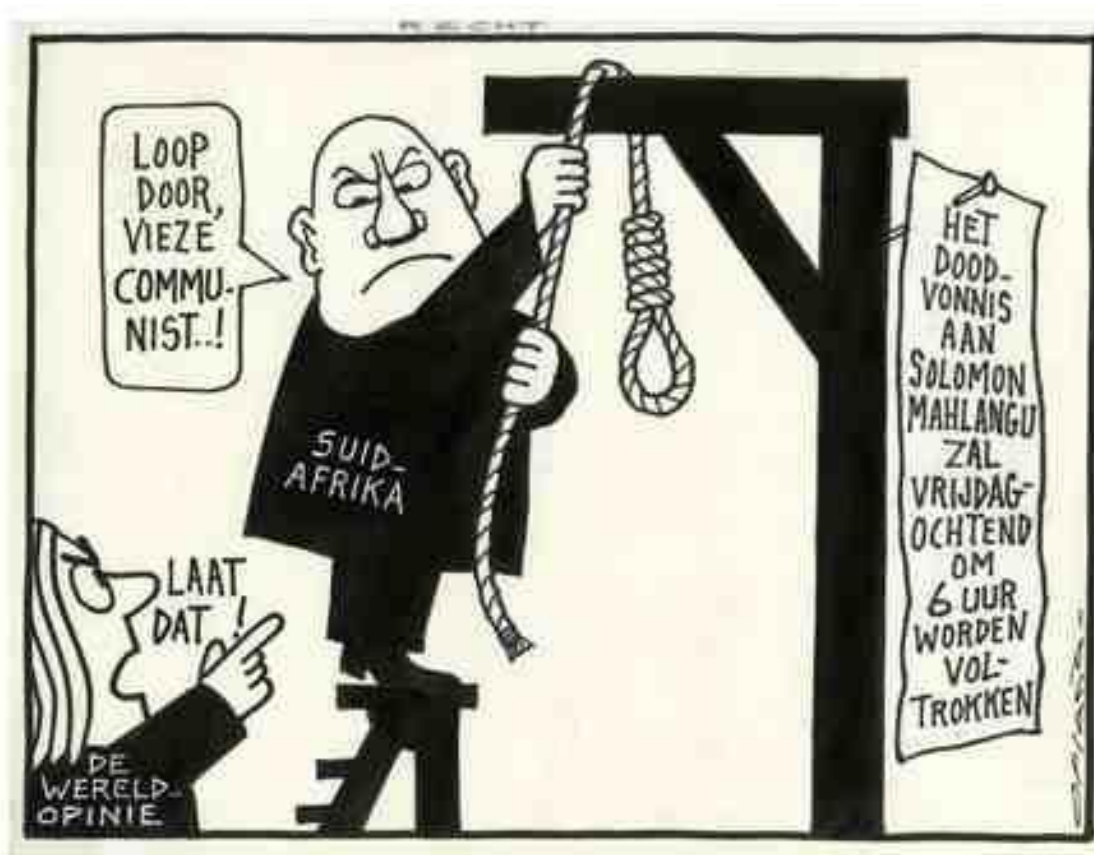


Image 3: Cartoon in *de Volkskrant* of April 5 1979, depicting the widely shared worries for Mahlangu's fate

However, the recognition of the power of such a campaign was also accompanied by a clear unease with acts of protest that had such a focus on the suffering of just one individual. Speaking of a need to “transcend the level of mere humanitarian activism (however justified and important such activism may be)”, the minutes of the discussion show that the activists of the AABN intended to put much effort in trying to connect caring about an individual’s suffering with clear political goals in similar future campaigns. The minutes went as follows:

In general, the need to keep devoting attention to acts of protest regarding political prisoners is apparent, not only because such acts serve as the last hope for the prisoners themselves, but also because they serve the practical purpose of shining light on the repressive nature of the apartheid system. As a solidarity organisation we will keep making the link to the liberation struggle led by the ANC. [...] We must consistently emphasise the political meaning of the protest by demanding (and mobilising support for these demands among the population) that the Dutch government take action on the situation in Southern Africa. The indignation at the repressive activities of those governments must be converted into acts of protest that are actually geared towards bringing down those regimes.¹²⁹

¹²⁹ Ibid.

Paradoxically then, the campaign that proved to be the most successful one since the start of the AABN brought them the furthest away from their explicitly aired desire to be a truly political organisation. To the activists, campaigning to save the life of an individual might be necessary and serve instrumental purposes, but it was ultimately inferior to what they saw as the truly political act of advocating for the end of the South African regime. The very fact that they ultimately could not save Mahlangu's life might very well have appeared to them as confirmation of this view. Thus, their future plan was to try to walk the fine line of using the power of such a campaign, while simultaneously trying to keep doing what they thought of as real politics.

The wait for the next campaign on behalf of a political prisoner did not take long. At the beginning of 1980, the AABN started another campaign, this time for James Mange. Similarly to Mahlangu, Mange was serving in the armed wing of the ANC when he got handed a death sentence. The AABN intended to run a similar campaign to the one for Mahlangu, including demonstration and the sending of postcards. However, they also emphasised that the campaign should feature a political link with the ANC's armed wing, expressing the desire to request the assistance of some former Dutch World War II resistance fighters to emphasise the validity and need for armed resistance.¹³⁰ Additionally, the AABN approached several Dutch lawyers to protest to the Dutch government on behalf of James Mange. Eventually, 250 lawyers signed a statement calling on the Dutch government, with reference to the Convention of Geneva and the votes of the Dutch delegation in the UN, to put effort into making sure that ANC members would be treated as prisoners of war.¹³¹ Almost identical to Mahlangu's campaign was the emphasis on the personal suffering of the prisoner, albeit expressed through someone close to him. This time the AABN reported on the way the postcards affected the wife of Mange, Pauline Moerane:

At the end of last year, we called on people in the Netherlands to send messages of solidarity to Pauline Moerane, the wife of James Mange. One of the people that did so sent us copies of two letters she sent him in reply. Pauline (who also has a three year old son) writes among other things: 'I have read how much you support me. I am very happy to know that there are people that care for me. I feel strong and full of confidence. I suffer my faith with patience, but sometimes – when things get too much – I cry out

¹³⁰ Minutes Pleno, 7-1-1980, Archive AABN, Box 4, IISH.

¹³¹ *Zuidelijk Afrika Nieuws 102*, April 1980, p. 13; Annual Report AABN 1979, Archive AABN, Box 4, IISH.

with all my force ‘AMANDLA!’.¹³² I try not to hate, because if I start hating I will fall back into the valley of hopelessness and then I will drown. Prince (her son) says hi, and Daniël as well. He is strong and brave.’¹³³

To bring force to this personal appeal the AABN also included a picture of Pauline and her son Prince with the report (*see image 4*). The image was placed right below a written call that asked people to keep sending postcards. Contrary to Mahlangu, Mange’s life was saved, when on September 11 1980, the Appeal Court of Bloemfontein commuted his sentence to 20 years imprisonment. Whether the international campaign to save Mange’s life had any effect is difficult to tell. Nonetheless, the AABN’s campaigns focusing on the suffering of individual prisoners were there to stay, ultimately culminating in the reverence of Nelson Mandela (which will be discussed in more detail in chapter 5).¹³⁴



Image 4: The picture of Pauline and her son Prince in Zuidelijk Afrika Nieuws 101.

¹³² Amandla means power in Zulu/Xhosa. It was a widely used rallying cry for the resistance against apartheid and was often used by ANC members.

¹³³ *Zuidelijk Afrika Nieuws 101*, February 1980, p. 15.

¹³⁴ One could argue that the start of this process was initiated in 1980: Minutes Pleno, 11-6-1980, Archive AABN, Box 4, IISH; Minutes Pleno, 2-9-1980, Archive AABN, Box 4, IISH.

Solidarity as the Moral High Ground

While the campaigns for the political prisoners took centre stage at certain moments in this period, they never became *the* dominant focus of the AABN. Solidarity, and not advocacy for the rights of prisoners was the main message. This can also be gathered from an exploration of the *Education against Apartheid* campaign. This campaign revolved around promoting practical support of an ANC college in Mazimbu, Tanzania. This college had as its goal to provide education to the youth that had fled the repression and violence of South Africa. Capitalising on the Mahlangu moment, the ANC named the school the Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College. The ingenuity of the campaign was not only that it had an eye-catching message, for who could argue against providing children an education; but that it was a good way to build support for the liberation struggle in Southern Africa among the school-going population. In efforts to get the campaign going the AABN not only relied on teachers that read the AABN periodical, but also obtained the cooperation of the teacher's union, using their communication channels to spread the message about the campaign. This way schools and teachers were informed on how to order the information and action material for the campaign.¹³⁵

The campaign was intended to create bonds of solidarity between Dutch youth and teachers with the ANC project. By tying exploration of the subject of contemporary South Africa to the practical effort to support an ANC school, the AABN tried to offer a combination of learning and activism. In Purmerend, for example, the AABN was involved in a campaign at the Ignatius College to raise money for the Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College.¹³⁶ The first event, on December 19 1979, was geared towards providing the school children with information on the current state of South Africa. The school children were given an impression of contemporary South Africa by means of discussions in class, screening of movies and a performance by a South African band. There was (unsurprisingly) an emphasis on the activities and convictions of the ANC in general, and the role the Freedom College would play in the struggle for liberation in particular. Two months later, the school organised a fancy-fair and an auction to collect money for the ANC's College, ultimately raising 6000 Guilders.¹³⁷

The main message of the campaign was about solidarity with the ANC. The information that was provided to schools participating in the campaign explored the history of South Africa and payed specific attention to the structural nature of apartheid. The theme of political prisoners was just one among many. More attention was paid to the Dutch economic complicity

¹³⁵ Letter to all ABOP-divisions, 31-10-1979, Archive AABN, Box 212, IISH.

¹³⁶ See: Purmerend, Archive AABN, Box 210, IISH.

¹³⁷ *Nieuwe Noordhollandse Courant*, 9-2-1981.

in upholding apartheid through investments and defence projects.¹³⁸ The ultimate goal, however, was to create bonds of solidarity with the ANC through the practical efforts of raising money to support the Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College. The support was made tangible so the children and youths could have a real perception of what it is they were doing. For example, the AABN provided lists of things that the first 150 South African students at the college needed, such as microscopes for biology and dictionaries for English classes.¹³⁹ The AABN also explicitly stated the political dimension of the school. Not only would the children learn about regular subjects such as mathematics and physics, but they would also follow social science classes that would “form in effect a complete political training, in which the formation of an anti-racist and anti-colonialist mentality is of great importance. The true history of the people of Southern Africa takes centre stage, as well as the shared struggle against racist and colonial occupation.”¹⁴⁰

This education campaign clearly showed the priority of the AABN to be solidarity, not human rights. Comparing these efforts with a similar education campaign on South Africa that was conducted by Amnesty International highlights the difference. In this 1979 campaign Amnesty organised classes across schools in the Netherlands dealing with the situation in South Africa. Contrary to the AABN, the focus of these classes was specifically on the issue of political prisoners. After learning about the plight of prisoners in South Africa, the Dutch children were encouraged to write letters to South African minors in detention in South Africa.¹⁴¹ The difference then is profound. Whereas the AABN was going across the country preaching solidarity to the ANC and other liberation movements, Amnesty was protesting human rights abuses of the South African regime without airing an opinion about who should be in charge of the country. However, as we have seen in this chapter, the fact that human rights did not come to be *the* moral centre around which everything was to revolve, did not preclude the AABN from adopting emotionally appealing campaigns that shared a focus on individual suffering with those initiated by the human rights movement.

¹³⁸ Education Portfolio Fall 1979, Archive AABN, Box 212, IISH.

¹³⁹ Folder ‘Support the Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College’, Appendix to *Zuidelijk Afrika Nieuws* 99, October 1979.

¹⁴⁰ *Zuidelijk Afrika Nieuws* 99, October 1979, p. 9.

¹⁴¹ School Students South Africa action package, *Amnesty International*, 14-9-1979, Archive AABN, Box 211, IISH.

4. Replacing the Bonds of Culture, 1981-1987

Historian Saul Dubow has characterised the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s as a period of “respite” for the South African regime, as improving economic conditions and a friendlier environment in international politics – with the ascent to power of Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom and Ronald Reagan in the United States – seemed to provide some temporarily relief for the South African government.¹⁴² Sensing opportunity to increase its regional security, the South African government escalated military activity beyond its borders, most prominently in Mozambique and Angola.¹⁴³ However, even as Thatcher and Reagan held onto power for most of the 1980s, their presence masked an underlying reality of increasing global unease with, and resistance to, South Africa’s internal affairs. This paradox came to the fore most prominently when the United States’ Senate overturned Reagan’s veto on sanctions on the South African government in 1986.¹⁴⁴ As the 1980s progressed it seemed increasingly clear that change was imminent. There was increasing opposition to apartheid within South Africa, exemplified by the emergence of a politically broad coalition party, the *United Democratic Front* (UDF) which managed to instigate anti-apartheid activity not seen for decades. There were close links between the ANC and the UDF, but the ANC was in no way in complete control over the UDF, even if, at times, they would have wanted to.¹⁴⁵ Similar developments occurred in the Netherlands, where, as the 1980s progressed, more people became aware of apartheid and started to adopt a more critical attitude towards the events unfolding in South Africa. The Dutch national government upped its criticism of the South African regime, although remaining shy of anything resembling the “total boycott” demanded by the activists of the AABN. Nonetheless, from 1981 onwards the Dutch government started to provide material support to the ANC in the form of humanitarian goods for refugees that had fled South Africa.¹⁴⁶ This reflected increasing pressure to take a stance on apartheid, pressure that further escalated halfway through the 1980s. This chapter will discuss the new ways in which the AABN came to present itself in this turbulent period.

¹⁴² Dubow, *Apartheid*, pp. 195-196.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 213-215.

¹⁴⁴ Vernon D. Johnson and Eliot Dickinson, ‘International norms and the end of apartheid in South Africa’, *Safundi* 16(4) (2015), pp. 370-372.

¹⁴⁵ Dubow, *Apartheid*, pp. 207-213.

¹⁴⁶ Muskens, Goede, p. 512.

The Primacy of the Struggle

Following the campaigns for the life of Mahlangu and Mange, the AABN continued to protest the death penalties of arrested ANC guerrilla fighters. 1981 saw a campaign for the lives of guerrilla fighters Lubisi, Mashigo and Manana under the slogan of “They must not die!”.¹⁴⁷ They did not die indeed. The petition for mercy proved successful and their sentences were commuted to life in prison. Building on this success, the AABN called for further protests: “The apartheid regime, under pressure from international protests, did not dare to murder the three ANC-fighters. This success is an extra stimulus to forcefully continue with the international campaign to save the lives of three other ANC-fighters (David Moise, Anthony Tsotsobe and Johannes Shabangu).”¹⁴⁸ Similar protests continued to be a factor throughout the 1980s. However, the activists did act on their worry that holding such a protest was not political enough. They continuously emphasised that their campaigns for prisoners also entailed support for the armed struggle of the ANC. Their desire to make campaigns for rights of prisoners a thoroughly political act was also reflected in a piece in their journal in 1986 criticising the approach of Amnesty International to South Africa. Whereas the article started with praise for Amnesty’s meticulously documented reports on torture in South Africa, there was vehement criticism of the way in which Amnesty framed its protest:

Someone who wants an end to torture must, according to [Amnesty International], write a ‘polite’ letter to president Botha. [...] It is true that Amnesty operates without any ideological preference. However, over the years Amnesty must have obtained at least some sophistication. Amnesty could have known that torture in South Africa is a part of the system. [...] It is no excess, but a structural occurrence. Thus, an end to torture in South Africa can only become a reality if its coupled with an end to apartheid.¹⁴⁹

This criticism of Amnesty closely resembled the AABN’s larger concern, already touched upon in the previous chapter, that too much of a focus on the plight of prisoners implies a disregard for the structural nature of the problem; namely apartheid. Thus, activism against apartheid should also explicitly entail choosing sides and supporting the liberation movements.

However, the desire to promote the struggle against apartheid began to manifest a presence of a certain degree of hesitancy surrounding the possible vices of the liberation movements. In the summer of 1983, when there was a lot of coverage in the Dutch press of an

¹⁴⁷ *Zuidelijk Afrika Nieuws* 107, February 1981, p. 7.

¹⁴⁸ *Zuidelijk Afrika Nieuws* 115, June 1982, pp. 195-196.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

ANC attack in Pretoria in which civilians lost their lives, the minutes of internal discussions echo disagreement within the AABN about the questions “to what extent the AABN can support ANC-attacks, that also cause civilian casualties” and “how far does the ‘unconditional support’ go”?¹⁵⁰ Nevertheless, further discussion did not lead to a change in policy. They mentioned that the AABN did not want to be without criticism and that further review of support should remain an option in the case of a change in military strategy within the ANC. Nonetheless, the ANC’s current strategy, which regarded the use of violence – with the inevitable risk of collateral damage to civilians – as valid if it was aimed at a military target, was regarded as justified.¹⁵¹ Thus, even while the collateral damage of the increasing violence between the South African government and the ANC certainly seemed to worry the AABN activists, they still felt the strategy was justified and necessary.

Replacing the Bonds of Solidarity

Meanwhile, the AABN ramped up the work to try and engender more support for the liberation movements. 1981 saw a campaign titled “Take a Share in the Resistance. The People Will Govern”. The campaign entailed a call to support the ANC, SACTU and SWAPO by buying shares of 5 or 25 Guilders in these liberation movements.¹⁵² As the AABN explained in a letter to its activists, this format was chosen because it was seen as a more personal thing than just giving money.¹⁵³ Additionally, the metaphor of a share was powerful because it juxtaposed investment in apartheid, which the AABN had fought since its inception, with the positive investment in the liberation movements. This became even more apparent with a similar campaign 4 years later, when, with the slogan “Don’t Invest in Apartheid, Invest in a Free South Africa, Take a Share in the Resistance”, they tried to combine protests against multinationals like Philips and Holland International with the opportunity to buy shares in the ANC and SACTU.¹⁵⁴ This positive investment was not necessarily a change in strategy, since (as discussed in previous chapters) material support of the liberation movements had always been a key component of the AABN’s activism. However, it was a strong discursive weapon to emphasise the support of the ANC as the ultimate act of opposition to apartheid.

¹⁵⁰ Minutes Pleno 26-5-1983, Archive AABN, Box 5, IISH.

¹⁵¹ Minutes Pleno 23-6-1983, Archive AABN, Box 5, IISH.

¹⁵² *Zuidelijk Afrika Nieuws* 107, February 1981.

¹⁵³ Letter to AABN activists, 20-3-1981, Archive AABN, Box 5, IISH.

¹⁵⁴ ‘Investeer niet in apartheid, Investeer in een vrij Zuid-Afrika, Neem een aandeel in het verzet’, Archive AABN, Box 6, IISH.

This formulation also reflected enduring attention for the economic reality of investment in Southern Africa. The AABN reported on Philips's complicity in the wars in Southern Africa, as the Dutch company was still playing a role in providing South Africa with military supplies. Whereas the Dutch government had forbidden to supply weapons to South Africa, it seemingly allowed Philips subsidiaries in South Africa, the United Kingdom and the United States to sell electronics on the South African market that were subsequently used for military purposes by the South African regime. Sometimes these subsidiaries even directly supplied their products to the South African army.¹⁵⁵ Additionally, the AABN did not only report on the need for disinvestment, but also on the nature of investments that were necessary in areas of Southern Africa that had gained their independence. The AABN's journal reported, for example, on a development conference in Maputo, Mozambique at the end of 1980. Questioning the particular ways in which economic development could be attained while preventing overdependence the journal concluded the following:

[The] Southern African movement in the Netherlands must keep track of, and critically assess, the development support supplied to Southern Africa, and especially the conditions with which the support is given. This must be done in close cooperation with progressive [liberation] movements in those areas [...]. We welcome support that is aimed at giving this area collective independence with regards to South Africa and the Western countries. We denounce support aimed at stealing resources or at enlarging neo-colonial dependence.¹⁵⁶

This focus on economics, however, was clearly less militantly Marxist than at the start of the inception of the AABN. The original view of the clear dichotomy between the world capitalism that had caused apartheid and the envisioned utopia of democratic control over the economy was replaced by a more nuanced appreciation of the role of the economy. When the AABN published a report in 1986 on why Reagan and Thatcher were so vehemently opposed to sanctions on South Africa, they suggested they were propelled to this position by their unjustifiably ideologically rigid view of the workings of the economy:

[Reagan and Thatcher] are especially driven by ideological goals that are connected to the upholding of world capitalism. Both do not wish to accept sanctions against South Africa because such a weapon goes against the ideas of free trade, and this principle could thus be compromised by humanitarian notions. [...] They consider the ANC as a

¹⁵⁵ *Zuidelijk Afrika Nieuws* 117, October 1982, p. 11; *Leewardier Courant*, 17-03-1983, p. 9.

¹⁵⁶ *Zuidelijk Afrika Nieuws* 107, February 1981, p. 11.

movement that would remove South Africa from the sphere of influence of the international, capitalist world system.¹⁵⁷

Quite ironically then, the article went on to disagree with such a rigid worldview: “The blunt Cold War-philosophy of Reagan and Thatcher is accepted by less and less countries around the world.”¹⁵⁸ The disappearance of a Marxist analysis of apartheid within the AABN should not be a surprise, given the wider state of disarray in the Dutch Communist movement in the end of the 1970s and the 1980s.¹⁵⁹ The interpretations of apartheid as an outgrowth of the capitalist economy did not hold much sway anymore. This change into a less radically anti-capitalist organisation was in many ways also a reflection of the changes within the ANC, which became less dominated by the ideas and members of the SACP.¹⁶⁰

It was not economics then, but culture, which would become the main focus for the AABN in the 1980s. As mentioned before, the AABN had a long history of advocating for a boycott of cultural activities of South Africans that had the blessing of the South African government.¹⁶¹ Increasingly, throughout the 1980s, the AABN started to employ cultural activities positively on behalf of the anti-apartheid struggle. Admittedly, this had happened occasionally for a longer time already. According to Conny Braam, at this point the de facto leader of the AABN, the discovery of culture began already in the early 1970s: “In February 1973 the first AABN-concert took place. Imdad Husain, originally from Pakistan, playing on his violin, performed an evening-filling concert on his own: 400 people. Never before had we brought together so many people. Thus, we discovered culture.” Nonetheless, the occasional cultural act as a way to attract a crowd in the early years was of a different order than the role culture was to play in the 1980s. One of the first larger scale employments of culture was the *Beat apartheid* concert on June 13 1981, with acts by Reggae musician Peter Tosh and the band Jabula, composed of exiled South African musicians. As part of the campaign *The People Will Govern*, which promoted the ANC, SACTU and SWAPO, the AABN organised a concert in order to “bring the large groups of youths, that do have an ‘anti-apartheids’ conviction, but do not normally go to political manifestation, in contact with [...] the efforts of the AABN.”¹⁶²

¹⁵⁷ *Zuidelijk Afrika Nieuws* 140, August 1986, p. 3.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ Ger Verrips, *Dwars, Duivels en Dromend: De geschiedenis van de CPN, 1938-1991* (Amsterdam, 1995), p. 488.

¹⁶⁰ See for example: *Zuidelijk Afrika Nieuws* 147, October 1987.

¹⁶¹ For a history of the cultural boycott see: H. Otto Terblanche, ‘Die Nederlandse kulturele boikot teen Suid-Afrika: 'n ontleding’, *Tydskrif vir Geesteswetenskappe* 54(1) (2014), pp. 37-55.

¹⁶² *Zuidelijk Afrika Nieuws* 109, June 1981, p. 3.

The road towards culture was not just an instrumental one. Underlying it was a desire to fundamentally change South African society. Promoting cultural expressions of repressed South Africans was seen not only as an act of liberation, but also of creation; of the first steps towards a new culture that was to replace the current officially sanctioned South African one. Discussions about the protest against the South African theatre group Ipi Tombi, which toured the Netherlands in 1981, reflected this reasoning. Speaking of the importance of upholding the principle of boycotting all contacts between South Africa and the Netherlands that were officially sanctioned by the South African government, the AABN posed a clear distinction between the “fake culture” of the current South Africa under apartheid and the “struggle cultural” that ought to be fostered. Instead of cultural connections to South Africa there should be cultural bonds with liberation movements and artists associated with these movements.¹⁶³

These ideas about the creation of a new South African culture had its roots at least partly in the Black Consciousness Movement. Black Consciousness was different from the traditional liberation movements such as the ANC in that it saw culture not as a secondary form of political awareness, but as a primary part of liberation.¹⁶⁴ Culture was seen as a key component in the embrace of blackness and fundamental to the eventual goal of psychological liberation. Although the ANC was initially sceptical of the use of cultural activities in bringing liberation closer, in the 1980s they increasingly began to realise its potential as a tool to create international awareness and raise funds for the struggle against apartheid. Simultaneously, people within the ANC began to be increasingly convinced that culture indeed had an inherent value and that it could be an important avenue through which an alternative vision of a future South Africa could be expressed.¹⁶⁵

In a further effort to create bonds between the Netherlands and the artists of the “struggle culture” the AABN organised *The Cultural Voice of the Resistance* in December 1983 in Amsterdam. Bringing together both Dutch and South African poets, actors, dancers, musicians and painters, the weeklong manifestation sought out to forge connections between Dutch cultural life and exiled South African artists. In discussions of the event the AABN portrayed culture as a Manichean struggle between apartheid culture and resistance culture: “Literature in South Africa is a battleground, and the central choice which all literators face is: whether you choose the side of the resistance or follow the avenues laid out by the regime.”¹⁶⁶ Implicit in

¹⁶³ *Zuidelijk Afrika Nieuws 111*, October 1981, pp. 3-5.

¹⁶⁴ Dubow, *Apartheid*, pp. 162-163.

¹⁶⁵ Shirli Gilbert, ‘Singing Against Apartheid: ANC Cultural Groups and the International Anti-Apartheid Struggle’, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 33(2) (2007), pp. 421-441.

¹⁶⁶ *Zuidelijk Afrika Nieuws 119*, February 1983, p. 8.

this view seemed then to be that one could only be culturally South African if one was aligned with the liberation struggle, or perhaps more accurately, aligned with the ANC's vision of that struggle. Nonetheless, the event also allowed for critical discussion of this view, for especially the Dutch artists voiced their fears that such a perspective of culture could imply too close of an alliance between artists and the resistance movement; that artists would be forced to "be on the ANC's leash".¹⁶⁷ Cosmo Pieterse, a South African poet, refuted this as follows: "Definitely not. A South African artist affiliated with the ANC departs from his individualism, but in no way from his individual identity. For that is after all what decides his specific craftsmanship as an artist."¹⁶⁸

This embrace of culture brought to the fore some of the same hesitancy that also plagued the activists after the campaign for Mahlangu: a fear that this form of activism was not political enough. Internal discussions after the Cultural Voice of Resistance conference phrased this sentiment as follows: "For us, as AABN, it is important to consider whether and if so yes, to what extent the cultural contacts can be a part of our political activism."¹⁶⁹ These doubts did not mean that the AABN strayed from the taken course; cultural activity came increasingly to define the organisation. Although other Dutch anti-apartheid organisations occasionally included culture in their activism, the AABN distinguished itself with its extensive focus on culture. There seemed to be a staying power in providing a positive prescription for South Africa. Cultural connections with South Africa were also personal to those involved with the AABN. There was, for example, an AABN-choir that was practicing South African resistance songs bimonthly.¹⁷⁰ Furthermore, the cultural activities provided a means to keep promoting the ANC as *the* organisation representing resistance in South Africa. This was especially important as internal turmoil within South Africa at times seemed to entail a spotlight on the UDF and less of a focus on the exiled ANC. Although the AABN supported the struggle of the UDF within South Africa, there was some fear that the ANC could be "replaced".¹⁷¹ Nonetheless, some broader engagement with current events in South Africa could not be avoided, for it would have been impossible to stay relevant otherwise. Activities on behalf of, or in cooperation with, the ANC were thus sure ways to keep the limelight on the organisation, while also putting forward their positive vision of the future South Africa. This strategy was

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Minutes Pleno 2-3-1983, Archive AABN, Box 5, IISH; see also: Minutes Pleno 17-2-1983, Archive AABN, Box 5, IISH.

¹⁷⁰ Minutes Pleno 23-6-1983, Archive AABN, Box 5, IISH.

¹⁷¹ Minutes Pleno 25-10-1984, Archive AABN, Box 6, IISH.

exemplified above all with the organisation of undoubtedly the biggest event organised by the AABN ever: *Culture in Another South Africa (CASA)*.

Culture in Another South Africa

The organisation of CASA was a huge endeavour. While organised in cooperation with the cultural department of the ANC, the brunt of the work was nonetheless carried out by the AABN.¹⁷² The idea of the conference was to organise an international event, taking place in Amsterdam, with over two hundred South African artists, either living in South Africa or in exile.¹⁷³ Similarly to the previous conference, the plan was to exchange ideas together with Dutch artists “on the cultural future of a democratic, non-racial South Africa without apartheid”.¹⁷⁴ The enthusiasm of Dutch society for the project was tantalising; all theatres and other locations were made available without costs, posters were printed free of charge and all artists were being provided with free transportation by the transportation service of Amsterdam.¹⁷⁵ The organisation was partly financed through contributions from the Dutch national government, the municipal government of Amsterdam and more than ten other municipalities across the Netherlands. Even the UN provided a financial contribution.¹⁷⁶ Additionally, Joseph Garba, Secretary General of the UN Committee against Apartheid visited, breaking with long-standing policies of the UN committee that it would only participate in events if the PAC was also participating (in order to show impartiality). The activists of the AABN celebrated this moment: “This is more than a historic moment – it is a historic victory. For the [AABN] and the ANC.”¹⁷⁷ The conference itself also ended up being quite a remarkable scene:

For two weeks anti-apartheids city Amsterdam was host to almost three hundred South African actors, musicians, writers, photographers, journalists and other ‘cultural workers’. Young starting artists, professionals, stars and unknown talents were meeting up throughout the day, performing in the evening on the large and small stages of the

¹⁷² H. Otto Terblanche, ‘Amsterdam as'n anti-apartheidstad’, *Historia* 57(2) (2012), pp. 150-181.

¹⁷³ *Zuidelijk Afrika Nieuws* 153, October 1988, p. 2.

¹⁷⁴ Although the conference was held in Amsterdam, the goal was to reach people across the country. There was, for example, an exposition put together, showing the work of 48 South African photographers, collected during CASA in Amsterdam. The exhibition ‘the hidden camera’ moved across the country, shown not only in Amsterdam, but also in Spijkenisse, Maastricht, Leeuwarden, Enschede, Rotterdam, Dordrecht, Emmen and The Hague. See: ‘CASAkrant’, p. 1, appendix to *Zuidelijk Afrika Nieuws* 146, August 1986.

¹⁷⁵ *NRC Handelsblad*, 10-12-1987.

¹⁷⁶ *Zuidelijk Afrika Nieuws* 149, February 1988, p. 3.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

capital and sleeping at night in the houses of a few hundred hospitable residents of Amsterdam.¹⁷⁸

The themes of replacing the existing ties with South Africa with cultural bonds with the ANC was emphasised once again. In the conclusion of a published volume on the conference long-time AABN activists Conny Braam and Fons Geerlings formulated this view as follows: “We, the people of the Netherlands, in the West, or anywhere in the world, must be partners in the new ‘other’ culture and wish to know of it. We must enter into cultural relations and conclude new cultural agreements with the representatives of this new ‘other’ culture.”¹⁷⁹ The keynote address by Pallo Jordan on behalf of the National Executive Committee of the ANC reiterated much of the same themes. He first depicted the culture of the apartheid society; of a white colonial power ruling over a colonised people. He contrasted this vision of society with a different view, that of the the ANC:

The opposing perspective, which is historically associated with the national liberation movement, accepts that history has brought together on the territory of South Africa people who trace their roots to three different continents – Africa, Asia and Europe. The national liberation movement has consistently held to the view that it is not only impossible, but also undesirable, to try to unscramble this historical omelette. [...] We argue that, though our people came from differing ethnic and racial backgrounds, having been thrown together on South African soil, they are collectively engaged in creating something qualitatively new. This emergent quality, we say, is a South African people.¹⁸⁰

Thus, again culture blended together with liberation. It must be emphasised that this liberation followed a particular vision of both the struggle and the envisioned future of South Africa – the view of the ANC. It is extremely doubtful whether the PAC would have concurred with this vision of South Africa as a historically scrambled omelette.

The predominance of the ANC, and the predominance of artists with ties to the organisation, did not mean that there was no room for debate. In fact, the conference was fairly remarkable for providing a platform for free discussion of all sorts of different themes.¹⁸¹ As Roeland Muskens has argued, especially the fact that not only exiled South Africans, but also

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁷⁹ Conny Braam and Fons Geerlings, ‘Towards new cultural relations: A reflection on the cultural boycott’, in: Willem Campschreur and Joost Divendal (eds.), *Culture in Another South Africa* (London, 1989), pp. 170-181.

¹⁸⁰ Pallo Jordan, ‘Keynote Address’, in: Willem Campschreur and Joost Divendal (eds.), *Culture in Another South Africa* (London, 1989), pp. 170-181.

¹⁸¹ *De Volkskrant*, 21-12-1987, p. 9.

South Africans still living in South Africa attended, provided new insights for both the organisers and attendees:

Especially for the approximately 20 South Africans from South Africa [as distinct from exiles] it was a revelation [...]. It led to discussions about subjects that were taboo back home and exchanges with people that were silenced back home. But it was also useful to the AABN. [...] The AABN could talk about new, exciting themes with the South Africans [that attended CASA], such as gay rights, the position of women and challenges like prostitution. But also the theme of freedom of expression could be discussed much more freely with these new acquaintances.¹⁸²

Starting off as a concerted effort by the AABN to juxtapose the cultural expressions sanctioned by the South African government with a culture around the struggle for liberation, the conference seemed also to result in the opening up of all different sorts of discussions.

Not much remained then of the vehemently anti-capitalist message that had characterised the AABN at its formation. The disenchantment with Marxist ideology seemed to have given way to an emphasis on the positive vision of a new democratic South Africa. In some ways one could regard CASA as the culmination of this new perspective. Guiding this transition was a seemingly ever constant belief in the ANC and its mission. The forming of a new perspective is certainly something that could also be said of the AABN's final years, which I will discuss in the next chapter. We thus finally arrive at the emergence of human rights as a new moral reference point for the AABN.

¹⁸² Muskens, *Goede*, p. 283.

5. The Emergence of Human Rights, 1988-1994

The end of the 1980s was a period of great expectations. The reforms initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev in the Soviet Union seemed an indication of new times ahead. 1989 was of course a year that many experienced as seismic, with the Berlin wall coming down and the winds of change seemingly blowing throughout the world. Similar expectations gripped the activists of the AABN, who increasingly saw change within South Africa on the horizon. And indeed, five years later, on the night of the 15th of October 1994, the AABN abolished itself by means of a celebratory event. For in April that same year, South Africa had held its first ever free democratic elections, leading the activists to declare their goal – and end to apartheid – achieved. However, before it were to do so the AABN went through some changes. As mentioned in the last chapter, the CASA conference in 1987 marked a new openness. Yet human rights had not made its mark at that point in time. The very end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s saw a monumental shift in the AABN's disposition towards the liberation movement. Whereas the last chapters have showcased an attitude towards the liberation movements of unconditional support, with little sign of criticism towards the movements, things at this point quickly began to change.¹⁸³ Yet before discussing these changes we should first emphasise the continuation of certain trends. Both the power of reverencing individual suffering and the switch from a Marxist interpretation of the economy towards a less negative view of capitalism seems to have reached its culmination in this period.

Mandela Mania

The expectation of imminent change in South Africa that came to grip so many around the world was paralleled by Nelson Mandela's rise to be the symbol of this change. Although Mandela had never been completely out of the spotlights, he was hardly news for most of the time he served in detention after the conclusion of his trial in 1964. However, according to Tom Lodge, who has written a biography of Mandela, by the 1980s Mandela had achieved an international celebrity status.¹⁸⁴ A closer look at three major Dutch newspapers in the period 1960-1995 seems to suggest that 1985 was the true breakthrough year, as mentions of "Mandela" grew exponentially (*see figure 1*). To a certain extent this corresponds to the general

¹⁸³ Right wing parliamentarian and former journalist Martin Bosma goes even further by describing this initial hesitancy as hypocrisy. See: Martin Bosma, *Minderheid in eigen land: Hoe progressieve strijd ontaardt in genocide en ANC-apartheid* (Amsterdam, 2015), pp. 20-21.

¹⁸⁴ Tom Lodge, *Mandela: A Critical Life* (New York, 2006), p. 181.

increase of interest in the Netherlands for the situation in South Africa, following the introduction of the state of emergency in 1985. Comparing the results of the term “Mandela” with references to the term “apartheid” (see figure 2) seems to suggest, however, that the rate of increasing attention for Mandela greatly surpassed the rate of increase in interest for South Africa in general. Thus, in this period Mandela came to personify the struggle against apartheid.

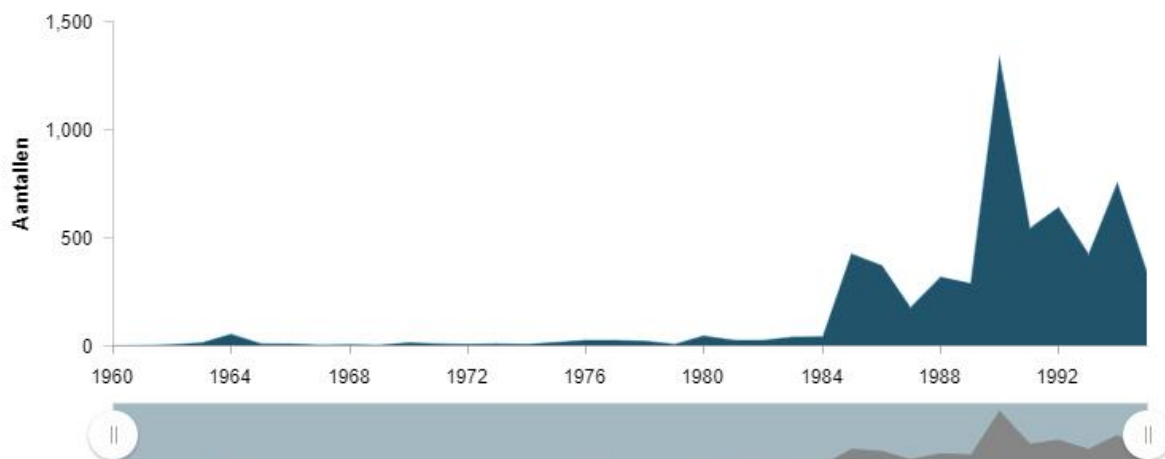


Figure 1: Number of times the word “Mandela” is mentioned in three major Dutch newspapers: *De Telegraaf*, *Trouw* and *De Volkskrant*. Made using <https://www.delpher.nl/>, on 26-6-2019.

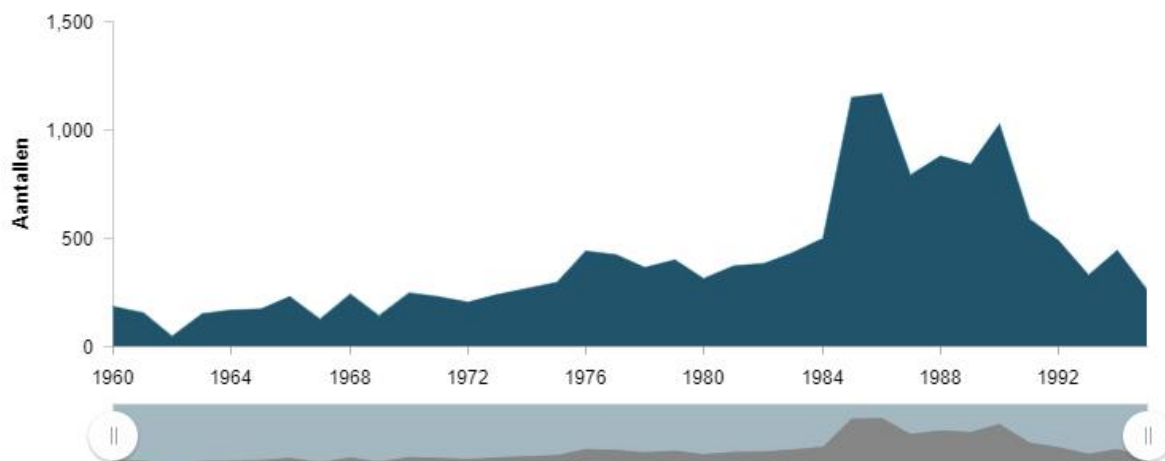


Figure 2: Number of times the word “apartheid” is mentioned in three major Dutch newspapers: *De Telegraaf*, *Trouw* and *De Volkskrant*. Made using <https://www.delpher.nl/>, on 26-6-2019.

Activities initiated by the AABN certainly seemed to confirm this trend. Around the same time that Wembley hosted the renowned Mandela Concert, which was broadcasted around the world, the AABN called on the people of the Netherlands to send messages of solidarity to Winnie, the wife of Nelson Mandela, for his upcoming 70th birthday, of which he had already

‘celebrated’ more than 25 behind bars.¹⁸⁵ The call reiterated this idea of Mandela – both Nelson and his wife Winnie – as the symbol for the apartheid struggle:

You would expect, that after 26 years of separation with the outside world, the leader Mandela would have been quietly forgotten. The opposite has happened. [...] His imprisonment, the longest political imprisonment of South Africa, has become a symbol for the unfreedom of the South African people. The lonely exile of Winnie, without her partner and suffering setbacks, has become equally symbolic for the life of Black South African women, of whom so much are barred from living with their husbands, whom are prevented from giving their children a safe home and a decent upbringing.¹⁸⁶

The method of activism – sending letters – was at this point a tried and tested one for the AABN. The glorification of Mandela’s individual suffering surely built on the foundations of the similar efforts for Mahlangu (see chapter 3). And similarly to that campaign people again responded in droves. More than 150.000 messages of solidarity were eventually written by the Dutch public. The AABN organised for the messages to be personally delivered to Winnie and her daughter Zinzi. With help from Foreign Affairs and free tickets from KLM, the Dutch national airline, AABN managed to deliver the eleven postbags containing the 150.000 letters. Although the journey proved challenging, the messages could be delivered in the end, with camera’s there to capture the moment.¹⁸⁷ This attention was part of a wider pattern, as a few months before, for example, the largest demonstration against apartheid in the Netherlands so far was organised in Amsterdam. 50.000 people participated.¹⁸⁸

The Mandela moment was close to reaching its zenith when the new South African president Frederik Willem de Klerk embarked on a road to end apartheid, officially entering in negotiations with the ANC. Mandela’s release seemed imminent. When the moment finally arrived, and he was set free on 11 February 1990, it was broadcasted live on Dutch television – and around the world. The moment saw a great sense of euphoria. Notably, Conny Braam, in an interview in *De Groene Amsterdammer* noted the role that the business world had played in the process: “At the moment it is especially hopeful that the white businesses have been the key factor behind these changes. De Klerk has been pushed into this position – besides [by] the resistance and the international pressure – also very much by the business community.”¹⁸⁹ Additionally she argued that: “[The business leaders] are truly interested in a democratic society

¹⁸⁵ *Zuidelijk Afrika Nieuws* 151, June 1988, p. 2.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁸⁷ *Zuidelijk Afrika Nieuws* 152, August 1988, pp. 8-9.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁸⁹ *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 14-2-1990.

– albeit one in which they can continue doing business without much trouble.”¹⁹⁰ Clearly, the AABN had moved far away from their initial start as a party based on a Marxist critique of apartheid.

The Winnie Affair

The Mandela symbol, however, had also gone through a challenge. In February 1989 Winnie Mandela – whose reputation had already been tarnished by previous incidents – was accused of complicity in murder. She was alleged to have ordered her bodyguards to abduct and abuse four black youths. Eventually, one of her bodyguards murdered one of the abductees, fourteen year old Stompie Moeketsie.¹⁹¹ This was one particularly notable event, as violence and repression perpetrated by ANC-members rarely reached the spotlight.¹⁹² As the events unfolded, the AABN remained cautious in its reaction, stating in *Het Parool* that: “We do not know exactly what happened, but if it is true what we are told what happened, then it is simply criminal behaviour.”¹⁹³ The first extensive reflection of the affair was in September 1989, when they published an article in their journal titled “How is it with Winnie”.¹⁹⁴ The article detailed the candid reactions of parts of the anti-apartheid coalition. Murphy Morobe, on behalf of the UDF, for example, had an unequivocal reaction: “She no longer represents the anti-apartheid movement. She violates human rights in the name of the struggle against apartheid. She has abused the confidence she had been given for years.”¹⁹⁵ However, the article also detailed other opinions within the movement:

The conviction has taken hold, at least in a substantial part of the movement, that the declaration of UDF [...] had been ‘too vehement’. The declaration after all was no more than a condemnation of Winnie Mandela and her bodyguard, but the context in which the events should be seen were missing. Winnie seemed to have been ‘placed outside of the movement’, after which they continued with business as usual. But wasn’t that much too easy, when for all those years the movement had benefited from this leading woman, who was seen, not just by the media, but also by the movement, as a ‘mother of the nation’? Shouldn’t the question how it happened also have been asked?¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ *NRC Handelsblad*, 13-2-1989, p. 4; *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden*, 27-2-1989, p. 4.

¹⁹² Stephen Ellis, *External Mission: The ANC in Exile, 1960-1990* (London, 2012), pp. 287-289. This does of course not apply to the violence perpetrated by the ANC’s guerrilla fighters.

¹⁹³ *Het Parool*, 17-12-1989, p. 1.

¹⁹⁴ *Anti-Apartheidskrant*, September/October 1989, p. 9.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ *Anti-Apartheidskrant*, September/October 1989, p. 9.

The AABN seemed to favour the latter view, arguing that the adoption of violence and cruelty as methods were in some ways a logical consequence of apartheid. Nonetheless, the whole affair meant that the AABN was confronted with the question of human rights violations by liberation movements. As the AABN carefully formulated: “Maybe the upside of the ‘Winnie-affair’ is that a large number of sensitive issues have become subject of discussion.”¹⁹⁷

The Embrace of Human Rights

The AABN was forced to return to similar “sensitive issues” very quickly, as reports of maltreatment and abuse of SWAPO’s prisoners became public at the end of 1989. At a camp in Lubango, Angola, the SWAPO detained hundreds from among its own ranks who were alleged to have spied on behalf of South Africa. Rumours about the dire conditions in which these prisoners were detained had already begun circulating in Namibia and abroad in 1985, spreading through word of mouth by detainees’ relatives.¹⁹⁸ In 1986 the SWAPO felt compelled to publicly deny these allegations in a press conference, decrying the rumours as “a well calculated campaign organized by South Africa”.¹⁹⁹ The stories gained more credibility when journalists met former detainees from Lubango in 1989.²⁰⁰ Subsequently, the Dutch media published reports that contained horrifying details about the abuses by the SWAPO in these camps.²⁰¹ Internal discussions show that, following the reports, the AABN very much wanted the SWAPO to publish an official reaction to the allegations of “human rights abuses”.²⁰² In the end, however, the AABN did not wait for an official reaction from the SWAPO and published the following denunciation in its journal:

Should we hide in ‘contextualisation’ then? And say that the enemy has been responsible for much graver human rights abuses? But wasn’t that precisely the reason why we fought against them in the first place? No, a denunciation is appropriate. We can let those involved know that it will become difficult to keep our support unconditional [...] and demand clarification. And not deal with [this sort of information] by saying that we can only react if those that have tortured have explained us their reasons.²⁰³

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Christian A. Williams, *Exile History: An Ethnography of the Swapo Camps and the Namibian Nation* (2009), PhD Dissertation University of Michigan, pp 157-158.

¹⁹⁹ *The Namibian*, 21-2-1986, as cited in: Williams, *Exile*, p. 158.

²⁰⁰ Williams, *Exile*, p. 158.

²⁰¹ *NRC Handelsblad*, 5-7-1989, p. 4; *Het Parool*, 20-9-1989; *De Telegraaf*, 22-9-1989, p. 13.

²⁰² Minutes Dagelijks Bestuur, 28-9-1989, Archive AABN, Box 18, IISH.

²⁰³ *Anti-Apartheidskrant*, October/November 1989, pp. 6-7.

This forceful denunciation stood in sharp contrast with the reaction of some of the other anti-apartheid organisations in the Netherlands. In an article in the AABN's journal, the position of the AABN was argued to be in sharp contrast with that of the *Komitee Zuidelijk Afrika* (KZA) and Kairos, who had shown more restraint in their reaction towards the reports.²⁰⁴

This contrast was part of a broader division among several solidarity organisations and NGO's. Development organisation Novib, for example, withdrew its support for the SWAPO, enraging other organisations in the process.²⁰⁵ Whereas AABN did not go as far as withdrawing support for the SWAPO altogether, its statements nonetheless frustrated some of the other anti-apartheid organisations. The minutes of a meeting between the AABN and KZA reflected this disagreement.²⁰⁶ Whereas the meeting was supposed to explore the possibility of a merger, it quickly turned into a discussion about the organisations' view of, and response to, the reports of the SWAPO camps. After a member of the AABN mentioned that he missed a form of "critical dialogue" in the reaction of the KZA towards the events, Sietse Bosgra, the driving force behind the KZA defended the organisation as follows: "Where do you draw boundaries during an undesired war? [...] [There were] tortures by the SWAPO, but [there were] maybe 100 or 1000 victims, however, this can be contrasted with over 70.000 victims during the war on SWAPO's side." Another KZA member added that the SWAPO was the only alternative to a racist regime. Conny Braam disagreed with that response and emphasised the gravity of the occurrences: "Especially because this has happened within a liberation movement this is a grave shock. This simply must not be tolerated. [...] We must provide context, but not right away [and it can never be used] as a justification." After some more back and forth, Bosgra pronounced his scepticism towards the AABN's reference to human rights quite clearly: "[When] thousands of youths were dying [in Namibia] yearly, where [were] those human rights?"

This exchange clearly reflected the differing interpretations on the matter. The AABN was clearly beginning to move away from its long-held position of unconditional support for the liberation movements, starting to refer to human rights as a moral reference point outside of their support for the liberation movements. Alternatively, the KZA seemed rather hesitant to adopt such a standard, still very much emphasising the primacy of the struggle. Therefore, the KZA was satisfied with the SWAPO's response that they would deal with the matter

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Anne-Lot Hoek, *'Aan de goede zijde van de strijd': De schendingen van mensenrechten door bevrijdingsbeweging SWAPO tijdens de onafhankelijkheidsstrijd van Namibië en de reactie daarop van de Nederlandse solidariteitsbeweging* (Amsterdam, 2005), MA thesis, pp. 76-79.

²⁰⁶ Minutes of meeting between AABN and KZA, 2-12-1989, Archive AABN, Box 18, IISH.

internally.²⁰⁷ The KZA's response is not necessarily surprising, given that they – and most other solidarity organisations – were mostly informed by the liberation movements themselves. Differing accounts were often seen as right wing South African propaganda.²⁰⁸ And even if the accounts were to be believed, there still remained a fear that criticism of liberation movements could embolden their opponents. Additionally, as Anne-Lot Hoek has argued: “There was a fear that criticism of the liberation movements would be regarded by those movements as acts of imperialism.”²⁰⁹ Nonetheless, the very fact that the Dutch anti-apartheid organisations felt obligated to grapple with the concept of human rights when it came to the abuses within the SWAPO-camps suggests that at this point in time it had become a force to be reckoned with.

If indeed the KZA's hesitant response was unsurprising, then why exactly did the AABN see this issue differently? Especially when you take into account that the core message of the AABN had until this point always been loyalty towards the liberation movements.

The Diversity of Black South Africa

The adoption of a more critical attitude towards the liberation movements – and the parallel adoption of human rights as a new moral standard – is shrouded in a bit of mystery. It is difficult to give one clear cut reason. There are nonetheless several factors that have certainly contributed to this development. As mentioned before, the fact that the activists of the AABN saw the end of apartheid, both in South Africa and across Southern Africa, as just a matter of time, meant that a more critical attitude towards the liberation movements did not necessarily mean helping those that advocated for apartheid. However, it was not that the AABN had hold back criticism for the entire duration of its existence and that the apparent imminence of the end of apartheid simply opened the floodgates. It was rather, that at the same time in which they seemed to be inching closer to a new South Africa and criticism thus appeared less sinful, the activists of the AABN became aware of the diversity among those that were struggling for that new South Africa. As discussed in the previous chapter, events like CASA were keen in creating this awareness; they provided the AABN's activists with avenues to discover the diversity of the people of South Africa. Key in this new perspective was the attention towards issues that divided the liberation movement. Women's rights for example, were discussed no longer purely from the vantage point of denouncing the sexism within the apartheid system and rallying

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Anne-Lot Hoek, *'Aan de goede zijde van de strijd': De schendingen van mensenrechten door bevrijdingsbeweging SWAPO tijdens de onafhankelijkheidsstrijd van Namibië en de reactie daarop van de Nederlandse solidariteitsbeweging* (Amsterdam, 2005), MA thesis, pp. 93-94.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 100.

women against it, but also concerning the question how women could ensure that the new South Africa would not just become another subjugation.

This attention to the future of South Africa for particular groups inevitably meant more attention towards the hardships these people were currently facing, not just because of apartheid, but also within the liberation movement itself. Most striking in this regard is probably the activism for the rights of South African gays and lesbians.²¹⁰ Spurred on especially by AABN activist Bart Luirink, who developed contacts with gay rights activists in South Africa, discussions of the struggle for gay rights became a regular feature. AABN's journal, for example, published an interview in 1989 with Simon Nkoli, a prominent black South African gay rights activist who formed a gay rights organisation after leaving a predominantly white gay rights organisation that refused to support him in his trial for treason because of his role in the anti-apartheid struggle. The organisation he formed, *Gay and Lesbian Organisation of Witwatersrand* (GLOW), had a predominantly black membership and explicitly linked the struggle for gay rights to the anti-apartheid struggle.²¹¹ The conversation with Nkoli also touched upon the homophobia within the ANC, as he talked about the hassle that a gift from a Scottish gay rights organisation produced:

A financial gift from the Scottish gay rights organisation was the cause of weeks of debate. Should we accept it or not, people were wondering. Because if we would take the money, would the women – most of the discussants were married – not think ill of it. Eventually it was decided – against my wish – to ask the Scots to send the money indirectly, through the Council of Churches. After this there was vehement discussion among [the Scots] about the mediating role of an institution that throughout history had been guilty of stirring up hatreds of gays. In the end [they] chose not to send the money.²¹²

The activities of GLOW, and the subsequent support of the AABN for these gay rights activists, were meant to shed light on the double repression that black South Africans faced, both for their blackness and their gayness. As Nkoli aptly argued, during the first pride march of South Africa in 1990:

²¹⁰ Regarding the use of terminology: it seemed most appropriate to adopt the terms those at the time were using.

²¹¹ Sheila Croucher, 'South Africa's Democratisation and the Politics of Gay Liberation, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 28(2), p. 319.

²¹² *Anti-Apartheidskrant*, October/November 1989, p. 11.

This is what I say to my comrades in the struggle who ask me why I waste time fighting for moffies [a derogatory slang for male homosexual in Afrikaans]²¹³, and this is what I say to white gay men or women who ask me why I spent so much time talking about apartheid when I should be talking about gay rights: I am black and I am gay, I cannot separate the two parts of me into secondary or primary struggle, they will be all one struggle.²¹⁴



Image 5: Simon Nkoli during pride in Johannesburg in October 1990. A screenshot from *Simon & I*.

The worry about homophobia within the ANC – and more broadly among black South Africans – was a recurring theme.²¹⁵ For example, during the trial of Winnie Mandela in which she stood accused of abduction, abuse and murder, her defence team attempted to portray the abduction of the four youths, of which only the murdered Stompie was a minor, as a heroic effort to protect the boys from alleged rape by a white priest (who was later cleared of the charges). The defence team further added that the “disciplining”, i.e. abuse, of the “boys” was because some of them were engaging in *voluntary* homosexual practices among themselves. This behaviour, according to the defence, was a direct result of the alleged abuse of the white priest. The fact

²¹³ Similarly to the term queer this label has been positively appropriated.

²¹⁴ Quoted in: *Simon & I*, Directed by Beverley Palesa Ditsie and Nicky Newman (2002).

²¹⁵ This is not to suggest that homophobia was only an issue among black South Africans.

that the “boys” engaging in this behaviour were in fact adults was deemphasised by the defence, thus framing Winnie Mandela’s efforts as guided by a desire to protect minors against homosexual corruption.²¹⁶ Worried about this conflation of sexual abuse and homosexuality as an apparent attempt to sway popular opinion of the case, GLOW criticised the ANC and demanded it to condemn Winnie’s defence in the case.²¹⁷

The AABN actualised its support of the gay rights movement in South Africa by forming *Ma Thoko*, an AABN subgroup focused on supporting the gay rights struggle in South Africa in general, and GLOW in particular. The group was named after a woman who opened a shebeen, an illegal pub in ones living room, in the Kwathema township where young black homosexuals were welcome and could be themselves.²¹⁸ That this was not apparent was brought to the fore powerfully by an article in the AABN’s journal, detailing the murder of a prominent member of GLOW in Kwathema who was “alleged to have been killed with a rake by one of his brothers ‘because he was meeting men’.”²¹⁹ Ma Thoko tried to raise broad support for gay rights in South Africa. As Luirink stated in a fundraising letter, this proved to be a challenging task: “About support from Western development organisations I am not optimistic. First, I was told during initial conversations that the goal might indeed be ‘sympathetic’, but that GLOW ‘cannot now have the priority’.”²²⁰ In practice then, the main efforts were geared towards raising funds for GLOW by appealing to the Dutch gay and lesbian community. One of its greatest achievements was the visit of Cecil Nyathi and Tanya Chan-Sam, two representatives of GLOW, to the Netherlands from June 16 until July 26 1992. The visit, which was financed through a frantic effort to raise money among Dutch non-profits and several municipalities with sympathies for the gay rights struggle, was a means to allow GLOW to establish contacts with Dutch gay rights organisations, AIDS prevention organisations and other NGO’s.²²¹ Additionally, Ma Thoko not only provided material support to the gay rights struggle in South Africa, but also organised an exhibition in the Netherlands to provide a window into the life of gays and lesbians in South Africa. In Amsterdam City Hall they hosted an exhibition on gay life in Africa, titled “Out in Africa! Gay life in South Africa”.²²²

²¹⁶ Rachel Holmes, ‘Queer Comrades: Winnie Mandela and the Moffies’, *Social Text* 52/53 (1997), pp. 167-168.

²¹⁷ *The Weekly Mail*, March 15-21 1991, p. 10.

²¹⁸ *Anti-Apartheidskrant*, May/June 1991, p. 10.

²¹⁹ *Anti-Apartheidskrant*, February/March 1992, p. 2.

²²⁰ Letter to Marie Jose, 25-1-1991, Archive AABN, Box 460, IISH.

²²¹ Report on the visit of two representatives of GLOW to the Netherlands, 4-8-1992, Archive AABN, Box 460, IISH.

²²² Archive AABN, Box 461, IISH.

Unconditional Solidarity: A Thing of the Past

The more critical attitude towards the ANC was something that would stay with the AABN until its end in 1994. Even Nelson Mandela, who, as we have seen, was widely revered within the anti-apartheids struggle, was not immune to criticism. When he visited Suharto's Indonesia in 1991, ostensibly to thank him for the financial support to the ANC, he failed to make any reference to Suharto's meagre human rights record. The AABN reacted with stinging criticism: "That [he] did not utter a single word on the fate of the political prisoners whom after 25 years are still in detention, nor on the executions, nor on the other serious human rights violations, nor on the politics of terror against the population of West-Papua and the occupation of East-Timor, has baffled us."²²³ This attitude was formalised in an article in the AABN's journal titled "Unconditional solidarity: a thing of the past".²²⁴ This article, somewhat ironically celebrating the ANC's 80th birthday, laid out the new reality. It argued that the simple proposition that being *against* apartheid meant being *for* the ANC simply did not hold anymore. As there was an increasing clash of opinions occurring within the ANC, simply supporting the organisation did not mean much anymore. The complexity of the changes within the ANC meant that there was now room for people wishing to combine solidarity with personal convictions. Thus, according to the AABN, this moment called for a fundamental change among solidarity organisations:

Solidarity organisations must decide now to support the realisation of fundamental ideals: democracy, non-racialism, non-sexism and respect for human rights. The ANC can, although critically, be seen as the most important promoter of these ideals. The unequal relationship between the machinery of apartheid and the liberation movements, which automatically puts the latter in a disadvantaged position in the negotiation process, justifies practical and moral support of the ANC. But such support must be viewed critically.²²⁵

The goal was then no longer just about helping bring apartheid to an end, but also about nudging the ANC – and the new South Africa – towards a particular way in which such an alternative society was to be constructed. Thus, the transformation of the AABN as being on the vanguard of several human rights issues was encouraged by an increasing realisation among its activists that the newly envisioned South Africa would not be great simply by virtue of the ANC's leadership. Instead, South African activists fighting for women and gay rights should be assisted.

²²³ *Anti-Apartheidskrant*, November/December 1990, p. 4.

²²⁴ *Anti-Apartheidskrant*, February/March 1992, pp. 6-7.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*

The AABN's realignment was in some ways actually following trends within the ANC. As reported by the AABN, the ANC was cleaning its house, acknowledging the human rights abuses that had occurred among its own ranks. The worst confessions were about the ANC prison camp in Quatro, Angola, where:

people were hit on their cheeks (which they were forced to blow up with air) until their eardrums ruptured and blood was streaming out of their ears; where they were hit by guards with sticks, attacked with boiling water or forced to walk through a colony of fire ants. Quatro, as acknowledged by the commission of the ANC, which were tasked with investigating the treatment of political prisoners by the own organisation, could truly be called a concentration camp.²²⁶

The AABN praised the acknowledgement of guilt of the ANC, noting that Nelson Mandela had characterised it as a “structural defect within the ANC” and “thus accepted responsibility for the committed crimes”.²²⁷

The changing appreciation within the AABN of their solidarity with the ANC did not just resolve around upholding human rights, but was embedded in a desire to help create a new South Africa. For example, the AABN also arranged exchanges between the Dutch environmentalist movement and South Africans.²²⁸ Additionally, they helped jumpstart holiday tours to South Africa, promoting Vulilindlela Tours, a new South African tourist agency that was started by “returning exiles, ex-political prisoners, ex-political detainees and other persons disadvantaged by the system of apartheid”. The holiday tour was marketed as a form of non-exploitative tourism, not just in regards to black South Africans, but also regarding the South African environment.²²⁹ Thus, the early 1990s up until the self-abolishment of the AABN at the time of the first free South African election in 1994, can be characterised as an exciting period for the activists of the AABN, who wanted to promote issues around human rights and progressive notions like sustainability as points of reference for a new South Africa. The eventual decision to abolish the AABN after the first elections, was heavily criticised by both the KZA and Kairos, who argued that the decision was practically an abandonment.²³⁰ The AABN, however, saw itself as having played its part in the effort to end apartheid.²³¹

²²⁶ *Anti-Apartheidskrant*, November 1992, p. 6.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*

²²⁸ *Anti-Apartheidskrant*, February/March 1992, p. 2.

²²⁹ Project Proposal – Vulindlela Tours, 30-7-1992, Archive AABN, Box 454, IISH; Advertising Brochure Vula South Africa, 30-7-1992, Archive AABN, Box 454, IISH.

²³⁰ Muskens, *Goede*, pp. 307-308.

²³¹ This stands in contrast with the KZA, which continued its support for the ANC throughout the elections with the campaign “Give Mandela an honest chance”. See: Muskens, *Goede*, pp. 545-549.

6. Conclusion

In this research I have sought out to answer the following question: *How did the AABN attempt to fight apartheid, and what role did the concept of human rights play in this endeavour?* If one thing is to become clear from the preceding chapters, it is that it is difficult to answer this question in a way that easily fits into one of the existing narratives of human rights in the global consciousness. Starting off at its founding as clearly a Marxist-inspired anti-apartheid organisation, human rights was simply not a concept of significance to the activists of the AABN. However, at the end of the 1970s the activists of the AABN slowly moved away from their Marxist origins. This is a pattern that clearly corresponds to Moyn's assessment of the facilitating factors for the emergence of human rights. Nonetheless, human rights did not make its entrance into the AABN at this period. Moral and material solidarity with the liberation movements – especially with the ANC – was strong enough to provide direction and meaning to the activists' work. The end of the 1970s did, however, see a focus on rights of prisoners within the AABN. This phenomenon was very particular and did not imply much engagement with human rights more generally. Nevertheless, these campaigns on behalf of imprisoned ANC-members shared obvious similarities to campaigns by human rights organisations like Amnesty International. The AABN clearly managed to ride some of the waves of energy that proved vital to fuelling engagement with human rights. Focusing heavily on individual suffering, these AABN campaigns employed similar means of identifying with strangers as those undertaken by human rights organisations. To the activists of the AABN these campaigns were valuable, as they served an instrumental purpose in furthering the case of the ANC and that against apartheid more generally. The activists nonetheless expressed uneasiness with this type of campaign, voicing fears that such a focus might imply a less political outlook on apartheid.

Even if the disenchantment with Marxism did not yet pave the way for human rights, it did allow the activists of the AABN to relay their focus. Thus, culture came to be a defining feature within the AABN in the 1980s. Fitting clearly within their message of solidarity with the ANC, the AABN adopted as part of their mission the act of contrasting the current South Africa with the potential of a new liberated South Africa through cultural activities. Culture, more than just serving an instrumental purpose in bringing attention to the struggle, had an inherent value. It was part of a positive vision of a new South Africa. Ultimately, human rights did begin to play a factor within the AABN. This development came to light with the AABN's

reaction to the human rights abuses of prisoners perpetrated by the SWAPO in 1989. This issue brought to the fore the emergence of human rights as a new moral high ground. It was quite a sudden development. Arguably an important factor in explaining this change is that, at the end of the 1980s, there was a widespread perception that the end of apartheid was near. Furthermore, this thesis has also shown that the move to human rights was animated too by a newly found concern for particular groups within the larger liberation movement. This realisation of the diversity of oppressed South Africa was something certainly facilitated by their focus on culture, and their subsequent contact with South African artists from all walks of life. The AABN's advocacy for the rights of gays and lesbians was a case in point of this development. This change meant a recalibration of the AABN's definition of solidarity. The unconditional support for the liberation movement as a whole was replaced by concerns for the position of different particular groups within South African society.

But how exactly does this relate to the already existing human rights historiography? As noted before, this explication of the AABN conflicts with Moyn's interpretation of the breakthrough of human rights in the 1970s. The AABN's activism seems to fit in a lot more with Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann's appraisal of the 1970s and 1980s as a period characterised by a coexistence between human rights and terms like "solidarity" that were lasting remnants of anti-colonialism and Marxism. In many ways, like Hoffmann suggests, the period following the AABN's move away from a Marxist interpretation of apartheid in the late 1970s can be designated as a transition period. In the case of the AABN it was a period in which attention for the rights of prisoners was accompanied by an overarching focus on solidarity for the ANC. However, the trajectory of the AABN departs from Hoffmann's account, when, in the late 1990s, human rights came to replace unconditional solidarity as a new moral high ground for the activists. Hoffmann asserts that human rights did not attain such a status before the big changes in the early 1990s – he specifically mentions the end of the Cold War and the end of apartheid.²³² In contrast to Hoffmann, the exploration of the AABN suggests that the concept of human rights was already a force to be reckoned with before these epoch-defining moments had passed. With the end of apartheid approaching the adoption of human rights was a way in which the activists of the AABN started to adapt to this new reality. Whereas Hoffmann sees the adoption of human rights as a reaction to the humanitarian catastrophes that afflicted the world *after* the end of the Cold War, the activists of the AABN adopted human rights in a period

²³² Hoffmann, 'Human', p. 284.

in which they were profoundly optimistic. It was a means for them to start to look *beyond* the end of apartheid; to envision what a new South African society could look like.

This challenge to existing narratives of the emergence of human rights, however, calls for further investigation. As I have already identified in this thesis, different Dutch Southern African solidarity organisations did not adopt human rights at the moment in which the AABN embraced it. Further (comparative) accounts of solidarity organisations from across the world have the potential to shed light on whether the AABN was a unique case or part of a wider pattern. Additionally, a focus on anti-apartheid organisations in South Africa could explore whether similar developments occurred at the source, or whether this adoption was peculiar to some of the solidarity organisations in the Global North. However, even if the results of this research thus remain somewhat tentative, this account has demonstrated that historical research of particular organisations reminds us of the nuances that are often disguised by accounts of changes in the global consciousness.

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