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STRUCTURE AND EXPERIENCE IN THE MAKING OF APARTHEID

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AN EVIL EMPIRE? THE RUSSIANS ON THE REEF, 1947-1957[1]

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Introduction

Ask anyone who was resident in the black locations along the Reef in the 1940's and 1950's what the main sources of violence and insecurity at that time were and the chances are that they will answer either 'the tsotsis' or 'the Russians' [amaRashea] or both.* A scan of the newspapers and archival record of the period confirms those residues of popular memory. Reporters, location superintendents, location advisory boards, and police commandants all regularly reported on the periodic 'reigns of terror' which erupted out of a normally turbulent and disordered life on the Reef, in which blanketed Russians or more stylishly attired youth were principally involved.

Yet besides the bare listing of clashes, casualties, police engagements and trials that we find in the written record, remarkably little is known about the origins, motives or wider political significance of either group.[3] In the case of the Russians this was at least partly due to the closed and secretive nature of the group. Throughout this period, and subsequently, they took great pains to disguise and misrepresent the objectives and activities of their gangs, elevating deception of the police, in particular, to a fine art. Before long, the magistrates who presided at their innumerable trials, and the prosecutors by whom they were arraigned seem to have simply given up trying to find out what the underlying causes of these clashes were, and to have contented themselves with the tale fed to them by the Russians that they were the outcome of 'a conflict between two sub-chiefs in Basutoland'.[4]

For both sides this was a highly convenient fiction. In the case of the Russians it permitted them to cast themselves in the role of rough and simple traditionalists pursuing a time-honoured and unfathomable feud. For the authorities it allowed them to drop the vexed task of explanation. However bloody their feuds, they were all rooted in an obscure and distant past, reassuringly disconnected from the realities of modern day urban life, and the mass politics that they were beginning to spawn.

The disappearance of the Russians in the historical record must, however, be explained by factors other than the gullibility or apathy of contemporary observers. They did, after all, make a definite impression on the times, yet they have been all but erased from subsequent historical writing. This may in part be attributed to the general failure in South African historiography up until the last fifteen years to pay much attention to the black experience but it also reflects a tendency among a later generation of historians, including those most concerned with the plight and the struggles of the disenfranchised majority, to focus principally on the more forward looking black nationalist movements[5] and the activities and utterances of their mostly educated leaderships. It is only comparatively

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*Today another prime candidate for this role might well be the police. However, in the period under discussion, despite the constant harassment of pass, permit and beer raids carried out by the police, informants of all political and other persuasions, repeatedly offer the same unsolicited remark: 'in those days the police didn't shoot you'.

attributed to the refusal of the Basotho to pay admission to a dance organised by the Mpondo. On this occasion the casualty list read, four dead and 25 injured, two critically.[18] It was out of this increasingly turbulent and fractious environment that th Russians (and Japanese) were born in mid 1947.

Thenceforth the pace of conflict quickened. A major battle between the two gangs in August 1947 was followed by a series of skirmishes in the first half of 1948.[19] In October these spilled over into a wider ethnic conflict between the Russians and a section of the Xhosa residents of Benoni's 'Tent Town', leaving two dead and 27 injured, 12 critically.[20]

At this stage a new, though hardly foreign, element was grafted onto Benoni's Russo-Japanese hostilities. Hitherto both Russians and Japanese had recruited members from all areas of Basutoland; now the whole basis of gang membership was transformed. Some time towards the end of 1948 a fund was either created or replenished among the Russians for the purpose of helping gang members 'in trouble'.[21] The occasion may well have been the need to assist those arrested in the aftermath of the Russian/Xhosa clash in October of that year. Russian co-founder Mabiloko Mohlapo was given custody of the fund. At around the same time Nathaniel Lihloka arrived in Benoni, having been ejected from Jabavu.

According to a statement later volunteered by Mabiloko to the police Lihloka now set about sowing suspicions about Mabiloko's custodianship of the money, which came to a climax at a meeting in March 1949 when Lihloka suggested that half (or all) of the fund be placed in the charge of Russian co-leader Mohau Massau. At this or a subsequent meeting it was also proposed that the Matsieng and Molapo components of the Russians split, which in fact was what happened a few days later when Mohau of the Matsieng was attacked and seriously injured by Molapo assailants.[22] From this point on a bitter feud set in, which in one form or another has persisted till this day.

While Lihloka probably played some part in fomenting the dispute, the split did not simply hinge on matters of personality and ambition, as Mabilako sought to suggest. Mabiloko was an acknowledged master of deception and disinformation in his dealings with the police[23] - on this occasion he disingenously divulged to them that Lihloka and his chief lieutenants were 'notorius criminals' in contrast, presumably, to his own blameless following - and there were a range of other tensions emerging within the ranks of Benoni's Russians which Lihloka could as easily have been articulating as orchestrating. Foremost among these were long-standing rivalries between different localities and sections of the Basotho in Basutoland. Samuel Pelanyane, for example, talks of early (pre-Russian) fights in Benoni being like 'traditional games' between different locally based sections of Basotho migrants, and other testimony points in the same direction. As time went on some of these assumed a more pervasive and intractable character, especially those between the Molapo, Masupha and Matsieng sections of the Basotho from north, north-central, and south central Basutoland respectively, [each of which areas had been granted out to different sons of Moshoeshoe I in the mid nineteenth century].[23] The conflict which broke out among the Basotho of Vereeniging and Evaton between 1944-7, for example, followed these lines. Beginning when 'People from Peete's place used to beat young men from my (Hlalele's) village in Basutoland' it gradually broadened until Hlalele and his Matsieng faction had to seek refuge in Newclare, where they later came to constitute the most violent and predatory Russian gang of them all.[24]

It seems hardly conceivable that similar rivalries did not lurk below

the surface of Benoni's Basotho community, providing fertile ground on which Lihloka could work.

A second and more immediate source of conflict among Benoni's Russians centred on the administration of the fund which had been placed under Mabiloko's control. What Mabiloko and other Russians had neglected to mention to the police when they had confided in them their opponents transgressions was that the principal purpose of the fund was to bail out Russians arrested by the police for robbery, public violence and murder and to provide them with the best and least principled legal counsel available. As we shall see later on in this paper very large sums were collected for these purposes whose disposition even in the most propitious of circumstances was likely to evoke suspicions. In Mabiloko's case these hardened into firm conviction after a group of Benoni's Russians were despatched early in 1949 to recover Hlabatusi's wife who had absconded to Kroonstad with a lover. This group was arrested for trespass on the evening of its arrival before it was able to carry out its mission, and immediately summonsed headquarters in Benoni to furnish the necessary money to provide admissions of guilt/or bail. Help was quickly forthcoming but was, according to Isaac Mogkape, dispersed on a patently discriminatory basis, with the bulk of Molapo being bailed out and many Matsieng being left to languish in gaol. This not surprisingly 'caused hard feelings, and manifested itself in the conflict between the Molapo and Matsieng'.[25] Almost identical reasons underlay an equally convulsive split between Sotho and Hlubi Russians in Newclare early in 1952[26] which will be the subject of closer analysis later on in this paper.

Once this factional polarisation had taken place it quickly spread to all other areas where Basotho migrants and immigrants were congregated and where the same latent rivalries were present. 'Shortly after my arrival in Newclare, battle erupted between the Matsieng and Molapo factions' Hlalele recalls, and the same pattern reproduced itself in Pimville, Orlando, Moroka, Evaton and most other parts of the Reef. By the early 1950's there was scarcely a Reef township that was untouched by the fighting, which very often reached extraordinary intensity, involving up to 1 000 combatants at any one time. The following list gives some idea of the extent of conflict in Newclare which was one of the areas where the fighting was worst (see Table I).

While fighting between the rival Basotho factions continued to absorb most of the energies of the Russians, the rest of the black population of the Reef by no means escaped unscathed. At one point or another Russian gangs seem to have collided with or molested virtually every identifiable section of the Reef's black urban population, but the two groups with whom they most conspiculously and regularly clashed were 'Nguni' speaking migrant workers, and those sections of second generation black urban residents whom the Russians could associate with tsotsis or city slickers. In Benoni's Tent Town a fresh round of disturbances broke out between the Russians and Tent Town's Xhosa inhabitants in August 1949, while in October 1950 a bloody and celebrated clash took place between the Russians and Zulu migrant workers from Benoni hostel and the Dunswart Iron and Steel Works which has acquired epic and almost legendary proportions in the recollections of Benoni's black residents of the time.[27] Elsewhere, in December 1951 a fight broke out at Orlando shelters between the Russians, and Zulu and other supporters of Mpanza in which 10 people died and 152 were injured, while in September 1955 pitched battles between Russians and Zulu migrants in Dube and Meadowlands townships around Dube hostel left 40 people killed and scores more seriously injured.[28] These, it may be added, account for only the most celebrated episodes which were so gory or violent that they were forced to the attention of the authorities or the press. Countless other

TABLE I: RUSSIAN CLASHES IN NEWCLARE 1953-1957

Date	Number of Police Involved	Number of Russians Involved	Dead	Wounded	Arrested
25. 8.53	50	200	1	1	13
4. 5.54	36	150		9	11
19. 5.54	62	100		9	24
30. 5.54	39	100		8	
13. 6.54	17	40		6	8
4. 7.54	61	200	1	11	26
22. 9.54	90	400		4	
6.10.54	42	500	2	14	
20.10.54	24	200		3	
21.10.54	69	500		1	8
25.10.54	47	700		5	
30.10.54	22	200	1	5	
5. 6.55	53	400	1	14	31
12. 6.55	30	1 000		5	30
18. 9.55	26	200			62
27.11.55	5	70		5	3
3.12.55	18	300		2	2
7. 2.55	32	400		4	
9.12.55	16	300	1	4	
9. 9.56	43	800	1	26	
7.12.56	11	200	1	5	
25.12.56	16	100		13	
30.12.56	3	300			2
30.12.56	23	500		4	
17. 1.57	3	30		3	1
20. 1.57	18	500		5	
23. 1.57	18	200			
23. 1.57	12	1 000		19	
27. 1.57	19	1 000	1	39	3
3. 2.57	31	500	1	30	
10. 2.57	153	20	1	87	26
Total fights	1 079	11 110	12	345	250

ethnic skirmishes studded this period which only careful research can unearth, breeding attitudes of deep apprehension and resentment among much of the Reef's migrant population.

Other groups who found themselves caught up in brawling encounters with the Russians were sections of the Reef's more settled urban population. The Russians harboured a deep-seated antipathy for urban youth, whom they generally equated with tsotsis and whom they viewed as being without culture or principle. The Russians' prejudices, though misguided, were not entirely without foundation. Benoni, ex-tsotsi, P.P., for example, recalls

> 'When you see a migrant worker having a long stick on his shoulder and having all his necessary possessions other job seekers would rob him.'[29]

and this was an attitude that the Russians understandably resented. Whether on the streets or the trains they were thus prone to take reprisals against those whom they took to be tsotsis, and often not in the most discriminating fashion, so that hapless urban workers could sometimes find theselves victims of unprovoked assaults.[30]

A further point of friction with the urban population was the Russians' practice of levying contributions from their constituents to meet their legal costs. The indications are that this practice, having started in Benoni in 1948, spread itself to Pimville, Newclare and probably elsewhere on the Reef in the course of the same year.[31] These collections lent themselves easily to abuse. Rantoa recalls

> 'At the beginning we would ask this money from Basotho only. Later we realised that we were protecting the people of different ethnic groups who were not contributing to the collections. Then the collection was extended to everybody who stayed in the same area irrespective of ethnicity.'[32]

On the basis of this kind of rationale all Basotho, all those married to Basotho[33] or the entire population in a given area could find themselves subject to such demands. Those refusing were liable to experience eviction, robbery or assault.[34] In January 1950, for example, a group of Russians were reported as forcing their way into the houses of residents of Moroka East, demanding protection money and assaulting their inhabitants.[35] Again in May of the same year 1 000 residents of Pimville assembled to protest about the same kind of depredations by Russians. Similarly, in December 1950, the Molapo faction of the Russians were reported as terrorising Benoni's Tent Town residents and demanding money for those arrested after the murder of a white police sergeant in Tent Town earlier that year,[36] while in May 1952 500 residents of Newclare South were forcibly evicted by Hlalele's Matsieng faction following their refusal to continue to pay into Hlalele's fund.[37]

A clamour of protest rose up as such practices became more regular and prevalent, culminating in an anguished memorandum being sent by the Joint Advisory Boards of Johannesburg's locations to the Ministers of Justice and Native Affairs in February 1951. The crime situation it asserted

> 'has now reached a climax. The extent of the reign of terror among the African people whether in the house, in the street, in the train or bus, or whether in day time or night time cannot be adequately expressed. Men, women and children are not safe and live in constant fear of loss of life and/or property as a result of the activities of these Russian, Japanese and/or tsotsi gangsters.'[38]

In a number of areas an outraged citizenry sought to band themselves together in civilian guards to resist the twin menaces of tsotsis and Russians. Civilian guards had been sanctioned by the government in 1942 when it was confronted by a mounting crime wave in the urban areas and a depleted police force drained by the demands of the war.[39] Such bodies were, however, always regarded with a certain degree of suspicion by the police who saw them as a potential power base for local warlords, and political brokers , and even criminals, who could as easily use them to subvert the order they were supposed to maintain.[40] The latter, predictably, was the view the Russians found convenient to hold. In Newclare where the Russians and Civilian Guards first seriously squared up against each other, the Russians claimed that the Civilian Guard had been infiltrated by tsotsis who were using it as a cover for indiscriminate attacks on anyone speaking Sesotho or wearing a blanket.[41] In February 1952

the Russians retaliated and a vicious vendetta soon ensued which divided Newclare into two warring parts: Newclare South (Sitekekeng) where the Basotho lived and the Russians held sway, and Newclare North over which (especially) Tswana and Zulu speakers, and in general a more settled urban population, had secured control.[42] Further conflicts between the Russians and civilian guards flared up elsewhere on the Rand, most notably in Germiston in 1955, while what was in many ways an analagous clash erupted during the Evaton bus boycott of 1957.[43] All of these, moreover, acquired ethnic and political inflections, which will be discussed in the final part of this paper.

An Explanation

As the foregoing survey should have shown, the Russians were an exceptionally violent and dislocative presence on the Rand. The question which this obviously prompts is 'why was it Basutoland specifically that produced such a group?'. This is something that cannot be answered in isolation. Particular features of the Russians appear to be associated with particular aspects of Basotho society, but to establish these connections with any certainty, it is necessary to look at other labour exporting areas of southern Africa to ascertain whether similar structures or experiences yielded similar results, or whether different combinations of factors produced similar features to those displayed in the Russian gangs. Such an exercise is beyond the scope of this paper, and it is debatable whether the data for such an exercise yet exists. All that is attempted in this section are, therefore, a few partial but hopefully suggestive comparisons.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature about Basotho workers in this period is that they were experiencing a transition from migrant to immigrant status. Statistics reveal a sharply climbing number of Basotho migrants to South Africa in the middle decades of the century (see Table II) but fail to disclose the number that had been absent for lengthy periods of time or had finally severed their links with the land.

TABLE II: BASOTHO MIGRANTS TO SOUTH AFRICA 1921-1956

Year	Males	Females
1921	37 827	9 314
1936	78 604	22 669
1946	95 697	32 331
1956	112 790	41 992

Source: Murray, Families Divided, p.4.

Less quantifiable data nevertheless suggests that between the 1930's and 1950's this was happening on a proportionately larger scale among the Basotho than among any other identifiable group from the black reserves in South Africa or from South Africa's neighbouring states. Basotho immigrants, for example, figured disproportionately prominently in the tide of squatter movements which swept over the Rand immediately following the Second World War. Three of the major squatter settlements which sprang up around Johannesburg in the late 1940's were Basotho led and predominantly Basotho in composition, prompting a bout of ethnic paranoia amongst the officials of the Johannesburg City Council. 'Apart from the fact that the vast majority of the participants in these movements are Basuto', Manager of

Non-European Affairs, W.J.P. Carr, complained 'the fact emerges that with one exception ... the leaders have been Basutos, and usually natives who can be classified as genuine Basutoland tribal natives.'[44] Benoni's Tent Town, which is the only major squatter camp for which a detailed census appears to have survived, likewise housed more Basotho from Basutoland than any discretely identifiable ethnic group.[45] Still more conspicuous was the number of Basotho women that moved singly and more or less permanently to the various urban areas of South Africa, and particularly to the Rand. This is an issue which I have treated more extensively elsewhere, and all that requires mention at the present juncture is that the concensus among officials was that this was not paralleled in any other black 'reserve' in southern Africa.[46]

It is the argument of this paper that it was the scale and rapidity of this transition from migrant to immigrant status that was responsible for the development of the Russians but before embarking on that discussion it is still necessary to pose the prior question 'why was this happening to the Basotho at this time and at this rate?'.

Economic factors almost certainly provide a central part of the answer. As Murray, among others, has shown Basutoland's economy entered a period of deep distress in the early 1930's when the effects of a rapidly climbing population, mounting land shortage and accellerating soil exhaustion were compounded by the onset of an unprecedentedly savage drought. Maize production slumped, never to recover, livestock holdings collapsed, and Basutoland for the first time turned into a net importer as opposed to a net exporter of grain. The effects of these pressures were not uniformly felt, as Murray again is at pains to point out. A growing gulf was developing between rich and poor households in the territory while within individual households younger sons were having to wait longer and longer before they gained independent access to land. As a result the sons of a growing number of commonomer households had to make do with land holdings of 4 acres or less while many were unable to enter into even this meagre patrimony until the age of 35 or more.[47]

Such economic pressures undoubtedly contributed to the growing exodus of Basotho migrants to South Africa, but they still do not necessarily offer a complete explanation of why so many of such migrants failed to return. Other black rural societies which were not conspicuously better off than Basutoland (e.g. the Transkei and Sekhukhuneland) managed to keep themselves to a much greater extent intact on the basis of a still viable migrant labour system.[48] Other factors it would seem need to be taken into account. One important difference between Basutoland and the rest of the labour reserves in and around the Union of South Africa was the ease with which a customarily sanctioned marriage could occur. In contrast to other parts of the sub-continent where anything between 4 and 12 cattle were normally demanded as bridewealth, in Basutoland bridewealth levels stood at 20 cattle or more. Such inflated levels of bridewealth required prospective suitors to engage in lengthy periods of migrant labour, even when their families could contribute part of the price. These problems were seriously exacerbated by the drought of 1932-3.[49] Cattle holdings plunged and had not recovered their 1921 levels by 1976.[50] Young men had to spend correspondingly longer periods at work. For many men marriage was deferred till the age of 30 or 35, which provided an additional disincentive against return. One alternative to which young men increasingly resorted was the abduction of brides and the payment of a lesser number of cattle in compensation. Even then the money for the cattle still had to be earned and the full price still had to be paid if a husband was to enjoy complete

rights over his wife and his children. Where the latter did not occur, migrant husbands once again had less incentive to return.[51] Such problems served to weaken many migrants' attachments to their families and their homes, and led to a mounting incidence of deserted wives. Faced with the prospect of destitution many wives abandoned in this fashion set out themselves to the employment centres of South Africa either to track down their absent husbands, or to become independent bread winners themselves, through petty trading, beer-brewing or prostitution. Once engaged in such occupations these women were far less likely than their husbands to return to their homes and rapidly swelled the number of Basotho immigrants to the Rand. The presence of large numbers of 'unattached' Basotho women on the Rand, in turn, acted as a further attraction to Basotho migrants on the Rand. Many established relationships with such women, which even when impermanent, left them less and less inclined to return home.

A further solvent of Basotho society at this time was the rise of secondary industry in South Africa especially on the Rand. Between 1933 and 1946 the number of industrial establishments rose from 6 543 to 9 999, creating a steadily increasing demand for semi-skilled, and, as many argue, non-migrant labour. These facts are well-known as is the presumed connection between this and the growth of a permanently settled black urban population. Yet in the case of Basotho workers, and probably most other sections of the black working class the connection between industrialisation and urbanisation was not as direct and mechanistic as most writers (including myself) have previously suggested. Basotho migrants, it is true, did enter secondary industry in large numbers in this period, and many proceeded to sever their links with the land, but this had little to do with the expansion of semi-skilled work. The typical trajectory for Basotho workers in this period was still to begin their working life by taking a 'join' to the mines (usually straight after their initiation ceremonies were complete). To begin with this seems to have represented the limit of their horizons. S. Pelanyane's response to his first job on the mines is in this respect typical and at first sight confounds conventional wisdom about the costs and hardships of migrant labour on the mines.

> 'I wouldn't say I had problems; in fact it was wonderful, earning some money. At home I would be given five shillings a month and not even regularly, and now I was earning £3 a month. I thought, hell, there is a lot of money here in Gauteng .... I mean I could buy Khakhi trousers for four shillings, a lamb's head for a penny, and cigarettes for a shilling.'

On this rendering Pelanyane's childhood was relatively prosperous. Most of his contemporaries went penniless and in rags. For them their first trip to the mines bestowed a veritable cornucopia of wealth.

After sampling a number of other mines, Pelanyane

> 'realised that the mines are all the same: you still get the same old conditions where you stay in the compounds (and), get given the same bad food.'

He, therefore, decided to look for a better-paying job in the neighbouring firms. In common with most Basotho ex-miners, Pelanyane's first job was in the heavy engineering sector shunned by those reared in the towns. The work was arduous and unskilled and was characterised by an enormously high turn-over of labour. In this respect it was no different from the bulk of the jobs open to black workers in secondary industry a good 60% of which remained unskilled throughout the 1950's.[52] In the case of Pelanyane, and

countless other Basotho workers - who as a group were in great demand in heavy industry because of their supposed propensity for hard manual work - the need for a more stable semi-skilled labour force thus had little to do with the decision to settle in the towns.[53]

Like many other Basotho workers in secondary industry Pelanyane's entry was smoothed by the relaxation of the pass laws which took place during the Second World War. Pelanyane remained unemployed for six months after leaving the mines, but was still able to live with his brother in the Asiatic quarter of Benoni without suffering harassment from the police. An even more common mode of entry into secondary industry employed by Basotho ex-miners at the time was to sleep at the local pass office until home-boy networks succeeded in delivering a job.[54]

As with most other new Basotho entrants into industry, there is nothing to indicate that Pelanyane had any intention of settling permanently in the towns. That shift seems to have occurred imperceptibly and in an almost involuntary fashion. To begin with Pelanyane, along with many other of his fellow workers, retained his links to the countryside, remitting money to his family and periodically returning home. However, in the face of the many temptations of urban life, that resolve gradually crumbled away. One important difference between working in secondary industry and working on the mines was that no structured mechanisms existed for remitting money back home, so that there was a built in temptation to allow remittances to falter or lapse.[55] Urban living also served in other ways to hasten the breakdown of the encapsulated migrant networks that had been sustained on the mines. A key component of many migrant cultures on the mines was a deep suspicion of urban life and particularly of urban women. Migrant workers were urged to keep within relatively closed migrant networks and not to expose themselves to the physical and moral contamination of the towns. Mpondo, Xhosa and Pedi migrants who have thus far been most intensively studied seem to have largely succeeded in this endeavour.[56] Basotho miners by contrast never sealed themselves off to quite the same extent as their fellow migrants from these areas. They were prone to gravitate in larger numbers to the less regulated parts of the urban locations, and seem to have been disproportionately involved in the urban 'faction fights' which broke out.[57]

This pattern was reproduced once the Basotho and other ex-miners moved into secondary industry. While Pedi workers, for example, quarantined themselves in hostels and succeeded in maintaining their migrant networks relatively intact, Basotho migrants flooded towards the least controlled parts of the urban locations, and entered into a variety of temporary or semi-permanent relations with urban women. Delius and Mayer attribute this orientation of Pedi and Xhosa migrants to the effectiveness of rural youth socialisation, particularly through circumcision.[58] Addressing a slightly different issue, Beinart makes a similar point, viewing the rise of the Mpondo youth gang, the <u>indlavini</u> as being occasioned by the absence of such a mechanism to instil respect for traditional hierarchies and values.[59] Yet even in the absence of circumcision, Mpondo migrants still seem to have maintained their distance from urban life and to have practiced their gang activities in the rural areas and in the compounds, as opposed to in the towns.[60] Conversely, the Basotho, among whom circumcision retained its traditional vitality became more and more embroiled in urban life and eventually gave birth to the Russians.[61] Here, the only obvious reason that can be advanced for the difference is the presence in the urban areas of ever-growing numbers of 'unattached' Basotho women. It was their presence which ensured that so many Basotho men were 'lost' to the towns; and it was their independence which helped generate the gang phenomenon of the Russians.

Basotho women seem to have figured in almost all the early conflicts of

the Russians. In Vereeniging, Hlalele tells us the conflicts in 1944-47 were prompted when men from Peete's area started 'beating our brothers and taking our wives'. Those involved, it may be added, were new recruits to secondary industry, Hlalele himself had recently arrived to work in 'Warm Pipe' in Vereeniging after leaving Brakpan's State Mines.[62] In Benoni, the issue was even more clear-cut. Here the Russians were formed by those Basotho working in secondary industry and living in the Asiatic area of Benoni expressly for the purpose of retaining control over their women in the face of Basotho intruders from the mines. In response, as we have seen, the miners formed thier own gang, the Japanese. The genesis of the Russians at the intersection between migrant and immigrant ways of life could not be more plain. Within this context, however, the immigrant element soon became ascendent. The aftermath of the Second World War witnessed a massive and ongoing exodus of workers into secondary industry from the mines, spurred on by the suppression of the 1946 strike, and in the Near East Rand by the closure of several mines.[63] Between 1946 and 1948 the numbers of Basotho miners on the Rand dropped from 55 136 to 27 672 after having stood at 47 029 in 1936. The number of Basotho workers in secondary industry, by contrast, had grown to 23 578 in 1946 and were rapidly climbing up.[63a] Thus, by early 1948 the Japanese were already based in Benoni's squatter camp, Tent Town, rather than on the mines and the centre of gravity of the conflict had shifted decisively to the towns.[64] It was perhaps an implicit recognition of this that persuaded the Japanese to relinquish their name, and to fight instead over the possession of the common name, the Russians.[65]

The sudden surge of immigration to the towns during and immediately after the Second World War soon led to a desperate shortage of housing, and prompted a series of squatter movements to spring up all over the Rand. The growth of a settled Basotho immigrant community, and the evolution of the Russians was intimately caught up with this development. One of the many ironies of this period is that once the Nationalist government had accepted the need to stabilise a significant portion of its black urban population it poured the bulk of its available resources into 'site and service' programmes for ex-squatter settlements and thereafter so called 'economic housing schemes', and for a period neglected hostel construction.[66] Access to accommodation either in the old site and service settlements or the new economic housing schemes was conditional on being married, which placed many migrants in the indivious position of striking up a temporary relationship with a woman in the towns or finding space in either illegal or highly congested accommodation elsewhere. Some groups (like sections of the Pedi and Zulu) managed to negotiate this transition by staking out claims in the overcrowded company and municipal hostels that were dotted across the Rand, within which they continued to insulate their lives from the corrosive influences of the towns.[67] Basotho migrants, by contrast, needed no bidding to flood into the site and service settlements and the other less controlled residential areas of the Rand. Liaisons contracted in the course of such a move, often no doubt intended as temporary, acted as an additional drain on the migrant's resolve to maintain links with his home, while the generally less encapsulated urban living drove further bridgeheads into the migrant cultures which had been fashioned on the mines.

Within this new environment two new arenas of conflict emerged, the first in the squatter settlements, the second in the less controlled black residential areas such as the black freehold areas of Newclare and Evaton, and the Asiatic section of Benoni. While Basotho women were generally as fulsome in their tributes to the squatter leaders as the rest of the camps' female populations, their menfolk were often much less keen. 'The Russians refused to join Mpanza', Rantoa tells us

> 'because it was clearly stated that we did not have to join somebody because he had done something good for us.'[68]

The basic problem was that they were in competition for the same things. Whereas the squatter leaders levied fees to administer the camps they set up, the Russians exacted contributions to cover their legal costs. Whereas one of the principal functions of the squatter leaderships was to police the communities that they had founded, the Russians insisted on administering their own brand of rough justice themselves. Finally, whereas many 'unattached' Sotho women saw the camps and their leaders as a means of gaining a measure of security independent of men, one of the principal objects of the Russians was to re-establish male control. Except where Russian leaders set up their own squatter settlements, violent struggles for ascendency could scarcely be avoided. Mention has already been made of the bloody Christmas Day battle in Orlando Shelters in 1950, but our best documented example comes from the squatter settlement of Tent Town near Benoni. Founded by a Mpanza-like figure called Harry Mabuya in 1945, it soon became the centre of the so-called Japanese gang as they moved off Benoni's mines. From then on Tent Town found itself repeatedly the scene of violent conflicts first between the Japanese and the Russians and then between the Molopo and Matsieng.[69] As the level of violence heightened it also found itself subject to forced levies of money to pay for the Russian's legal defence. Not surprisingly this resolved itself into a battle for control. Mpanza and his committee set up a civilian guard comprising mostly of Xhosa in 1950, and then took the decision to take the battle to their opponents' camp. Molapo leader, Pokone, recalls

> 'He (Maboya) came along with his civil guards to my tent. He wanted by blood, but he couldn't find me. You see, I knew they wanted to strike that day. As they were busy destroying my tent, I was watching with my boys. I was in hiding. He was commanding while in his car and focussing his lights on my tent.'[70]

However, neither Maboya nor the Xhosa were any match for the Russians and after a violent battle in which they were heavily defeated the Russians again enjoyed a free run of the camp.

An analogous set of conflicts emerged in the Asiatic area of Benoni and the black freehold township of Newclare. One of the first conflicts in Benoni, in which a distinctively (though proto-) 'Russian' flavour was present, occurred in 1945, when Basotho migrants and immigrants fought a pitched battle against African 'watchmen' of Indian houses and rented shanties, and against other black residents of the area. Control over space, to all appearances, underlay this battle, which seems to have been shot through with a strong resident/immigrant tension. A similar set of causes appear responsible for the rise of tension in Newclare township, which erupted in protracted conflict between 1950 and 1957, which there is no space to discuss in any detail here.[71] To sum up then control over space and accommodation in a period or rapid immigration was a major concern of the Russians, and was a factor in many of the more bloody clashes in which they were embroiled.

An Anatomy

The Russians emerged out of a transition from migrant to immigrant life on the Rand. In common with other migrant societies, their lifestyle and practices were inbued with rural values, and their identities were powerfully stamped by their experiences of rural youth socialisation. Virtually every single Russian interviewed for this study saw a clear continuity between their experiences as herdboys and initiates and their later activities as Russians on the Rand. Maliehe Khoeli is among the most unequivocal in this respect.

> 'Borashea is almost the same thing as lehlankana-poonyane in which a dispute would arise between the boys from one village and those from other villages over grazing rights in the mohoang .... In the mohoang, the boys whose cattle have arrived first would deny those who came late to the grazing rights and they would beat and strike one another. This is what is called haneli (do not graze here).'[72]

Much of the Russian identity was defined by these experiences. The Russians on the Reef were, above all, a fighting machine, and they used the martial skills that they had learnt in their youth to defend new kinds of resources which were a source of dispute - notably, women and urban space. To join the Russians there was no elaborate induction or training. The only laws were to

> 'respond to the whistle, don't rob wives (of other gang members) and obedience to the committee.'[73]

Both membership and advancement depended in large measure on the capacity to fight, and since 'fighting was a skill learned through fighting and nothing else', the Russians recruited from those whose boyhood experiences had taught them how to fight. Both factions were made up of those whose background was that 'of looking after cattle and fighting with sticks'. Eastern Orange Free State Basotho would generally be allowed to join 'because they herded cattle and automatically had experience of fighting'[74] but rarely anyone else. An occasional Pedi, Tswana or Hlubi would be permitted to enlist, but according to Molapo sources, this was more of a Matsieng practice, on which, they imply, they looked down.[75]

Founded on migrancy and fighting the Russians were informed by a strong ethnic sentiment which played a significant role in shaping and hardening ethnic identities on the Reef. Russians associated with fellow Basotho, whom they knew primarily from their own region, or whom they had met on the mines. This latter experience seems to have been particularly influential in forging a chauvinistic ethnic identity. Russian exclusivity and the attacks which they inflicted on others engendered a strong anti-Basotho backlash among many other sections of the Reef's urban population, which was most strikingly apparent in Newclare in the early 1950's, when anyone making the mistake of wearing a blanket or speaking Sesotho was a likely target of robbery or assault by tsotsis and/or the civilian guard.[76] The Russians conversely sought to draw all Basotho living in Newclare into their orbit, if not into their own ranks. Even where actively hostile to the Russians, other Basotho residents were levied for contributions and subjected to great pressure to move from non-Basotho neighbourhoods to the Basotho stronghold of Sitekekeng.[77] A similar process of ethnic polarisation - often under duress - can be traced in Germiston, Benoni and Evaton.[78] In Benoni and Germiston the Basotho clashed repeatedly with those they defined as 'Zulu', 'Xhosa' and 'Mpondo' creating a deep chasm of hostility and misunderstanding with the groups, which even those Basotho who sought to stand aloof from the fighting found it difficult to bridge. Two points of a wider significance emerge from this discussion: firstly the role of communities moving along an axis from migrant to immigrant in urban areas in defining and hardening ethnic divisions, and secondly, the role of ethnic gangs in providing the nucleus and thrust for the growth of destructive ethnic chauvinisms. Neither issue has been accorded much attention in the literature, including the recent collection on African ethnicity edited by Vail.[79] Nevertheless, if one examines the Russians in the context of the studies by Phimister and van Onselen in Zimbabwe, and Troup and Tamarkin in Kenya, they suggest an urban root to ethnicity which has a much greater importance than has hitherto been acknowledged.[80]

While migrant in origin, the Russians were also strongly immigrant and proletarian in character and composition. Rantoa remarks:

'We had three parts. Some tailors (and) gamblers, others on contract (in the factories), others on the mines.'[81]

By far the largest of these categories were those living and employed in the towns. The preponderance of Russian leaders were working in secondary industry (much of it heavy), with the balance self-employed, mainly in tailoring.[82] Their membership, while being regularly replenished and re-inforced from the mines[83] was likewise employed for the most part in secondary industry. This proletarian aspect is reflected in their weekly calendar. Fights - and dances, the other principal Russian entertainment - were confined to the week-ends. In between, Molapo and Matiseng faction members fraternised happily with each other in the firms.

An unexpected feature of the Russians which marks them off sharply from other urban-based migrant associations was their complete absence of concern for their members' families back home. If a member was killed during battle they would collect money to buy a coffin and to pay for his funeral,[84] but would not even bother to notify his wife back home. Nothing could underline more clearly the immigrant perspective of the organisation and of the people that joined. One reflection of this proletarian and immigrant character was that the Russians were overwhelmingly adult in composition. No age cohort dominated, certainly not the youth. Khoeli observes '... it was completely mixed.[85] There was no majority of older or younger people'[86] a profile which the court records confirm. Thus, while emerging out of a youth culture, the Russians, unlike many other gangs on the Rand,[87] in no sense constituted a youth sub-culture themselves.

The immigrant and proletarian character of the Russians also found expression in the internal structure of the organisation. Leadership was based wholly on merit, which was decided primarily by fighting ability, but also by oratory, strategic capacity or guile. No sons of chiefs figured among the leadership of any Russian gangs, and the few that were ordinary members are remembered by name.[88] Leaders were elected, but were allowed to appoint their close lieutenants; among a committee of eight (Deputy, treasurer, vice-treasurer, secretary, vice-secretary and three additional members, including the whistle-blowers). The leader and his lieutenants would take day to day decisions but key issues were referred to the membership at general meetings which took place on the week-ends. At these, the leaders' authority could at any time be revoked, but this often caused division in the gangs, sometimes leading to outright secession.[89] Gangs consisted of anything from 50 to 400 core members but no clear hierarchy existed among the various gangs scattered across the Reef. Newclare and Benoni were the most important centres, and Hlalele claims that Newclare was the headquarters of the Matsieng and that he was overall chief.[90] A degree of precedence may have been accorded, and gangs from one area usually responded to a call for support from another, but there was no clear obligation that this should occur.[91] The Russians could thus be better likened to a confederacy than an empire but one which could act swiftly and effectively when the occasion demanded, as most of the opponents could attest.

The Russians practiced a kind of qualified democracy, but this came to an abrupt halt where women were concerned. Women had no say in Russian councils, played no part in Russian gangs and were viewed primarily as objects to be kept under control. In Russian eyes Basotho women, having tasted independence, were mercenary and fickle. 'Women at that time were enticed by money' Pelanyana asserts. 'If you had money you could have as many women as you wanted', and this is a stereotype that recurs in both vernacular literature and oral testimony.[92] One of the principal objects of the Russians was thus to keep women under control. Where women absconded

they were recovered, if possible, and subjected to brutal reprisals and such incidents were among the most common triggers of Russian fights. The low esteem in which the Russians held urban (Basotho) women led them to treat them very often as little more than a commodity or a resource.[93] Khoeli recalls his induction into the Molapo faction of the Russians

> 'We arrived at Benoni and went to a part of the township called Tent Town. When we got [there] we heard music from the accordion. There was shouting and some of my comrades were singing their praises. In their praises they declared that they were from Molapo village. They were jumping and dancing while they said this ... While watching the spectacle ... Kantini was talking to a woman and at the same time pointing to me. I was soon to find out that he was telling the woman to take me as her man. The woman walked up to me and greeted me. "Hello boy". I: "Hello mother". She asked me my name, I told her. She asked me if I had a wife back at home in Lesotho. I said yes I had a wife. She said: "Oh, I see. Now that you have a wife at home would you not like to have another wife?" I said to her: "No! I don't want another wife." She said: "No, you must have antoher wife here on the Rand otherwise you will not be allowed to dance in this place." "Do you see all these men here?" she asked. "Yes", I said. "All of them have women of their own. All these women have their own men too. You too must have a woman of your own", she said. I asked her: "Where am I supposed to get a woman from?" She said: "I am your woman." I said: "You?" She said: "Yes".'

Indeed, it was not an uncommon Russian practice to seize women by force. Khoeli and others recall Russians simply seizing women with the phrase "Here is the wife of years that I have been looking for".[94] Many Russians would have agreed with the simple philosophy of ex Matsieng Russian leader E. "The only reason that I ever came to be a Russian was that I found it very entertaining. There were many women to be had as a Russian. On the other hand it was also enjoyable to be involved in fights and seeing people die." An occasional Russian woman achieved celebrity status, notably Maepisi in Newclare (whose life was fictionalised in Majora's novel Makotulo) and who was strong enough to seize any man she wanted[95] but these were the proverbial exceptions which proved the rule.

The Russians were clearly male-chauvinists. Running one's finger down the check-list of modern crimes, were they also a-political? The Russians for the most part kept aloof from anything that smacked of modern politics. There energies seem to have been comprehensively absorbed in their Russian fights, their Russian dances and their Russian women. As Russian leader Maliehe Khoeli put it 'I loved the Russians. It was my life. I just was not interested in politics'. But there were other elements within the cultural universe of the Russians which could pre-dispose them to be actively hostile to the ANC or other modern African political organisations, and they found themselves in conflict with such bodies on at least three separate occasions - in Johannesburg's western area of Newclare between 1949 and 1953, in Germiston in 1955, and in Evaton in 1957. I shall concentrate on the first of these episodes as it is most revealing of Russian preoccupations and perceptions.

Initial grounds for some suspicion of the ANC and other kindred African political organisations was their association in the Russian's minds with the settled urban African population. Isaac Mogkupa was probably speaking for many fellow Russians when he reflected

> 'I felt that urban people were never to be trusted. A man would appear as a friend whereas they make you out as a potential prey.'[96]

As Mogkupe's final words suggest the difference in Russian minds between the tsotsis and the rest of the second generation urban population was often simply a matter of degree. Here alone was fertile ground for misunderstanding. This almost visceral mistrust was given apparent substance in Newclare in May 1950. Two months earlier a section of the population of Newclare, comprising mainly of unemployed youths, went on the rampage stoning cars and burning property following the attempted arrest of an African youth on a pass law offence.[97] In what was probably an effort to capitalise on this spirit of defiance the Comunist Party of South Africa (CPSA) leader J.B. Marks, who was a resident of Newclare, issued a call to a May Day meeting that was held in Newclare square for the mass burning of passes. This may have resonated well with Newclare's youth for whom employment and passes were almost impossible to secure but it provoked outrage among Basotho workers, who as citizens of a British Protectorate, were even more dependent than their fellow migrant labourers on possessing the right documentation.[98] For the Russians the association between the political parties and the tsotsi'element' seemed confirmed, and as the Russian leader Hlalele subsequently declared to anyone who would listen, all further co-operation broke down.[99] Open conflict was deferred until late the following year. Then, to curb the depredations of both tsotsis and Russians, the residents of Newclare took the decision to set up a Civilian Guard. This seems to have operated effectively and impartially for the first couple of months but then apparently became slowly infiltrated by tsotsis who began preying on anyone who gave a hint of being Basotho. The Russians were not slow to relatiate, and open war between the north and south of Newclare quickly broke out.[100] As the conflict developed a set of discrete but overlapping categories began to cement themselves solidly together in the collective consciousness of the Russians. The Civilian Guard, supposedly comprised of urbanites and tsotsis, was also depicted as being orchestrated and led by J.B. Marks and the SACP. For good measure, the opposing camp was given an ethnic inflection, being portrayed as flabby urban Tswana, who literally waddled into war.[101]

A further fracture appeared within the ranks of Newclare's African population when the supporters of the Hlubi leader Mmamandinyane Dlamini, who had formerly thrown in his lot with the Russians, were expelled from Newclare South over a leadership dispute (this deserves fuller attention in its own right, which I will give in a separate paper). A variety of other parties now either became involved in or took an interest in the dispute - the Johannesburg City Council, journalists, and clergymen like Father Huddlestone, and it was at this point that Hlalele and his followers began to cement a de facto alliance with the police. He kept up a steady stream of communication with the Newlands police station constantly misleading them as to the nature and course of the dispute. Mmamandinyane and the Civilian Guards were stigmatised as being both pawns of 'the communists' and the perpetual agressors, whereas in fact it was the Russians who usually attacked. Hlalele recounts with a disarming chuckle.

> 'Whenever we felt the urge to fight the civil guards I would go to the police station and report that the civil guards were molesting us. Before I went to the police I would tell my men to be on the alert for a signal from me to attack the civil guards on my return from the police station. I would approach the township in the company of the police and signal my men and a battle would rage.'[102]

Faced by what they imagined were communists and tsotsis, the police were willing dupes and allowed the Russians literally to annex Southern Newclare and inaugurate a reign of terror which lasted another two years.[103] Who was using who in this situation is clearly a matter to debate.

A very similar, though shorter lived, conflagration flared up in Germiston in December 1955. There a Civilian Guard was set up with close links to the local branch of the ANC. Conflict quickly broke out between it and the local Russians, which according to the municipal report 'brought every tsotsi from far and wide to flock to the Civil Guard's banner'.[104] Again a similar logic may well have been at work, although fewer details are known.

On this evidence the Russians were hostile to the kind of politics represented by the ANC, but this did not mean that they were entirely a-political. The Newclare leader Hlalele told a Drum reporter in 1952 'We don't want anything to do with the Congress - we come from Basutoland, which is a Protectorate and we don't belong to the Union'[105] and this suggests a useful insight into the Russian's mentality. Despite their immigrant position they still thought of themselves as extra South African and had not entirely abandoned hope of eventually returning home. Their politics reflected this ambivalence and could thus as easily be centred on Basutoland as the Rand. Rantoa indeed claims that at some point in the early 1950's, the Matsieng faction of the Russians was drawn under the wing of the main nationalist party in Basutoland, the Basutoland Congress Party (BCP).[106] How much substance there is to this claim requires further exploration, and it must remain for the moment in the realm of interesting speculation.

In any case if one wishes to identify the politics of the Russians one probably needs to conceive of politics in a somewhat broader way. Beinart considers the indlavini political because they challenged rural structures of authority, and a similar argument could be applied to the Russians.[107] Although they manipulated the police and were manipulated in turn they nevertheless constituted one of the most serious and enduring challenges to police control on the Rand. In specific circumstances, but in a quite fundamental fashion, they would simply repudiate police authority. M.M., for example is not a-typical:

> 'The police I fought for a long time till they retreated and ran away, shooting at me and I returning the fire back. They would let loose dogs and we would hit them. The reason is that we did not want the police to reach us. If they [did] they would want to search us and find our pistols or revolvers or things like axes and swords. When they found them they confiscated them and arrested you. We did not agree to that so we signed to the effect that we should kill or be killed because we know that we are going to jail.'[108]

Even in the event of being arrested the Russians were exceptionally difficult to convict. Russians hired the best legal advice, and many (most?) Russian gangs had attornies and advocates on permanent retainer whom they could call on at any time day and night. Huge sums of money changed hands as bail or legal fees, and M.M. talks on one occasion of furnishing bail of R1 000 each for 60 men after one particularly bloody massed fight.[109] While Russians had great respect for their lawyers they had little respect for the rest of the apparatus of the law. On one occasion much savoured by Rantoa and confirmed in the Rand Daily Mail the Matsieng faction attacked Malapo prisoners as they were standing trial in Benoni Magistrate's Court in 1947, forcing the magistrate and all the officers of the court into panicky flight.[110] Three years later the Russians attacked and released the Molapo leader Matsarapane, after he had been convicted of the murder of a white police sergeant in Tent Town, Benoni as he was being taken back in the train from the Springs courts to Boksburg gaol.[110] Matsorapane was spirited away by taxi to Basutoland (other Russians likewise had fleets of taxis on retainer) only to be rearrested three months later

(and subsequently hanged) when he made the mistake of returning to South Africa.[111] Slightly less dramatic examples of contempt and defiance of the law could be multiplied many times over and it is a tribute to Russian guile and duplicity that they could manipulate the police at all.

By way of concluding this paper a note of caution should be sounded. Russian gangs did not always conform to an idential pattern but varied over space and over time. Many Russians admit that even from the beginning a section of their membership were little more than common criminals and thieves. As time went on, most old timer Russians agree, the behaviour of 'the younger generation' grew steadily worse. M.M. lends some credence to these claims, when asserting that his (Masupha) faction in Newclare introduced the use of pistols and revolvers on a much larger scale than earlier on (something confirmed in the police record) and would happily kill a fallen opponent, which, as Rantoa and others make clear, had been something frowned on before. By the late 1950's and early 1960's it is also apparent that the Russians' wings were slowly being clipped. The closer policing of passes as well as other aspects of urban life left them much less rooom to manoervre. It should not be thought, nevertheless, that the Russians now constitute no more than an historical byway or curiosity for as recently as January 19th a newspaper report speaks of 'violence last week-end (in Carletonville's township) between youths and a vigilante group known as the "Russians" who activists claim are working with the police'.[111] One can only imagine what complex dynamics this conceals.