

OLIVER TAMBO AND THE GHOST OF STRUGGLE PAST*

Loose standing questions on historical remembrance or preferred
ignorance

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On 11 April 1993 SACP leader Chris Hani died after he had been shot four times. His death at the hands of a rightist immigrant sent shock waves throughout the unstable New South Africa. As political parties called for calm, citizens pondered whether the proverbial papaw had now finally struck the fan. And also who was this man whose death created such a grand ruckus? His funeral broadcast on SATV was a memorable event. Emotions ran high at the epic funeral and South Africa was more or less brought to a rather rambling standstill. Suddenly even the most politically ignorant of South Africans now surely had to know and remember the name - Chris Hani.¹

When did Oliver Tambo die?

When asking most people they will almost certainly have to think about it or have no idea whatsoever. So too, when asking most young South Africans irrespective of colour if they know who Oliver Reginald Tambo was, they might very well not have a clue.

Tambo or Comrade OR as he was popularly known, was born in the eastern Cape in 1917. He went to a local Methodist missionary school and was later schooled at the Holy Cross missionary school in Johannesburg. A devout Christian, Tambo considered becoming a priest, but eventually chose a career in Law after he had completed a B.Sc. degree and taught at St. Peter's School. After some prompting by Walter Sisulu, Tambo embarked upon becoming a lawyer. Eventually he practiced law with his close friend Nelson Mandela. During 1944 Tambo became one of the ANC Youth League's (ANCYL) founding members. Immediately

* In *A Christmas Carroll* by Charles Dickens the salty old Scrooge is visited by the ghosts of Christmas Past, Present and Future.

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¹ D Nelson, *The miracle of a freed nation* (Cape Town 1994), pp.95-7.

the young heads of the ANCYL criticized the mother organization's leadership. They argued that the ANC had not nearly become a mass organization and that its leaders' weak management was to be blamed.

During about the same period the SACP and the Transvaal and Natal Indian Congress wanted to forge closer ties with the ANC. The organization's top structure was most susceptible but Tambo and his youth leaders felt that the ANC should retain its Africanism and tried to block this. Tambo et al. even tried, unsuccessfully, to force African communists to resign from the SACP if they wanted to remain part of the ANC. Later, when Tambo's group strongly favoured more radical anti-apartheid projects but was restrained by some ANC top executives, they found vigorous support in the SACP group and so accepted the communists' friendly advances for closer co-operation.²

In 1949 Tambo became a member of the ANC's national executive body and between 1955-1958 served as secretary general. A year later Hendrik Verwoerd promulgated the Law on Unlawful Organizations with which Pretoria turned its focus on the ANC. The ANC ordered Tambo out of the country to secure the organization in exile. After Tambo had left the country Pretoria tried once and for all to rid itself of the ANC, the SACP and the PAC. The ANC admitted that the South African government had succeeded in delivering the organization a devastating blow. During a special crisis meeting convened in Tanzania in 1969 almost a decade after he had left South Africa, Tambo was finally elected to succeed Albert Luthuli as ANC president.

ANC president Tambo had a daunting task ahead of him. After the dramatic Rivonia Treason Trials many prominent ANC leaders were lost to the organization. Furthermore Tambo had to reconcile and prevent frustrations and infighting from further undermining his already badly shaken organization. He moved the ANC's permanent headquarters to Zambia, and there established a revolutionary council in an attempt to revive and keep the struggle focussed on South Africa.³

Tambo was the chairman of the revolutionary council.

In a drive to internationalize the anti-apartheid struggle, Tambo met with almost every government on earth over the next decades - except South Africa's. He met and spoke to almost anybody across the globe about his drive against apartheid and the Nationalist government. Again and again he repeated the standpoint put

² A Nolan, "A thorn in the side of any oppressor", *Challenge*, October/November 1992, p. 8; C van Wyk & L Callinicos, *They fought for freedom - Oliver Tambo* (Durban 1994), pp. 18-9, 21, 27.

³ T Molefe et al., *Hulle het ons eeu gevorm* (Cape Town, 1999), pp. 136-43.

forward at the World Council of Churches: "We are committed to the struggle to overthrow the racist Pretoria regime, the transfer of power to all the people under a system of one person one vote in a unitary South African state..."⁴ By the late 1980s Tambo had established diplomatic offices in some 25 countries in Europe, Australia, the Americas, Africa and Asia.⁵ In many cases abroad, official requests for visits by Pretoria's officials were turned down, while Tambo got special treatment. So, for example, in 1984 a formal request by Pretoria for the then prime minister, PW Botha, to pay an official visit to France, was turned down by the French government. But the ANC president Oliver Tambo was formally invited by the French government to visit the country and conduct talks with the minister of foreign affairs. During the same year British opposition leader, Neil Kinnock, met with Tambo and publicly stated that should his Labour Party win the elections, his government would strengthen ties with the ANC and supply financial and material support.⁶

And always, wherever he went, Tambo would beat the sanctions drum. When he was confronted with the fact that black South Africans had the most to lose, he endlessly repeated his viewpoint that if black South Africans were prepared to die and be jailed, a little more suffering under sanctions would not make a world of difference. "If our people are prepared to die and go to jail to end apartheid", Tambo once told *Newsweek*, "do you really think that they will worry that sanctions, which they know hurt the regime, will cause them a little more hunger and lose some of them the miserable jobs they are now allowed to have?"⁷

His stance on sanctions and the overall drive to isolate South Africa were clear cut and could be understood as well as expected, but one of the issues which tested and taxed the ANC president's skill as a leader, strategist, spin-doctor and diplomat, was the *armed struggle*.

Oliver Tambo summed up the struggle by saying that two sectors of struggle were combined: armed struggle and political action. These two complimented and supplemented each other. The one was impossible without the other... This was the general strategy until the beginning of the eighties.

⁴ O Tambo, "Oliver Tambo se toespraak", *Die Suid-Afrikaan*, Augustus 1990, pp. 12-3.

⁵ C Cooper et al., *Race Relations Survey 1987/88* (Johannesburg, 1988), p. 701.

⁶ T Clifton et al., *Race Relations Survey 1984* (Johannesburg, 1988), p. 701.

⁷ C Cooper et al., "We will expect a blood bath", *Newsweek*, Vol. CVI, No. 12, 12 September 1985, pp. 16-7.

During the eighties the result of this strategy began to turn. In 1980 in particular the level of mass mobilization shot up with the involvement of the students and various activities that took place. The Freedom Charter strikes against economical installations, for example SASOL, were engaged in strengthening political action, by way of embarking on carefully timed, carefully selected targets.⁸

He continued: "As anyone interested in apartheid history surely knows, is that ever since the ANC embarked upon its *armed struggle*, it repeatedly pointed out to its critics that it had held back and had restrained itself to sabotage attacks on government installations." By the mid-1980s this of course had changed dramatically. The armed struggle and specifically attacks aimed at civilian or so-called *soft targets* blemished the ANC's stature as peace loving freedom fighters, especially outside the country. In effect the armed struggle threatened to jeopardize the ANC's moral high ground it had in the eyes of the world. Not surprisingly Tambo was increasingly being pressured to explain the ANC's reasoning on this. Tambo had a tough time balancing his organization's diplomatic appearance internationally and the ANC's military strategy. He said: "We who have been the victims of violence for centuries know its true meaning. Our own experience has taught us to hate violence. It was to terminate the violence against our people, which is inherent in white minority domination, that the ANC was formed."⁹

In 1987 British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher created a stir when she referred to Tambo as a "terrorist".¹⁰ Tambo's views on this issue is best depicted in a 1985 interview: "Now, the other aspect of being terrorists: Again, there is a lot of exaggeration about this terrorism. Long before we had injured a soul, when we were very, very careful in our sabotage actions to avoid hurting anybody, and that is what we have been doing for the past 20 years now...even when we started, this was called terrorism. We could have been terrorists if we had wanted to, but we chose not to be...We started in 1961 and 20 years later you get a bomb exploding. We could have done this much, much earlier...We did not want to be seen as terrorists...And we have been notoriously restrained in our armed actions - notoriously." Fair enough, but then there was the hyper sensitive issue of *soft targets*. Being confronted with the issue of *soft targets*, Tambo would immediately argue that that question had been completely "exaggerated out of all proportion".

⁸ Video documentary: *MK - the people's army*. ANC Dept. of Info & Publicity 1993. Directed and produced by Zeth Makgetla.

⁹ O Tambo, "Oliver Tambo se toespraak", *Die Suid-Afrikaan*, August 1990, pp. 12-3.

¹⁰ Molefe, p. 138.

Drawing a comparison between police brutalities Tambo said "...they were hitting soft targets". "If we stop," he said in the same 1985 interview, "we stop. But if we are in struggle and we feel the demand of the situation is that we struggle, then we must intensify that struggle. We have held back for too long." Tambo also added as an afterthought, but quite adamantly, that as far as soft targets go, his bombers would single out security personnel and not indiscriminately kill civilians.¹¹

On 7 September 1985 Oliver Tambo delivered his Radio Freedom message to the people of South Africa. His dispatch included four words which forever changed the country: "Make the country ungovernable. We cannot and should not allow a situation of relative peace and tranquility to obtain in the white areas of the country while black townships are in flames. We must take the struggle into the white areas of South Africa and there attack the apartheid regime and its forces of repression..."¹²

Two days before Christmas on 23 December 1985 at 11:00, a bomb exploded at an Amanzimtoti shopping centre. The bomb was concealed in a dustbin and detonated while the centre was packed to the brim with Christmas shoppers, holiday-goers and vacationers. Apart from the 54 people of all races who were injured, 6 whites were killed - a two-year old toddler; a seven-year old girl; a sixteen-year old girl; an eight-year old boy and two adult women. One eyewitness said: "It was just too horrible...There were bodies lying mutilated on the ground... Women were running around the place, holding their children, screaming. There were people, children covered in blood."¹³

"The whole South Africa is beginning to bleed in the face of the persistence of the apartheid system and intensification means more of this", a clearly emotional Tambo said at a press conference following the bomb attack. Although the ANC, through its president, took responsibility for the bombing, Tambo added what must have come as a surprise to many: "And if I have been approached by an ANC-unit to ask whether they should go and explode a bomb in a supermarket I would have said 'of course not!'"¹⁴ Still, before anyone could accuse him of having gone soft in the middle, he gave a speech to the Royal Commonwealth Society in London in June 1986, saying: "Prospects of a bloodbath and the reduction of South Africa to a

¹¹ T Heard, *The Cape of storms* (Braamfontein, 1990), pp. 232-3.

¹² H Murray, "To live together or die separately", *Leadership SA*, 1985, Vol. 4, No. 4, pp. 30-5.

¹³ R Van Graan and T Clarke, "Bomb horror - six die in 'Toti blast'", *The Citizen*, 24 December 1985.

¹⁴ Video documentary: VID 1672. Ullbambe Lingashoni - Hold up the sun - the ANC and popular power in the making, episode 5: "Not the kings and the generals - 1983/1990" Director: Mokonyanya Molete (Ster-Kinekor. Copyright: 1993 // Thoron & Thebe).

wasteland will not stop the struggle."¹⁵ Make no mistake, his sorrowful demeanor over the Amanzimtoti blast was no mere *face-saving* technique to minimize public outrage, but in fact the public outflow of a conflict deeply rooted within the ANC hierarchy which reached something of a climax a couple of years later.

During 1988 Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) - the military wing of the ANC - bosses Chris Hani and his friend Steve Tshwete granted a series of interviews with different newspapers, including the influential *New York Times*. They told the foreign journalists that it was time that the ANC should become much more militant and definitely start to focus the scope of the armed struggle on whites. They warned and boasted that they were going to ruin South Africa. Hani argued that legitimate targets included members of Parliament, white policemen and black collaborators and judges "who dish out death sentences to our people". Furthermore military transport planes should be shot down and direct bomb attacks should be launched.

What sounded like typical revolutionary rhetoric was followed by a spate of calculated attacks on soft targets, including the bomb attack on spectators at the Ellis Park sports stadium and other bombings of public places, including restaurants. It was clear that Hani and Tshwete were attempting to steer the ANC away from its official line of policy. Although the ANC's operations did include *soft targets*, it had always held firm that it was not formal Congress policy. It was clear to all that Tambo had two senior MK commanders publicly breaking with procedure. After an attempt by Tambo and other ANC leaders to isolate this faction and curb their influence, had failed, Tambo in an uncharacteristic move for a man who detested to get involved with internal intrigues and infighting, publicly repudiated these men. He denounced the policy of singling out *soft targets* and emphasized that these two were solely speaking on their own behalf and not on that of the ANC. Next he removed Tshwete from his post as MK Political Commissar.¹⁶

Another possible diplomatic calamity for Tambo lay in the so-called *black-on-black* violence between groups who supported either the status quo or the liberation movement, which became one of the predominant features of the political turmoil of the 1980s. Here Tambo was more adamant in his drawing of the battle lines. He explained to the World Council of Churches: "There are some from among the oppressed who have elected to serve on the side of the oppressor, to make their own contribution to the perpetuation of racial tyranny... At the same time we have called

¹⁵ O Tambo, "Oliver Tambo se toespraak", *Die Suid-Afrikaan*, August 1990, pp. 12-3.

¹⁶ S Ellis & T Sechaba, *Comrades against apartheid* (London, 1992), pp. 180-1; CJB le Roux, "The ANC-SACP's political military council - a brief profile of its origin and leadership", *Journal for Contemporary History*, Vol. 19, No. 1, June 1994, pp. 153-4.

repeatedly to those who serve within the machinery of apartheid to terminate such service and to join the struggle for their own liberation. It is clear that there are some who are refusing to listen – who find it right and proper to contribute to the commission of crime against humanity. I do not think that it is expected that we should excuse them simply because they are black. By their actions they have defined themselves as part of the enemy of all humanity."¹⁷

But, as is typical of all that is South African politics, there was a snag. The one political prickly pear was the *necklace* executions. First the ANC condoned it under the banner of *peoples' war*. Necklacing had torn Tambo in two. On the one hand he felt he could not easily condemn it because of Pretoria's own brutality, on the other hand he could not condone it because he was disturbed by the message each necklace sent into the world about the nature of his organization. But when the international community reeled back in utter disgust, the Tambo-led ANC dragged its feet a bit but eventually condemned it.¹⁸

The other issue proved to be almost as notorious, not to mention difficult to control. Winnie Mandela's township endeavours were becoming increasingly erratic and volatile. So much so that it became apparent to different liberation leaders that the movement could no longer be associated with her without losing support both inside the country and abroad.

After her Orlando West house was torched a Mandela Crisis Committee was formed at the behest of Tambo. Officially their task was to assist in restoring her home, unofficially but more important to the ANC, they had to try and tame her and her infamous Mandela United Football Club. As news of Winnie Mandela's worsening behaviour reached Tambo he was apparently aghast and exclaimed: "What must I do? We can't control her. The ANC can't control her. We tried to control her..." Eventually, after their internal branch had disassociated themselves openly from Mrs Mandela, Tambo and the ANC leadership in Lusaka followed suit. Tambo said in a statement: "It is with a feeling of terrible sadness that we consider it necessary to express our reservations about Winnie Mandela's judgement."¹⁹

Zulu orientated IFP strongman, Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, in 1983 spoke out strongly against the ANC. He said that because of the ANC KwaZulu had lost foreign aid which would have been used to uplift his homeland. Furthermore, he said that Tambo was an ineffective leader.²⁰ Some years later Tambo made a

¹⁷ O Tambo, "Oliver Tambo se toespraak", *Die Suid-Afrikaan*. August 1990, pp. 12-3.

¹⁸ H Adam and K Moodley, *The negotiated revolution* (Los Angeles, 1993), p. 161; F Bridgland, *Katiza's Journey* (London, 1997), p. 19.

¹⁹ Bridgland, pp. 80, 83, 119-20.

²⁰ C Cooper et al., *Survey of Race Relations in South Africa 1983* (Johannesburg, 1984), p. 347.

reconciliatory gesture towards the powerful Natal based Zulu leader. In 1988 he suggested to the famed Anglican Archbishop, Desmond Tutu, that he should invite UDF and IFP leaders to a peace meeting. He said that these warring factions should be invited not as representatives of their organizations, but as Christians.²¹ The intense rivalry between the ANC and Buthelezi's IFP is common knowledge. But Buthelezi's criticism of Tambo was not the only black or anti-apartheid voice to have gone up against Tambo and his leadership.

One of the severest points of criticism levelled at Tambo during his almost lifelong term as ANC supremo was the fact that he did not prevent the SACP from gradually taking over his organization. Tambo himself was not a communist, nor did he belong to the SACP. Various people who knew him stressed this fact. Anthony Sampson who first met Tambo when he was still a young lawyer, wrote that the ANC president was "more influenced by Christianity than Marxism."²² Nonetheless it had been pointed out by a wide spectrum of commentators that the SACP succeeded in taking over the ANC bit by bit under the leadership of Tambo. And that Tambo did not or could not stop their advances. By the mid-1970s the communist factions were successfully running the armed struggle, while at the same time increasingly isolating Tambo. An article in *Africa Confidential* in 1990 commented that "the Party quarantined ANC President Oliver Tambo, bestowing upon him an aura of adulation as a successful tactic to manoeuvre him out of the daily life of the ANC by keeping him on an exhausting round of diplomatic visits." According to that article, by 1988 Tambo had lost the ability to effectively steer ANC policy, while at the same time being under increasing challenges from the ranks of younger radicals within the organization.²³

Stephen Ellis and Tsepo Sechaba wrote: "Such criticism must take account of the primacy of the need to hold the organization together through years in the wilderness, when it could so easily have split apart. Tambo's great achievement has always been to maintain unity in the organisation, and this he could not easily have done if he had taken an anti-communist stand, even had it been his inclination to do so. Tambo repeatedly responded to internal crises by seeking conciliation rather than confrontation with the risk of provoking a split." About his personal management style, they wrote that he saw himself as "a chairman, who should not side with different factions, but give a broad sense of direction and keep the movement together. Moreover, he had no taste for the politics of cabals and cliques."²⁴

²¹ C Cooper et al., *Race Relations Survey 1987/88* (Johannesburg, 1988), p. 706.

²² A Sampson, "Putting pressure on Pretoria", *Newsweek*, Vol. CVI, No. 6, 5 August 1985, p. 13.

²³ Le Roux, pp. 153-4.

²⁴ Ellis and Sechaba, p. 41.

Although in practical terms Tambo might not have commanded real inner political power due to factions and communist cliques in the ANC-SACP alliance, the fact of the matter is that according to the world and South Africa, Oliver Tambo was the chief executive of the ANC and its anti-apartheid struggle. Responsibility for the strategies, tactics, methods and pace of the liberation struggle rested squarely on Tambo's shoulders. It was Tambo who had to explain to his followers and world supporters why the organization did or did not do something, why the organization was or was not reasoning in a certain way, why the liberation struggle was moving too fast or too slowly or in what direction it was moving or not moving. As far as the world was concerned, and to a certain level this included Pretoria, the struggle was not only steered by, but was also the responsibility of one man - Oliver Tambo.

In 1990 Oliver Tambo returned to his country of birth after having left it almost three decades earlier. Although overjoyed at returning to his country, after having struggled for so many years, Oliver Tambo was now finally old, sick and tired - and it showed. Some eyebrows lifted when Nelson Mandela was not immediately instated as ANC president after his release, but first he consulted with the frail and ailing 72 year old Tambo.²⁵

During December of 1990, during a special ANC conference, Tambo told the 1600 delegates that the time for "trite slogans" had passed and that it was necessary to reevaluate "the advisability of the retention of sanctions". His large audience jeered and ridiculed him.²⁶ On 5 July 1991, Tambo spoke at a Durban-Westville ANC congress and recalled his struggle during the past three decades. The frail, aged *revolutionary* caused an emotional stir and reportedly made a deep impression on the audience.²⁷

On 24 April 1993 Oliver Tambo passed away. He died two weeks after Chris Hani had been assassinated.

Pres. Bill Clinton sent an 18 person strong delegation to attend Tambo's funeral.²⁸

²⁵ R Louw (ed.), "ANC heads for talks in Pretoria", *Southern Africa Report*, Vol. 8, No. 8, 23 February 1990, p. 5.

²⁶ D Reed, *Beloved country* (London, 1994), p. 111; Louw (ed.), "ANC heads for talks in Pretoria", *Southern Africa Report*, Vol. 8, No. 8, 23 February 1990, p. 5.

²⁷ R Louw (ed.), "Tambo: '...the mission we were assigned to'", *Southern Africa Report*, Vol. 9, No. 27, 5 July 1991, p. 2.

²⁸ R Louw (ed.), "Tambo funeral: Clinton's message to South Africa", *Southern Africa Report*, Vol. 11, No. 18, 7 May 1993, p. 4.

Nelson Mandela wrote a touching eulogy: "In Plato's allegory of the metals, the philosopher classifies men into groups of gold, silver and lead. Oliver was pure gold; there was gold in his intellectual brilliance, gold in his warmth and humanity, gold in his tolerance and generosity, gold in his unfailing loyalty and self-sacrifice. As much as I respected him as a leader, that is how much I loved him as a man. Though we had been apart for all the years that I was in prison, Oliver was never far from my thoughts...Perhaps that is why I felt so bereft when he died. I felt...like the loneliest man in the world...When I looked at him in his coffin, it was as if a part of myself had died."²⁹

Today the most famous Tambo in South Africa is Dalhi Tambo, Oliver Tambo's son and flamboyant television personality.

Where's Tambo today? What happened to his legacy?

Whereas Nelson Mandela was and is indeed a symbol, when really thinking about it, his symbol is that of a new beginning, to wit the New South Africa. Whilst still jailed Nelson Mandela was indeed a symbol, but more a symbol of a political future, aspired to, than of the struggle. The international call to *Free Mandela!* was synonymous to calling for an end to apartheid; in fact that is exactly what it was: a future South Africa where Nelson Mandela was a free man and South Africa was without apartheid. Nelson Mandela was more a symbol of apartheid suppression than the actual *struggle* against the system. Therefore desiring his freedom equaled the end of apartheid and a new beginning. You could simply not have a freed Mandela and apartheid sharing the same country.

Nelson Mandela's suffering for his anti-apartheid cause in jail was of course a heroic contribution to the struggle - but it was not part of the struggle, it was part of apartheid suppression. He was jailed for his anti-apartheid struggle and had to suffer because of it. It was an epic *example*, and historic symbol of the *suffering* people had to endure under apartheid. Mandela became universally a physical embodiment of the suffering people had to endure under an unjust system. But his imprisonment could not be a symbol of the struggle. Of nobly *enduring suffering* in the name of the struggle - certainly. And of course, his example and symbol inspired many to also endure, or to take up the struggle that he was jailed for. Those who admired him, admired his inner strength to endure such suffering; those who fought to free him, fought for a new future dispensation.

²⁹ N Mandela, *Long walk to freedom* (Randburg, 1994), p. 601.

But Mandela was not a symbol of the struggle because you cannot wage a struggle from behind bars, on an island. Indeed his being a symbol related to this fundamental fact, that under and because of apartheid he could not oppose a political system as a free man. He could not be part of the struggle against apartheid because apartheid did not allow black dissent. So he rather was a universalized symbol of human suffering under an unjust political system. *Free Mandela* was the ultimate goal of the struggle: the new South Africa.

But Tambo was the *struggle*.

Mandela was Pretoria's number one prisoner and later because of that became their number one dilemma and the crux of a tricky situation. Tambo started out and remained the Nationalists' number one enemy. According to the authorities Tambo was the official bogeyman. Over a period of decades Pretoria vilified Tambo only stopping short of giving him horns and a tail. Pretoria turned him into a kind of mythological character. So ghastly was his politics that no one in South Africa was allowed to see his face or hear his voice. Because he was never seen or heard in South Africa, Pretoria explained his messages. And so of course he became an invisible enigma haunting whites. For many ordinary whites listening to their government, Tambo became an omnipotent terrorist; the grand genocidal instigator of all that was unholy. It would not be an overstatement to say that Tambo, thanks to Pretoria, became the physical embodiment of the white's worst political fears for their future in Africa.

Tambo symbolized and epitomized the struggle in progress - that struggle to end the system which caused Mandela to suffer. If Tambo's struggle succeeded, Mandela would go free; free to become a symbol of suffering ended, evil overcome and of a new beginning.

So Tambo was a symbol too - but of the struggle against apartheid and not of the suffering endured under apartheid. Tambo equaled the struggle-in-progress. The struggle to free Mandela was equal to end Apartheid - a symbol of the drawn-out struggle against apartheid and nothing more. Remember, the international call was to end apartheid and to free Mandela et al., it was not "Tambo for president." In fact it was up to Tambo to free Mandela so that the latter could become president. He epitomized the struggle. He waged it for decades.

Mandela in jail was an inspirational symbol of suffering and a desired future (a new South Africa without misery) and after his release he became an inspirational symbol of a new beginning (building a new South Africa without misery). In the old South Africa Tambo was a symbol of that present (the struggle to crack apartheid) and in the new South Africa without apartheid but with a freed Mandela, he became a symbol of the past (the struggle to crack apartheid). In apartheid's history "Mandela" was the title of a wishful political dream. "Tambo" was the name of a political reality.

It was Tambo's struggle that freed Mandela. It was Tambo's struggle that cracked apartheid. It was Tambo's struggle that led to the onetime political fantasy becoming present day political reality. Yet, a New South Africa seems not to have enough room for appreciating both political fantasy-turned-reality and remembering who got it there.

The National Party (NP) bosses dramatically came and went, from Verwoerd to Vorster to Botha to De Klerk. The ANC, however, had only one executive leader for the whole time it was in exile - no small historic phenomenon in itself. Can anybody imagine what would it have been like if the NP had one leader for 27 years? Indeed an interesting, albeit academically futile, point to ponder is how history could have been different if Tambo did not succeed in holding his executive position for so long. But the fact is he did, which again serves to highlight the anomaly that he should simply disappear so easily from public and historic interest.

In the same way that the historical memory of the New South Africa (NSA) seems not to have enough room for both a Verwoerd and a De Klerk, so it seems not to want to share both the legacies of a Madiba and a Tambo. Is this a case of historical hangover or reconciliatory amnesia? Did South Africa get so drunk while honouring their present day heroes that they overlooked their previous protagonists?

Or is forgetting the past better than forgiving? Did the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC) make South Africa's contemporary history and historical figures so dreary and dangerous that we would rather just not talk about them? Do the NSA look at its past as if it was a bully, believing that if ignored, it will go away? Better left unspoken? In the process huge chunks of South Africa's history and historical figures are slowly eroding from and in the country's collective historical consciousness.

Oliver Tambo was not perfect. He made many mistakes; mistakes which cost many lives and which South Africa is still dealing with. Nonetheless he, arguably more than any other South African, was involved with the struggle against apartheid. Whether honouring him or criticizing him does not matter, the fact is that the role, importance and legacy of one of the country's most famous men are being negated - sometimes subtly; sometimes overtly.

Why are South Africa's historians and new cultural supremos, white and black, nullifying this segment of its history? Was Oliver Tambo's part in South Africa's history buried with him? Were the last respects paid to Tambo in fact the last words with respect to Tambo? Chris Hani is continuously being resurrected and every once in a while Verwoerd makes a come-back. Joe Slovo too, is continuously making a curtain call while Smuts and Lethuli, Biko and even Hector Peterson time and again are historically resuscitated. So why has Tambo become the Historical Untouchable?

South Africa's contemporary history of the past 50 years has evolved to a point where it has become the predominant focus of South Africa's collective historical emphasis. Yet there is not even a passing glance in the direction of the one man who was arguably more intensely and longer involved with (anti)-apartheid politics than any other South African politician.

Why?

It is ironic that even in the New South Africa, Oliver Tambo remains an enigma - neither to be heard nor seen nor discussed nor vilified nor honoured.

Why?