REASSESSING TRANSITION VIOLENCE: VOICES FROM SOUTH AFRICA’S TOWNSHIP WARS, 1990–4

GARY KYNOCH*

ABSTRACT

Drawing on interviews with people involved in the communal violence that traumatized Thokoza and Katlehong townships in the early 1990s, this article challenges the received wisdom regarding transition violence in South Africa. Most significantly, it transcends the dominant narrative that African National Congress (ANC) supporters in the townships were under relentless attack by state security units known as the ‘third force’, along with the co-opted impis of the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP). The evidence presented indicates that Inkatha was responsible for much of the violence, but that ANC-affiliated militants also conducted murderous campaigns. Some police commanders and their units initiated violence for political ends, but different police and military groups operated independently and lacked a uniform political orientation. Some favoured the IFP, some backed the ANC, while others were divided or indifferent. Thus, the narrative that casts the ANC as victims of a state-orchestrated onslaught versus the Inkatha sell-outs who opportunistically sided with the white government (and its security forces) does not accurately capture events on the ground in Thokoza and Katlehong, two of the townships most afflicted by transition violence. A more fractured, less partisan picture emerges from the voices of those who survived the township wars.

IN 1990 THE NATIONAL PARTY (NP) GOVERNMENT entered into negotiations with opposition groups and liberation movements, leading to South Africa’s first non-racial elections in April 1994. Although the advent of democracy ended centuries of white political domination and repression, the four-year transition period preceding the elections witnessed the bloodiest ‘political’ violence of the apartheid era. Many areas throughout the country experienced outbreaks and/or the continuation of fighting. Parts of what is now the province of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), and

*Gary Kynoch (gkynoch@dal.ca) is in the History Department at Dalhousie University, Canada. I would like to thank Zodwa Radebe for her excellent work interviewing and translating, and for introducing me to former Self Defence Units. The financial support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada is gratefully acknowledged.
townships on the Witwatersrand or Rand, the urban sprawl surrounding Johannesburg, were hit particularly hard. Analyses of this period have produced a dominant narrative in which the bulk of transition violence is attributed to the government’s determination to weaken the African National Congress (ANC) prior to the 1994 elections. The Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), a politically ‘conservative’, predominantly Zulu organization, and a sinister collection of state security units referred to as the ‘third force’, are key actors in this narrative. In Thokoza and Katlehong – two adjoining townships south-east of Johannesburg that experienced extraordinary levels of violence – third force elements are reputed to have made common cause with IFP supporters housed in municipal hostels\(^1\) to target the common ANC enemy.\(^2\) Focusing on these townships, this article draws on residents’ oral testimonies to examine this theory.

Beyond the academic interest in piecing together the most accurate possible version of history, there are more practical implications for contesting conventional accounts of transition-era violence. Liberation struggle credentials – however defined – can greatly enhance one’s political currency in post-apartheid South Africa. Those who supported the ANC and its allies have an automatic claim to legitimacy as citizens in the new order. Inkatha followers who actively opposed the ANC are at risk of being marginalized by the ANC government, at least according to hostel dwellers who insist they have been punished for their association with the IFP. Jonny Steinberg’s assessment of the 2008 communal/xenophobic attacks in Alexandra points to Inkatha supporters’ perception of being overlooked during the allocation of development resources as a critical aspect of their mobilization for violence.\(^3\)

Post-apartheid development initiatives, including the improvement of services and the construction of hundreds of houses in Thokoza and Katlehong, have largely bypassed the hostels discussed in this study.\(^4\)

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1. These hostels are large dormitory-like complexes that were built to house unskilled black, male migrants, primarily employed in the lowest-status urban occupations such as factory and foundry work. Hostels were subject to municipal control until the late 1980s when this oversight was gradually abandoned. By the time the violence began the hostels were self-governing.

2. Population statistics for townships and hostels are best estimates and only provide an impression of the number of inhabitants. Immediately before the violence erupted, the hostels in Thokoza and Katlehong probably housed 20,000–30,000 men, along with far fewer women and very few children. In 1990 the combined population of Thokoza and Katlehong was well over five hundred thousand. See Philip Bonner and Noor Nieftagodien, *Kathoror: A history* (Maskew Miller Longman, Cape Town, 2001), pp. 54, 88.


4. The lone exception of which I am aware is an upgrading programme that has taken place at Buyafuthi Hostel in Katlehong.
Almost twenty years after the end of the conflict the main hostel complex in Thokoza remains without running water, electricity, or sanitation facilities. Instead, the ANC-dominated local government spent an appreciable sum on the erection of a concrete barrier to enclose the hostels, isolating them from the adjoining township. The Gauteng provincial government has embarked on a hostel eradication programme in Soweto that, if extended to the East Rand, may result in further violence. Importantly, the ANC’s proposal, when it emerged from exile in 1990, to either demolish the hostels or transform them into family housing is often cited as a factor contributing to the civil conflicts on the Rand.

Based on interviews with about one hundred township residents, twenty former members of the ANC-aligned Self Defence Units (SDUs), sixty hostel dwellers and a handful of local officials, violence monitors and police, this article demonstrates that the narrative that casts the ANC as heroic defenders of freedom versus the Inkatha sell-outs who opportunistically sided with the white government (and its security forces) does not hold for Katlehong and Thokoza, two of the townships most afflicted by communal conflict. Instead, hostilities were far more complex and ambiguous than the one-dimensional morality play that still retains hegemonic status. This is important, because the dominant narrative of transition violence works against the emergence of a more inclusive, less partisan, nation-building project with room for all South Africans.

*Explaining transition violence*

The basic tenets of the dominant account of transition violence on the Rand are as follows. The IFP and ANC had long disagreed on the most productive tactics for opposing apartheid and by the mid-1980s the IFP was in open conflict with ANC sympathizers in its home area of KZN. In 1990, with meaningful political power for black South Africans on the horizon, the IFP sought to extend its reach beyond KZN and Zulu-dominated hostels scattered across the Rand offered the best prospects for political mobilization. The combination of Inkatha’s heavy-handed recruiting methods and anti-ANC campaigning inevitably led to conflict with township residents. The government had already been sponsoring Inkatha in KZN and it continued this support once the fighting.

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5. Township interviews in Thokoza and Katlehong were conducted primarily through door-to-door canvassing. The only qualification was that respondents had to have been residents of the township during the early 1990s and at least in their teens during this period. Interviews with former SDUs occasionally took place by chance during this canvassing but most were arranged through an ex-combatants’ association. Access to hostel residents was negotiated through the hostel leaders and their committees. The former ISU members who agreed to an interview were so guarded in their responses that the interviews were worthless.
spread to the Rand. The third force covertly served government interests by assassinating ANC notables and sowing violence in the townships by attacking ANC supporters, openly assisting IFP forces and inciting conflict between ANC and IFP groups. A central premise of this account is that IFP hostel dwellers, typically with police complicity, were blatant aggressors in the township violence. In the words of a contemporary analyst, ‘The present crisis represents a new phase in the long war waged by the state against the liberation movement in general and the ANC in particular.’6 Stephen Ellis argues that third force networks ‘were not responsible for all the political violence that occurred in this period, but there is reason to believe that they were by some way its most important sponsors’.7 Almost a decade after the conflict David Everatt insisted that ‘the analysis of monitoring data leads to the conclusion that the violence was manipulated by elements from the security forces of the apartheid state to guarantee their position under a new democratic dispensation’.8

Based on sources sympathetic to the ANC and a top-down understanding of the conflicts, the dominant narrative represents a partial picture of the violence that engulfed numerous South African communities. Many monitoring groups and journalists (particularly those working for English-language publications) covering township events identified with the liberation struggle and established close relations with ANC officials and supporters. As the violence intensified it became almost impossible for reporters to work in both Inkatha and ANC areas.9 Political considerations

8. David Everatt, ‘Analysing political violence on the Reef, 1990–1994’ in Ran Greenstein (ed.), The Role of Political Violence in South Africa’s Democratisation (Community Agency for Social Enquiry, Johannesburg, 2003), p. 95. Contrasting narratives that draw attention to the ANC’s role in generating violence on the Rand do exist but have never gained the same popular or academic traction as variations of the dominant account. These range from the more extreme, such as Anthea Jeffreys’s contention that the ANC’s revolutionary agenda was the driving force behind the political violence of the 1980s and 1990s, to Ivor Chipkin’s argument that the ANC’s particular brand of trade unionism and vision of nationalism excluded rural-based Zulu migrant workers and was a critical development in the turn towards the 1990s violence on the East Rand. See Anthea Jeffreys, People’s War: New light on the struggle for South Africa (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2009); Ivor Chipkin, Do South Africans Exist? Nationalism, democracy and the identity of the people (Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 2007). Adrian Guelke also rejects the argument that the National Party profited from township violence, especially after mid-1992, and concludes that ‘the dynamic behind most of the violence lay elsewhere than white opponents of change’, ‘Interpretations of political violence during South Africa’s transition’, Politikon 27, 2 (2000), pp. 239–54, pp. 252–3.
9. Writing about the fighting in Thokoza, photo-journalist Greg Marinovich reports that ‘Inkatha was not very accepting of the presence of journalists – they were in fact openly hostile. … As the first year of the war wore on … entering the hostels at all was out of the question’, Greg Marinovich and Joao Silva, The Bang Bang Club: Snapshots from a hidden war (Arrow Books, London, 2001), p. 111.
and ease of access ensured that the majority worked exclusively in ANC-dominated territory and interacted primarily with ANC officials and supporters. The ANC judged the 1990s violence to be the latest attempt in the state’s ongoing campaign to undermine the liberation movement. It complained that Inkatha had joined forces with a duplicitous government that publicly pursued negotiations while secretly instigating violence against ANC supporters. These claims were not without foundation. As the transition period unfolded it became clear that Inkatha and the NP had a mutual interest in destabilizing the ANC and state security personnel provided some IFP militants with training, weapons, and funding. The ANC conveyed this message to monitoring organizations and the media who in turn broadcast it to a wider audience. Given the NP’s hostility towards nationalist opposition many were quick to accept virtually any account of government-sponsored violence. The apartheid state, with its history of deception and media manipulation, was almost entirely discredited as a reliable source of information and Inkatha officials were often considered similarly suspect.

Coverage of the 1992 Boipatong massacre provides perhaps the best documented example of the type of uncritical reporting that resulted from this state of affairs. After residents of KwaMadala Hostel, a stronghold of IFP supporters, launched a night-time raid on Boipatong township, slaughtering dozens of unsuspecting victims, the ANC immediately accused the police of assisting the attackers. As James Simpson points out, the massacre ‘is widely regarded as evidence of a third force’. Numerous scholars have endorsed this assumption, but he argues that this insistence ‘is attributable to a political context, progressively more prominent after the massacre, in which the ANC came to enjoy persuasive moral ascendancy over government’. In consequence, ‘Boipatong amassed an iconic status that drew focus away from its forensic truths’. Simpson describes how the ANC intervened to control the flow of information. On the morning after the massacre,

10. This state of affairs was not confined to the Rand. For KZN violence, see Phillipe Denis, Radikobo Ntsimane, and Thomas Cannel, Indians versus Russians: An oral history of political violence in Nxamalala (1987–1993) (Cluster Publications, Pietermaritzburg, 2010). They observed that ‘Because they were perceived to be sympathetic to the ANC, the violence monitors sometimes were incapable of obtaining information on the “other side”’, p. 13.
11. See for example, Eugene de Kock, A Long Night’s Damage: Working for the apartheid state (Contra Press, Johannesburg, 1998). De Kock headed a counter-insurgency unit that assassinated anti-apartheid activists and supplied Inkatha officials on the Rand with weapons on several occasions. However, he is adamant that, ‘We never took part in attacks launched by the IFP’, p. 241.
ANC officials went around Boipatong instructing residents not to talk to police or outsiders. Those wishing to make statements were asked to report to a local school, where they found representatives of the HRC [Human Rights Commission] and Peace Action. Both organizations monitored township violence and included ANC-supporting members. Journalists arriving in Boipatong were guided around the township and introduced to witnesses.  

Similar developments took place across the Rand. For example, the Wits-Vaal regional director for the National Peace Accord, who spent a great deal of time in Thokoza, was highly critical of the Human Rights Commission’s approach to reporting. ‘You can read HRC reports and there are two types of reports – there are Inkatha attacks and there are unknown men. It’s very clear that unknown men were ANC but they don’t say it, they never dared; and they were hated, absolutely hated, by all other parties: the police hated them, the army hated them, Inkatha hated them.’ The Community Agency for Social Inquiry (CASE) compiled a database of political violence on the Rand between 1990 and 1994 in which, whenever possible, it recorded the affiliation of aggressors. As it turns out ‘a massive 80 per cent of incidents were ascribed to Inkatha, 13 per cent to the SAP [South African Police] or SADF [South African Defence Force], and 5 per cent to ANC supporters’. 

The Independent Board of Inquiry (IBI), another violence monitoring organization, produced a considerable amount of written material on Rand violence, including a series of monthly reports, and regularly briefed international human rights groups, journalists, government-appointed inquiries such as the Goldstone Commission, and other interested parties. The IBI was formed in 1989 to investigate attacks on anti-apartheid activists and its political leanings were well established. Sally Sealey, the IBI’s senior researcher, worked very closely with Duma Nkosi, the ANC’s chairperson in Thokoza, and was seen by all parties to the conflict as an ally of the ANC. It is difficult to imagine that the IBI’s perspective was not influenced by its relationships with the combatant groups – generally friendly with the ANC and antagonistic to the IFP and state security forces. In a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearing in which she assisted former ANC-aligned SDU members with their submissions, Sealey explained the IBI’s approach to information gathering:

13. Ibid., p. 22.  
The way the Independent Board of Inquiry worked is that we would be called in by communities, for example the community of Thokoza or Polla [sic] Park, the informal settlement in Thokoza. We would be called in when there had been an attack on the settlement. We would go in and take statements from the various victims because they were too afraid in many cases, to approach the police.17

By the IBI’s own admission, the ‘community’ typically did not include IFP supporters or hostel dwellers. Instead, on those rare occasions when the IBI sought statements from these men and women, it had to negotiate access to them through IFP officials.18

This state of affairs was exacerbated by the IFP’s condemnation of the TRC as an exercise run by and for ANC interests. Philip Bonner and Noor Nieftagodien have noted how the TRC’s interpretations of the violence were affected by the IFP boycott. They specifically mention ANC supporters’ attacks on Lindela Hostel in Katlehong as a crucial event in the escalation of local violence that was completely overlooked by the TRC. ‘The only means of remediing this deficiency would have been the extensive interviewing of participants in or bystanders to these events. But seeing that the victims of the Lindela hostel slaughter were migrant Zulus, whose political party, the IFP, refused to cooperate with the Commission, a major source of information was automatically cut off.’19

Partially by default, the ANC’s interpretation of the township conflicts has gained the widest currency and with a limited body of evidence at their disposal, academics have relied heavily on these accounts. This has resulted in a literature that largely conforms to the ANC version of events and in which the IFP perspective is given scant attention. The evidence presented here indicates that this literature, while accurate in some respects, sacrifices the complexity of local exigencies in favour of a politically expedient meta-narrative. A more inclusive, morally fraught picture emerges from the voices of those who survived the township wars. Hostel dweller testimony adds an element that, with very few exceptions, is notable by its absence from existing accounts20 and oral

17. Ibid.
18. Such was the case, for instance, in the joint publication by the IBI and Peace Action, “Before we were good friends”: an account and analysis of displacement in the East Rand Townships of Thokoza and Katlehong’ (IBI and Peace Action, Johannesburg, April 1994).
testimony from township residents collected at least ten years after the end of the conflict arguably allows for a more measured response than information provided to violence-monitoring agencies and media during the course of the war.

*Thokoza and Katlehong*

Although relations between Zulu migrants and township residents who supported the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) had been deteriorating for a few years, most sources agree that the beginning of the civil conflict in these communities can be traced to a 1989 dispute between rival taxi associations in Katlehong.\(^{21}\) One association was operated primarily by Zulus from KZN with a strong base in the hostels, while the other was composed of township owners, some with links to the ANC-aligned United Democratic Front (UDF). While neither Inkatha nor the ANC played a formal role in the initial conflict, the political turmoil of the period injected new meaning into hostilities when the migrant Zulu occupants of a taxi—including women and children—were burned alive by township militants for failing to observe a ‘stay-away’ from work.\(^{22}\) Hostel dwellers retaliated against the township elements they deemed responsible throughout early 1990, including schoolchildren. Dozens of people were killed in the fighting and relations between hostel and township residents deteriorated significantly at the precise time that national-level political tensions were building. Following the unbanning of the ANC and Nelson Mandela’s release from prison in February 1990, the ANC began intensive campaigning for the elections that seemed sure to come. In July, Inkatha launched its political future as the Inkatha Freedom Party and with tens of thousands of migrant Zulu inhabitants, the hostels around Johannesburg offered a natural recruitment base for Inkatha’s expansionist ambitions. Because of the particularly high density of hostels, Thokoza and Katlehong became important sites of organization. Almost immediately, reports surfaced throughout the Rand that Inkatha followers were intimidating hostel residents who refused to join the party and that non-Zulus were leaving or being driven out of many hostels, sometimes with significant casualties. In a few hostels where Zulus were a minority, the opposite occurred. Inkatha supporters


22. Several respondents from the hostels quoted this incident, which is also discussed in Bonner and Nieftagodien, *Kathorus*, pp. 131–3.
living in the townships also reported incidents of intimidation and claimed that ANC activists were intolerant of other political parties.

Khalanyoni Hostel served as a flashpoint in Thokoza. An affray over a woman in August 1990 may have triggered fighting at Khalanyoni, but the conflict took an ethnic turn when Xhosa inmates vacated the hostel to settle in the adjacent squatter camp of Phola Park and continued to clash with the Zulu population that had remained in the hostel. Phola Park residents, many of whom were Xhosa, joined the fight against the Zulus in Khalanyoni, who were supported by Zulus in the neighbouring hostels. By the end of the year Phola Park combatants had completely demolished the hostel. Surviving Zulus sought refuge in the remaining hostels and Zulu-dominated informal settlements from which Xhosa migrants had been expelled. By this time the ethnic and political divide was becoming indistinguishable for many of the people affected by the violence. Migrant Zulus looked to the IFP for protection while the ANC consistently condemned hostel dwellers as a reactionary force. Sections of neighbourhoods adjoining the hostels were colonized by Inkatha supporters who forced out the original inhabitants. Zulus suspected of links to Inkatha were evicted from many township areas. Hostel dwellers became IFP by definition and all others, including some Zulus who remained in the townships, were associated with the ANC.

Hostel inmates marched en masse to launch attacks in the townships, evoking media comparisons with the fearsome Zulu regiments of the pre-colonial past. In the early stages of the conflict these impis often took a terrible toll on township residents, most of whom had no means of organized defence. Over time, the different sections in Thokoza and Katlehong mobilized SDU militias that protected their neighbourhoods, but also attacked the hostels and ambushed hostel dwellers who ventured into the townships. The IFP in turn, named its groups of combatants Self Protection Units (SPUs). Political marches and funerals were frequently interrupted by fighting; train and taxi commuters were slaughtered; prominent officials were assassinated; and, on many occasions, state police and soldiers contributed to the violence.

Although SDUs served as the frontline against Inkatha attacks and intimidation, some were little more than anarchic youths with guns who victimized the communities they were supposed to protect. This maelstrom of violence continued throughout the transition period. By the latter half of 1993, despite an infusion of fighters from rural KZN, hostel dwellers found it increasingly dangerous to venture out of their sanctuaries to go to work or purchase basic supplies, and attacks against the hostels had

become more frequent. Just a few days before the national elections of 27 April 1994, a number of SDUs, armed with rocket-propelled grenade launchers and automatic weapons, attempted to overwhelm the main hostel complex in Thokoza. This attack was repulsed after heavy fighting and a peace agreement, reached shortly after the ANC’s election victory, effectively ended the collective violence. The number of dead in these local conflicts is estimated to have reached several thousands.  

Perceptions of conflict

Although virtually all respondents recognize the Inkatha–ANC rivalry as the primary divide, hostel dwellers tend to view ethnicity as a key factor, while township residents, especially those linked to the ANC, often depict the fighting as an extension of the liberation struggle against white rule. Many hostel dwellers professed that they had no idea why the violence began and only took up arms to defend themselves or their fellow Zulu migrants in the townships. Some viewed it as an attempt at ethnic cleansing, while others construed it as a struggle for political supremacy, albeit with an ethnic dimension. For most, their status as migrants and identity as ‘traditional’ Zulus from KZN was central to their understanding of a war in which they battled for survival and the retention of an urban base that offered at least the possibility of relief from desperate rural poverty.

With political tension translating to violence in many townships on the Rand, reports of conflicts elsewhere and rumours of anti-Zulu campaigns fuelled xenophobia in the hostels. ‘People said they were fighting the Xhosas, because Xhosas had killed our relatives. Zulus that were staying in places that were dominated by Xhosas died in numbers, like in Khalanyoni, and Lindela, those hostels were destroyed. ’ Within a short period of time, the remaining hostels in Thokoza and Katlehong were largely purged of non-Zulus, and the dividing line with the surrounding neighbourhoods was sharply drawn. ‘I remember when it started in this hostel [Kwesine in Katlehong], the Xhosa were killed because it was said Xhosas were killing the Zulus, and after that all other ethnic groups left, and the hostel became Zulu and therefore those that were attacking the hostel were attacking the Zulus because it was only us.’ The perceived onslaught against Zulus dovetailed with IFP mobilization campaigns in the Johannesburg area and lent credence to IFP claims that a Xhosa-dominated ANC government

24. Various press reports cite figures of up to 4,000, but given the absence of documented statistics and the fact that many killings would have gone unreported, it is impossible to corroborate these numbers. The Thokoza Monument erected to memorialize the dead lists less than a thousand victims by name.
would constitute a threat to migrant Zulus. As the fighting intensified, ethnic identification sometimes assumed a deadly dynamic that transcended the particular conjunction of the IFP–ANC rivalry. Migrant Zulus staying in the townships had no doubt they were targeted on the basis of ethnicity. ‘I don’t think it was a political thing, they burned our house and we were not IFP or ANC, just Zulus.’ Distinguishing between migrants from rural KZN, often identified by the ‘deep’ Zulu they spoke and their distinctively pierced ears, and more urbanized Zulu speakers with a longer history of settlement in the townships, further complicated ethnic identification. Some SDU members were Zulus and they wereadamant that the conflict was a political one that pitted IFP-aligned hostel dwellers against people of all ethnicities in the townships. Nonetheless, Zulu migrants, even those with no visible ties to the IFP, were often at great risk. Many, including women who were attached to men in the hostels, either left the townships entirely or moved to the relative security of hostels controlled by fellow migrants. Their experiences reinforced the conviction that township residents were determined to eradicate Zulu migrants. ‘I also stood up and took part in the violence when it was becoming clearer that the violence was directed to the Zulu-speaking people. When women were running away from the township and taxis from Natal were burnt, that showed us that this violence was directed to us.’ The destruction of Khalanyoni hostel confirmed the migrants’ worst fears.

The township people did not want us here. They wanted to destroy all the hostels here so that they could build houses, so we were fighting to protect the hostels so that they do not get demolished. They tried, Lindela and Khalanyoni were destroyed and block D [Mazibuko Hostel] was also destroyed. If we did not fight you wouldn’t be here interviewing us. We fought – that is why you still see these buildings.

Zulus from the townships who sought refuge in the hostels were automatically branded as IFP supporters. A woman who had no political affiliation until she moved to Kwesine Hostel after her shack in Katlehong was burned explains:

We were all Inkatha members. Even if we were not before, we joined Inkatha because in the township we were referred to as Buthelezi’s people even though they had never seen us wearing his t-shirts. So when you were in the hostel that was joining IFP. You didn’t need to fill any forms, just by being there you are IFP. … In other words, to stay in the hostel meant that you are IFP and there is nothing you could do about that and ANC people would kill you when you come from the hostel. The hostel was your IFP card.

27. Interview, female hostel dweller, 25 October 2006, Mazibuko Hostel.
28. Interview, male hostel dweller, 20 October 2006, Mazibuko Hostel.
29. Interview, male hostel dweller, November 2006, Mazibuko Hostel.
The ANC and many of its supporters in the townships subscribe to the notion that the NP government was behind the conflicts. An SDU member voices a typical assessment: ‘The white system was our enemy. … It bought IFP, which used the hostel people.’

In this model Inkatha combatants are regarded either as mercenaries or the unwitting stooges of an apartheid regime that continued to direct violence against the ANC throughout the negotiation period. Inkatha resentment of the ANC’s political ascendance is cited as a precipitating factor. ‘These fights occurred right after Mandela was released. The Zulus were jealous that the ANC was going to overpower their political party.’ In so far as any ideological differences were noted, these were often put down to the backwardness of migrant Zulus and the IFP’s fixation with ethnicity.

The thing is there are many stories of how the violence started. The one I know is that when Mandela was released from prison, Inkatha leadership told its supporters that he was coming to take over and that he was a communist who did not believe in traditional beliefs, and you know that Inkatha is a Zulu party, and Zulus are traditionalists, so because most Zulus lived in hostels, they started attacking Phola Park squatter camp because most Xhosas lived there and Mandela is a Xhosa.

Several respondents commented that marauding hostel dwellers did not distinguish between ANC supporters and other people in the townships so it made sense to seek whatever protection party affiliation might offer. ‘Zulus wanted to kill and they did not ask if you were against them or not, were you into politics or not,’ explains an ANC Women’s League official. ‘Just as long as you lived in the township, you were their enemy.’

As with hostel dwellers, politics became secondary to survival for many township residents, who felt they had no choice but to defend themselves. ‘I think if the community did not fight, the Zulus working with the police were going to kill us all. I am telling you, this township would be history.’ After the initial rounds of fighting, in which perceived enemies were chased from the hostels and forced out of the townships, the primary divide, whether it was understood to be essentially ethnic or political or a mixture of the two, was expressed in spatial terms. The hostels and some adjacent housing and squatter camps were the preserve of Zulus identified with Inkatha, while the rest of the townships and settlements were dominated by the ANC.

31. Interview, male SDU member, 23 November 2008, Thokoza.
32. Interview, female township resident, 3 June, 2006, Thokoza.
33. Interview, male township resident, 21 August 2004, Thokoza.
34. Interview, male township resident, 11 August 2004, Thokoza.
35. Interview, male township resident, November 2006, Katlehong.
The local dynamics of political violence

As the violence persisted throughout the early 1990s, it became apparent that this was an all-consuming conflict. Hostel dwellers had to be prepared for attacks on the hostels at any time and journeying beyond the confines of their fortresses, even in large groups, was dangerous. Respondents tell desperate stories of running a gauntlet on the taxis and trains to get to work and being terrified of getting stranded in the township. There was a pervasive feeling on all sides that it was impossible to escape the violence. ‘I did not want to fight, that is not in my personality,’ reported a hostel dweller. ‘I am not someone who likes to fight but I found myself carrying weapons because I had to. Who was supposed to fight for me? I am a man and I had to fight for my life but it was something very terrible.’

A domestic worker with a house in the township, who held no political loyalties, explains: ‘The police were useless. Even if you did not want to get involved, the situation forced you to get involved, and everybody feared for their lives so it was better to unite and be strong so that when the enemy comes, you could expect help from others.’ In an interview in Phenduka section, which is opposite the biggest hostel complex in Thokoza and, along with Phola Park, probably the area that witnessed the most violence, an elderly woman related a story of how the taxi in which she was travelling was stopped and boarded by Inkatha militants who assaulted suspected ANC supporters. The woman, who was enjoying a large bottle of Black Label beer during the interview, claimed to care nothing for politics. In her words, ‘I did not favour ANC, I did not favour Inkatha. I only favoured Black Label.’

Unfortunately, neutrality was not an option. Over the years, the tide slowly turned against the hostel dwellers. The ANC central commander in charge of SDU operations explained that as the SDUs became better armed, trained, and co-ordinated they waged a campaign of attrition in which Inkatha’s early gains were reversed.

We put the hostels under siege, especially Kwsine and Buyafuthi, where they couldn’t go in, they couldn’t go out. We shot their water tanks out, we sabotaged their sewage system so they couldn’t wash, they couldn’t shit, they couldn’t go out. They had the Kwsine railway line that went almost into the hostel and they would shoot from the train and they had access out, so we blew that line up.

One hostel inmate describes a sustained attack on Mazibuko Hostel in Katlehong.

36. Interview, male hostel dweller, 24 June 2006, Buyafuthi Hostel.
37. Interview, male township resident, 3 November 2004, Thokoza.
38. Interview, female township resident, 12 July 2004, Thokoza.
There is a week that I cannot forget. I stayed the whole week without going to work. If I did not lose my job then I will never lose it again. In that week we could not even go out to buy food. It was black outside because of smoke, the gun shots, the screams, people singing. We would not sleep. We slept in shifts and if we did not do that this hostel would not be here. We had another block that was completely destroyed. I must say the township people were strong, but we fought too. I have never seen anything like that in my life. I don’t know how many people died in that week alone. I never thought I would leave this hostel alive.  

Bonner and Ndima’s interviewees recalled that ‘On one nightmarish occasion, when hostel residents were “holed up and starved”, a group of them dissected a dead body in search of a liver to eat.’  

Life inside the hostels was dangerous, but the physical structure and concentration of inmates offered a degree of security. When travelling to work, hostel dwellers moved in large groups and sometimes commandeered entire train carriages. However, they were still susceptible to attack, especially when the tracks were sabotaged. A resident of Mazibuko Hostel in Katlehong remembers:

The day that the train line was cut off we had to walk from the township to the hostel. You know we were in the middle of the township and we all knew in our hearts that anything could happen but we did not say a thing. We were many but still we knew that the township people were more than us, they could overpower us if they attacked.

Travel by taxi was especially risky and hostel taxi drivers played perilous cat and mouse games with armed groups in the townships.

As a taxi driver I would go out to take people to work and we had people that were escorting us. Taking people to work was our bread so we could not stop working, but it was very tense. Our taxis would meet with bullets. We tried all routes we could think of and we would use that route for a month and after that they discover it and they would sleep on the route and be there to attack in the morning.

Hostel dwellers repeated time and again that their greatest fear was being necklaced – the practice of dousing victims with petrol, placing a rubber tyre over their heads and setting them on fire. Necklacing originated in the mid-1980s as a punishment for suspected police informers and sellouts, and SDUs extended this treatment to anyone they associated with Inkatha. The horror of being burned alive contributed to hostel dwellers’ vilification of township residents, particularly the young ‘comrades’ in the SDUs. Comrades were labelled as animals for burning people and township residents denounced hostel fighters as bloodthirsty killers who spared no one, including children. ‘Even a child of one year, they will take him

40. Interview, male hostel dweller, 25 October 2006, Mazibuko Hostel.
42. Interview, male hostel dweller, November 2006, Mazibuko Hostel.
43. Interview, male hostel dweller, 18 July 2006, Madala Hostel.
by the legs and smash him into a wall because they will say he is a little Mandela. That’s what makes me afraid of Zulus even now – how can a person do something like that to a one-year-old? For me a normal human being cannot do that.” Township lore recounts how Inkatha-affiliated taxi drivers disguised their identities, loaded their taxis with people from the township and then drove into the hostels where the hapless commuters were raped, tortured, and murdered. Moreover, hostel dwellers who travelled by train are said to have fired indiscriminately into township homes. Non-combatants were routinely killed and the sense that all people associated with the opposing side had become legitimate targets clearly had a deep purchase in Thokoza and Katlehong.

In the midst of this deadly conflict with hostel dwellers, township residents also had to worry about predatory SDUs. Many respondents credited the young fighters with saving their lives and property, appreciated their sacrifices, and admired their courage. However, some SDUs abused their new-found powers. Phola Park, for example, experienced a deadly conflict between its SDU and the local residents’ committee over relations with the police and access to development funds. One particular SDU commander in Thokoza was notorious for his excesses, as his group killed a number of residents they branded as witches or informers. According to a local ANC official, ANC structures in the area called several meetings to try to calm down this renegade unit, but the youngsters would toyi-toyi – a militant dance associated with the liberation struggle – to the meetings, openly brandish their AK47s, and mock the ANC adults, refusing any attempts to provide them with direction. Armed primarily with their moral authority, these officials had little leverage over the SDU and could expect no assistance from the police. The situation only improved when the commander ordered the murder of the mother of one of his members and was in turn killed by that member. Fighting between rival SDUs was also a problem, with bystanders sometimes caught in the crossfire. At times, desperate community members banded together and struck back against delinquent SDUs. When questioned about the problems of disciplining such groups, the central commander indicated that vigilante solutions were not discouraged: ‘Well, without implicating myself, a lot of those

44. Interview, male township resident, 11 June 2004, Johannesburg.
46. Interview, male township resident, 19 May 2005, Thokoza.
47. For more information on the problems associated with SDUs, see Gary Kynoch, ‘Crime, conflict and politics in transition-era South Africa’, African Affairs 104, 416 (2005), pp. 493–514. For a detailed examination of a single episode of violence in which seven ANC Youth League members were killed by the local SDU see Vanessa Barolsky, The Moleleki Execution: A radical problem of understanding (University of the Witwatersrand, unpublished PhD thesis, 2010).
people were killed in responses to activities they did. If the community said that guy raped someone or shot someone for no reason then he got killed by the community and that happened quite often. At the same time, local commanders had to balance disciplinary requirements with the need to retain recruits operating in extremely trying conditions. This sometimes meant allowing wayward members considerable leeway.

It was difficult to discipline them because they were doing the community a favour, in a way, so we could not be too harsh. We had to bargain with them because they were there voluntarily. There were times when they will despair and want to quit. In those moments it would be where they will do things that they know they are not supposed to do, and as commanders we would try to counsel them and motivate them. So… we needed to be lenient.

It is difficult to reconcile these realities with a narrative that demonizes IFP-aligned hostel dwellers as unrelenting aggressors while representing ANC supporters in the townships almost exclusively as victims. Not only was the fighting not a one-sided affair but the larger political conflict provided an arena for a multitude of local disputes and criminal violence, some of which did not follow party lines.

Third forces

State security forces tended to exacerbate feelings of vulnerability. Instead of functioning as neutral arbiters committed to preventing and limiting violence, police and army units sometimes intervened to one side’s advantage. The ethnicity of African police seems to have been a factor in certain situations. Lauren Segal’s hostel informants recounted incidents, including major episodes of violence, in which Zulu police assisted their ‘brothers’ in the hostels, while their Xhosa counterparts in the SAP supported township combatants. Journalist Daniel Reed recorded an incident of ethnically partisan policing involving an attack on a Khumalo Street hostel:

Phola Park’s Great War of December 1990 began at midnight, when an army set out from the shanty town under police escort to annihilate Mshayazafe hostel. . . Xhosa policemen sympathetic to their clansmen in Phola Park were a key part of that night’s operation. . . . Two armoured police vehicles escorted the Phola Park war party. . . . The Xhosa-speaking policemen were fighting shoulder to shoulder with the Xhosa blanket men, gunning down the hostel residents in the yard.

A more common assertion was that police and military units displayed clear political preferences. Without exception, township residents

48. Interview, Robert McBride.
49. Interview, male SDU unit commander, 23 November 2008, Thokoza.
51. Reed, Beloved Country, pp. 54–5.
condemned the riot police known as the Internal Stability Unit (ISU) for its Inkatha bias and shoot-first-ask-questions-later tactics. Dozens of respondents bitterly recounted attacks in which ISU vehicles accompanied and protected Inkatha marauders. Several hostel dwellers confirmed that the ISU often assisted them in conflicts and that this was the only sector of the security forces upon which they could consistently rely. Residents of Buyafuthi Hostel, for example, speak animatedly of an SADF assault on the hostel and the concrete walls of one block are pitted with hundreds of bullet impressions, allegedly from this encounter. One man recalls that ‘The Stability protected us and I remember when the SADF attacked us it was December, I remember, it was Stability Unit that came to our rescue. If it was not for the Stability Unit we would have all died.’ Combatants from both sides, along with bystanders, reported that at least some SADF units favoured township residents. There are several possible reasons for this. The SADF did not share the SAP’s history of animosity vis-à-vis township residents, and SADF personnel had not been chased from their township homes as had many police in the 1980s. From the early 1990s the army had established a base in Thokoza where soldiers resided in tents and interacted with township residents on a day-to-day basis. These soldiers did not have the same proximity to hostel dwellers. Finally, during this period of political transition black soldiers may have identified with the ANC as the primary liberation movement. An SDU member in Thokoza explains SADF assistance:

Definitely, the soldiers used to sympathize with us. I’ll give you an example of what happened. We would have a situation where we were going to attack the hostel, we would gather in the township in our own section and then we’d get into a section that was nearer to the hostel. The soldiers would come and tell us where those IFP people were, the soldiers would come with their armoured vehicles and tell us what the IFP people were doing, where they were and what we must do. The police would do the opposite – they would be helping IFP in the same way.

An SDU member from Katlehong relates that,

SADF was on our side. I remember the day when the Zulus were from Pretoria, they had the rally there and when they were coming back with the train they were protected by the Stability Unit. The Zulus started shooting the township people and the SADF shot back and it was now Stability fighting SADF, and mind you SADF is stronger than Stability Unit, so the support we got from SADF was good.

Non-combatant township residents corroborate these accounts of a partial military. ‘They were on our side. They were brought to stop the violence but the way they did it you could see they were on our side. They showed

52. Interview, male hostel dweller, 4 July 2006, Buyafuthi Hostel.
53. Interview, male SDU member, 11 June 2004, Johannesburg.
54. Interview, male SDU member, November 2006, Katlehong.
no mercy to the Zulus, it was really good to have them." Many SDU members denied that the soldiers actively assisted their units, but even these commended the SADF for its neutrality. By contrast, one military unit, at least, was considered a hostile force by township respondents: 32 Battalion, composed primarily of veterans from the Angolan conflicts, had a very antagonistic relationship with residents of Phola Park, with whom they exchanged fire on several occasions. The National Peacekeeping Force (NPKF) – an amalgam of military personnel from the homeland armies and the armed wing of the ANC – assumed responsibility for security in Thokoza and Katlehong in April 1994 just prior to the general elections. Predictably, hostel dwellers condemned the NPKF, while ANC supporters embraced its presence. In the words of an SDU member, ‘We were working hand-in-hand with them.’

Although the biases of some police and army factions were common knowledge, an element of uncertainty often permeated interactions with the different security forces. A resident of Buyafuthi Hostel explains:

The role of police at that time was a bit confusing because they were mixed; there were those who supported us and those who were against us. So when they came here you could not know why they were coming. Those that were on our side, when they come they would not take weapons that we used to protect ourselves. They would also come when there was a fight to check if everything was okay. But those who were against us they would come and take our weapons so that we cannot defend ourselves, you could see that they were supporting the other group. So the role of the police was not clear.

Contrary to the depiction of state security forces as universally hostile towards ANC supporters, the various police and military units played a far more complex role in transition violence.

*Top-down meets bottom-up*

National level politicians from the ANC and IFP appeared at rallies in Thokoza and Katlehong to offer encouragement and support. They often preached peace, but some prominent party officials were implicated in directing attacks and promoting violence. Certainly both organizations worked closely with ‘defence’ structures to which they supplied weapons and training and exercised varying degrees of control. Yet, much of the violence was opportunistic, spontaneous, and not undertaken at the behest of political masters. Interviews with SDU members reveal that the ANC leadership was far removed from the day-to-day workings of township violence. The ANC managed to establish a unified command

55. Interview, male township resident, December 2006, Katlehong.
56. Sealey, interviews.
57. Interview, male hostel dweller, 24 June 2006, Buyafuthi Hostel. Some of our township respondents categorized black police as sympathetic and white police as hostile.
structure, but the different SDU sections maintained operational autonomy. For example, the massive pre-election attacks on Thokoza hostels were initiated by SDUs without the approval of the ANC. And, try as it might, the ANC was unable to eliminate abuses by SDUs. Many of these outfits were home-grown initiatives that emerged from communities desperate for protection. Only after the fighting had begun did ANC leaders arrive on the scene to assist with materials, training, and oversight. In the words of the central commander, ‘It’s bullshit to say that the ANC established SDUs. Fuck, the ANC had no infrastructure inside at that stage to do it. People defended themselves.’ 58 Not surprisingly, some units continued to operate largely independently of ANC authority. Given the patronage system operated by the IFP and the insular world of the hostels during the violence, it is likely that the combatants in the hostels, including the SPUs, were more tightly controlled by IFP-aligned officials – but much research remains to be done in this area.

Township residents and hostel dwellers appealed to their respective patrons for assistance and protection but also noted that political leaders often inflamed the violence. A hostel inmate remembers:

The other things that caused violence were rallies and there I blame leaders, they knew what will happen when they call a rally but they continued about in the name of campaigning while people were dying. It was easier to be attacked then because we were just in the open. I hated that, it is just that I could not say, ‘No I won’t go’, because it would be like I am a sell-out.

Some hostel respondents were outraged that they and their fellows had functioned as cannon fodder in a political contest over which they had little knowledge and no control.

I don’t think many people here in the hostel understood politics and I think that was the downfall of the hostel people because we died for something we don’t know. We were fighting to be Zulus but there was a political agenda behind that. There were IFP people here who would tell us that we were killed because we are Zulus and they were lying. They knew that it was a war between ANC and IFP but they would come here and say we are killed because of that, and they were using us.

Others hoped that political loyalty would ensure a measure of security. ‘We all became IFP, although we didn’t know what IFP stood for. I never understood politics … and I am not sure what IFP was fighting for, but during the violence I was an IFP person. I even had t-shirts and in my room I had the big photo of [IFP leader] Buthelezi because we were told that IFP could protect us.’ 61

58. Interview, Robert McBride.
59. Interview, male hostel dweller, 19 July 2006, Madala Hostel.
60. Interview, male hostel dweller, 10 July 2006, Madala Hostel.
61. Interview, male hostel dweller, 18 October 2006, Kwesine Hostel.
Township respondents voiced a wider range of perceptions regarding the ANC’s role in the conflict. Some were also disgusted by what they saw as politicians’ agendas that fed the violence. ‘The violence attracted publicity and that is what politicians want. They don’t care how many people die, as long as their political missions are achieved.’ Others equated the fighting in their home township with the larger liberation struggle and voiced strong support for the ANC. A few SDU members expressed derision towards an organization they feel did far too little to assist them in the war against the hostel dwellers, while some units characterized ANC assistance as critical to their survival.

None of the people interviewed describe a concerted attempt by political leadership to trigger the initial fighting, yet well-known political figures became instrumental in the violence once it began. Whatever the genesis of the violence, the evidence is overwhelming that both the ANC and IFP sometimes utilized the fighting to consolidate political support.

Conclusion

The voices of people caught up in the violence help us reassess events in Thokoza and Katlehong in several ways that challenge the dominant narrative. First, forces associated with both Inkatha and the ANC committed atrocities in an environment that sanctioned deadly violence against all people categorized as the enemy, regardless of combatant status. There was no shortage of victims on either side of the political divide and Inkatha did not have a monopoly on armed aggression. Indeed, by the later stages of the conflict the hostel dwellers were barely hanging on.

Second, the detailed accounts of security force involvement complicate the third force theory that attributes the conflict to the deadly manoeuvrings of secret government hit squads and provocateurs. While some police commanders and their units initiated violence for political ends, state security personnel lacked the capacity to engineer and manage wide-ranging and disparate conflicts. Various groups within the townships, of all political persuasions, were active players in the violence with their own agendas that were not subject to third force manipulation. Oral testimony indicates that the different police and military groups in Thokoza and Katlehong operated independently of one another and lacked a uniform political orientation. Some favoured the IFP; some backed the ANC, while others were divided or indifferent. Many security force personnel had no stake in the violence and performed their jobs, competently or otherwise, without discernible bias.

Third, the oral accounts shed light on the connections between local dynamics and national politics and suggest that while parochial concerns

62. Interview, male township resident, 21 August 2004, Thokoza.
influenced the course of the violence, national-level political antagonisms both defined and sustained the larger conflict. Once the NP was voted out of power, the ANC and IFP reached a peace agreement and the fighting was no longer sanctioned (and promoted) by national backers. Instead, acts of ‘political’ violence were branded as banditry and the perpetrators as criminals. Occasional revenge killings and some SDU rivalries persisted, but without the backing of the major political players, the scale of violence subsided considerably. In this sense, political rivalries served as the primary enabling agent for the transition-era violence perpetrated and experienced by residents of Thokoza and Katlehong. As such, all parties need to take responsibility for the devastation visited upon these people.

Nationalist histories, in general, and the dominant account of transition violence, in particular, provide sanitized versions of the past. Some ANC supporters and officials draw upon these histories to proclaim the moral supremacy of the party and to deny the legitimacy of political opposition. In as much as perceptions of history influence contemporary politics, this conviction that the ANC is ordained to rule the country could prove problematic for the future of democracy in South Africa. Questioning and challenging these narratives not only leads to a more accurate and representative history, but can also lay the foundations for a more inclusive nation.