

## Book Review

# Guilty and Proud – An MK Soldier’s Memoir of Exile, Prison and Freedom

Marion Sparg

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‘Sparg case: leg irons are removed’<sup>1</sup> so read the bold headline of *The Star* newspaper dated Saturday, 30 August 1986 when Marion Sparg appeared before the court charged with treason, after her legal counsel argued for removing the shackles. Sparg first appeared before the court on 15 August 1986 when she was formally charged with treason, as the *Citizen* reported ‘Sparg was accused of treason’.<sup>2</sup> These headlines introduced Marion Monica Sparg, not only to South Africa but to the world, as a white woman, African National Congress (ANC) member, and Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) soldier – whom the state labelled as a “terrorist” for planting bombs at three police stations.

In her memoir, *Guilty and Proud – An MK Soldier’s Memoir of Exile, Prison and Freedom*, Sparg narrates her life journey as a white female South African who was initially oblivious of the racial oppression blacks suffered under the white minority apartheid regime. The memoir focuses chronologically on three phases of her journey, which are respectively reflected in the sub-title of the memoir of *Exile, Prison and Freedom*: exile (1981–1986), prison (1986–1991), and freedom (1991–2024).

The book commences with the genesis of her political awakening in 1977, which also reveals the significant role played by Black Consciousness Movement politics in South Africa in the 1970s. Sparg’s political awakening was consolidated by her short stint as a journalist, and culminated during the 1981 anti-republican celebrations with her involvement in the petrol bombing of the Progressive Federal Party (PFP) offices.

This political awakening forced Sparg towards an unplanned journey into exile in 1981, to become an MK soldier, marking the first phase of her book title. Her experiences in Angola as a trainee and her deployment in the ANC headquarters, at the Department of Information and Publicity (DIP) section, exposed her to ANC politics, and she became imbued in its ideology. This phase was concluded by the decision to deploy her to the home front via Lesotho.

Sparg explains how she navigated the underground operational theatre on her own and how she succeeded in lying low for two months. During her stay in South Africa, her missions led her to place limpet mines at three police stations: Cambridge (East London on 19 February 1986), John Vorster Square (Johannesburg on 4 March 1986) and one that

did not detonate at Hillbrow police station (also 4 March 1986). In the opening chapter and in Chapter Fourteen, Sparg relates how she casually walked into the John Vorster Square and Hillbrow police stations for reconnaissance, and how her race made it easy to enter John Vorster Square on 4 March with limpet mines in her handbag. The black police officer manning the gate wanted to search her bag, but was stopped by a white police officer telling him not to search a white woman. She was arrested on 7 March 1986.

With her arrest, she faced interrogation by the dreaded security branch. Her arrest marked the second phase of her journey (prison 1986-1991) in the title of her book. She then planned to use her trial as a political trial to tell the world that the ANC was not a violent organisation. Her case was heard in the Rand Supreme Court. It started on 3 November 1986, and was presided over by Judge JP van der Walt. When she told her legal team of her intention to plead guilty, considering the gravity of the charge of treason, they were not pleased. She had taken this decision long before her arrest, as she states, 'I had already decided that if I was arrested, I was going to admit to my actions and explain why I had chosen, as a white South African, to join the ANC and MK.'<sup>3</sup> With this decision, Sparg wanted to make it a political trial by taking advantage of the coverage her trial received. She wanted to justify her reasons for fighting against apartheid as a white woman but also to prove that the ANC was non-racial, that it was not a terrorist organisation, and that the apartheid state was the one killing people both inside and outside the country. In the end, her legal team appreciated her stance. Her guilty plea helped to whittle down the witnesses from 141 to only six, saving her family the trouble of testifying against her.

As expected, Sparg was found guilty, and sentenced to 25 years imprisonment escaping both a life sentence and death sentence for a serious crime of treason. She served only five and half years at Pretoria Central as prisoner no. 1062/86, the same prison where Steve Biko died at the hands of police in detention on 12 September 1977.

In prison, Sparg met other white women who were serving sentences for political reasons, such as Barbara Hogan, Trish Hanekom, Jansie Lourens, and Ruth Gerhard. To make the best out of her prison stay, she registered for a BA Honours degree in Political Studies at the University of South Africa (Unisa), after she was denied registering for journalism. Among the letters she received, was a poem from Annemarie Hendrickz, which contained the words 'Guilty and proud',<sup>4</sup> which Sparg used when she pleaded guilty to the charges; and this became the title of her memoir.

The third phase of *Guilty and Proud* encompasses Sparg's release from prison as part of the negotiation process to release political prisoners, and the end of apartheid. She was released in April 1991 as part of the political arrangement to release political prisoners for the political transition of the country. This phase of the book gives the reader a glimpse of the negotiation process to end apartheid, and Sparg's role in shaping a post-apartheid South Africa, which comprises the essence of this book. The publicity of her arrest and trial as MK guerrilla was so far-reaching that Nelson Mandela visited her in prison – one of his priorities immediately after his release in 1990. His visit gave her hope that she would also be released. On her release, she became involved in political work for the ANC. After her short stay in Johannesburg, she flew back to East London, and she was

surprised to receive a hero's welcome when she landed. Moving around East London, she was surprised that the previous white conservative town embraced her, with a few hostile individuals remaining. Some white people were also politically active in the ANC, serving in the ANC executive committee for the Border region, and as staff in the regional offices. Sparg was also surprised that, when the parliamentary list for the region and province in preparation for the 1994 elections was submitted, there were a higher number of white names than names of black people.

In 1991, at the 48<sup>th</sup> ANC National Conference, Sparg was elected to the National Executive Committee (NEC) of the party. Working in the office of the secretary-general, she was always part of Nelson Mandela's entourage during negotiations as part of the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA). Another prominent event of her life after her imprisonment was the 28 March 1994 Inkatha Freedom Party march to Shell House. The march happened when she was in Cape Town on organisational matters. When she returned to the office the following day, one member of staff showed her a bullet hole directly behind her chair, which suggested that the bullet came from a sniper, and she was a possible target. Her assumption of a sniper was strengthened during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearing from the evidence given by Andrew Leask, which also claimed that the Goldstone Commission of Inquiry Regarding the Prevention of Public Violence and Intimidation in 1991 was warned about the plot to assassinate top ANC leaders.

Sparg concludes the book with a reflection on her role in MK, and whether her life for the struggle for liberation was worth the sacrifice. To this question, Sparg answered with a resounding yes, and added that she is proud to have contributed towards the fight against apartheid and the creation of a non-racial South Africa. She is proud to have contributed 'towards giving South Africa the greatest gift of all – a more human face'.<sup>5</sup> She however acknowledges the shortcomings of the ANC as the ruling party for having disappointed to deliver on its promises and singles out 'the wasted nine years under Jacob Zuma'.<sup>6</sup>

To those who had an influence in her life as leaders and mentors, she has dedicated some chapters in the memoir. These are Chapter Eight for Jack Simmons, Joe Slovo (Chapter Nine), Nelson Mandela (Chapter Twenty-five) and Chris Hani (Chapter Twenty-six). In the case of others, such as Thabo Mbeki, she has incorporated her encounters with them and their influence in her life in other parts of the book.

*Guilty and Proud – An MK Soldier's Memoir of Exile, Prison and Freedom* is not just a memoir, but also a history and record of some of the MK operations in the 1980s. Most of the individuals Sparg mentions in the memoir, are not just names, as she provides a background of each individual and their role and contribution, locating each name in the struggle for liberation. All these make Marion Sparg's book a good read and a vital addition to the historiography of the struggle for liberation in South Africa.

Importantly, *Guilty and Proud – An MK Soldier's Memoir of Exile, Prison and Freedom* sheds light on why some white men and women consciously decided to forego the privileges of the apartheid system and become involved in the armed struggle. On this,

Judge JP van der Walt stated, 'If a black South African were in your position his or her acts could be understood, although not excused.'<sup>7</sup> The important message that Sparg conveys, is to fight injustice done to a fellow human being. *Guilty and Proud* is a worthy read for anti-apartheid enthusiasts and autobiography readers and a milestone contribution to enrich the historiography covering the 30 years of the liberation struggle in South Africa.

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## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> I Molzen, 'Sparg Case: Leg Irons are Removed', *The Star*, 30 August 1986.
  - <sup>2</sup> S Lieberum, 'Sparg Accused of Treason', *The Citizen*, 16 August 1986.
  - <sup>3</sup> M Sparg, *Guilty and Proud: An MK Soldier's Memoir of Exile, Prison and Freedom* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2024), 145.
  - <sup>4</sup> Sparg, *Guilty and Proud*, 194.
  - <sup>5</sup> Sparg, *Guilty and Proud*, 257.
  - <sup>6</sup> Sparg, *Guilty and Proud*, 257.
  - <sup>7</sup> Sparg, *Guilty and Proud*, 189.
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