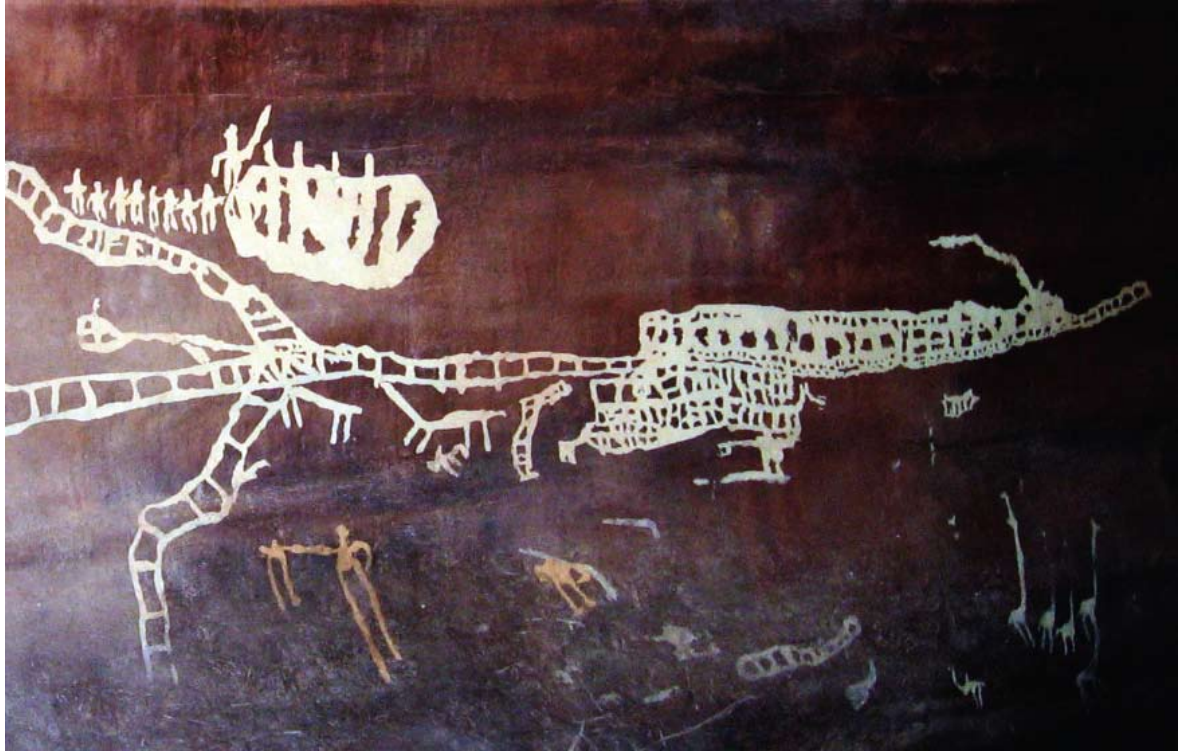


Inherited images of defiance



A panel of rock paintings in the Makabeng Hills done at the end of the 19th century shows the battle of Chief Maleboho of the Bahananwa against Boer general Paul Kruger; after waging a successful guerilla resistance in the Blouberg area, Chief Maleboho surrendered and was imprisoned by Kruger in Pretoria (the large square with bars and people inside in the above reproduction of the rock painting represents Chief Maleboho's imprisonment).

From the pre-colonial heritage

Early artistic expression from South Africa has been consistently ignored by international discourse on art – to the extent that it is not even preserved in museums as 'art', but only as pre-historical 'artifacts'. There is sufficient surviving work to say with confidence that people in pre-colonial southern Africa did make extensive creative visual art. Imagery made by these early artists has for the most part not been preserved, or collected, or sometimes even classified as art.

A few surviving artworks testify to the struggle against colonial conquest by South Africa's people (sometimes called 'primary resistance'). A rock painting from the Western Cape shows Boer settlers shooting Africans in the 18th and 19th centuries; historians have recently acknowledged this as 'genocide'². An etched horn from the British Zulu war period (1870s) shows the battles against British conquest. A cave in the Makabeng mountains in the Northern Province holds rock paintings which record the resistance of Chief Maleboho and his people against Boer troops under Paul Kruger, until Maleboho's eventual surrender and incarceration in a prison in Pretoria.³

But the links between pre-colonial and 'primary resistance' artworks like these, and modern imagery and design, have simply never been explored. Students at the Rorke's Drift art school in the 1960s and 1970s have mentioned that they found rock art in the hills near the school an 'inspiration',⁴ but little critical attempt has been made to consider the impact of this on contemporary styles and images and imagery.⁵

Tracing our heritage

In a similar vein, very little has been saved and recorded, and less studied, from the visual art produced in the period from the earliest days of colonialism until the 1950s. Relatively few early South African political publications have survived. Personal and organisational collections of printed material have only just begun to find their way into history archives. Some may still remain buried in police files. Much has been destroyed and lost.

'..the makers of this art did not stand outside their creations and think or talk about them as subjects for intellectual discourse or as the bountiful harvest in the orchard of the imagination that they represent. Nor.. would they have thought of themselves and their age as the epitome of innocence, in the sense of being unschooled practitioners, the antithesis of the self-conscious artists of today who begin by experimenting with forms and formulas. Innocence, often equated with the character of the 'primitive', is a figment of the modernist imagination.'

Es'kia Mphahlele ¹



Rock art, Cederberg Mountains; depicts men on horses with guns shooting Khoisan people holding bows and arrows. Probably 1800s.

'We did not even keep that stuff from our own generation – how could we have it from my parents?'

Thenji Mthintso, when asked whether she had visual material: graphics, photographs, pamphlets from her father, leading trade unionist and communist, Gana Makabena⁶

Despite these gaps, enough of a visual record of resistance and defiance remains to ensure that we cannot presume that such art was never made. In preparing for the Museum Africa 'Images of Defiance' exhibition, South African History Archives (SAHA) pointed researchers at a collection of 'old Russian political posters' which had been confiscated by the security police in Cape Town in the 1950s, and placed in the national library there; they were withdrawn from the national library without record, then recently handed to SAHA. It was discovered that most of the posters in the collection were not Russian, but silk-screened Communist Party posters made in Cape Town in the 1940s; the posters address issues such as the effect of the colour bar on South Africa's contribution to the second World War.⁷

Political graphics from the early 20th century

Despite the major gaps in the historical record of these early years, we can begin to trace the development of graphic symbolism and iconography that laid the foundations for what became the poster movement.

A first location for such graphics came in the various African Nationalist, trade union, and socialist publications.

The late 1800s and early 1900s saw the sprawl of urban and industrial areas, of mines and factories. White settlers and colonialist rulers divided up the land, the economy, and the government amongst themselves. Africans migrated from rural areas to work in towns and cities. A few found jobs as journalists, preachers, and doctors, but the majority of the African population were assigned to the lowest levels of labour, dispossessed from the land they had lived upon, and excluded from power within government or the economy. Many resisted.

The African Nationalist movement came to life as a dark twin to the newly forming country now called the Republic of South Africa. In 1912, the Union of South Africa was created. In the same year, the South African Native National Congress (later to become the African National Congress) called for recognition and equality for the black population. In 1913, the white government introduced the Native Land Act, which the nascent African nationalist movement resisted. In that year, Charlotte Maxeke led the first women's march against passes for women in Bloemfontein. In 1919, the first national black trade union, the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union, was created.

In Europe and America, the history of the graphic imagery of resistance paralleled the growth of the print media. Printers, as literate and skilled members of the newly forming working class, developed their own imagery and reproduced it on paper and in press.

In South Africa, however, few of the African nationalist publications in the first decades of the 20th century carried images. Two factors contributed to this:

- First, despite the rapid urbanisation of the later 19th century, the majority of Africans were excluded from literacy, and denied professional jobs, or even most 'skilled' occupations. Very few people from this majority had access to materials used to generate images: pens, paint, paper, or canvas.
- Second, while there was a vibrant 'African nationalist press' in the early 1900s, these newspapers did not have the technology to print complex graphics. Even those few which did have access to materials and training in drawing and design most often had no access to technologies for printing graphics.



For Victory in 1942: Colour Bar, artist unknown, 1942, printed for Communist Party of South Africa, offset litho. No. 3595

Graphic images in print: Early press, 1890s to 1930s

Several black-owned presses were closely linked to resistance politics — newspapers such as John Tembu Jabavu's *Imvo za baNtshundu* (East London), *Izwa laBantu* (People's Voice, founded 1900 by Walter Rubusana, a minister of the Congregational Church), the *South African Spectator* (founded in Cape Town in 1901), *Koranta ea Recoana* (Bechuana Gazette, published in seTswana and English at Mafeking by writer and ANC founder Sol Plaatje); and *Ilanga lase Natal* (begun in 1906 in Durban by John Dube, also a founder of the ANC).

In 1913, the ANC established *Abantu batho*, which played an instrumental role in mobilising people against the Native Land Act, and for the anti-pass movement of women in Orange Free State.⁸ But these relatively small black-owned presses did not have the in-house capacity to print complex graphic artwork. The plates for photographs and more complex images had to be made separately by commercial printing houses — an expensive and time-consuming process — controlled by white-owned business.

By the Depression of 1929, smaller presses could not survive, and a white entrepreneur bought up the previously independent black presses to form the Bantu World press, which dominated the black market for the following decades.

By the later 1890s, the commercial white press in South Africa adopted the new process of printing 'half-tones' — that is, allowing subtle changes of shade or colour in a printed area. But they imported trained graphic artists from Europe. In 1906, the Johannesburg Star hired cartoonist Frank Holland, after interviews in London.

DURBAN, Monday (Reuter). — Joseph's Roman Catholic Church, which previously stood in Grey Street, but recently razed and erected at Grey's was formally opened by Bishop Deane yesterday.

BY ELECTION AT VRYHEID Monday (Reuter). — Candidates have been requested to stand for the vacancy caused by the retirement of Mr. William Harper, chairman of Local Board. They are Messrs. O. Challinor, J. W. Dukes, and K. Holt. The last-named being editor of "Vryheid Herald."

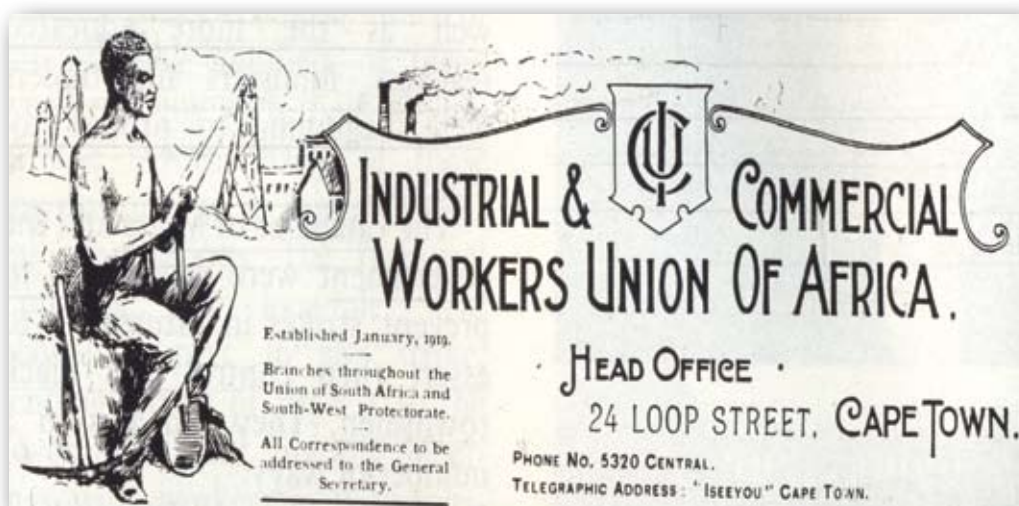
RETURN OF CHINESE. DURBAN, Monday (Reuter). — The six undesirable Chinese from the 10 have been placed on the ship for return to China. Eight invalids were also brought down for return. One, however, died the way, and another just before the trial of the train at the local Chinese camp.

Printers outside the printing works in Mafeking (early 1900s): seated from second, left to right: ST Plaatje, Elizabeth Plaatje, ST Mokwena. The printers holding the type-forms, and the mallet for 'locking' the form, are un-named. (Photo from South African Historical Papers)

DURBAN LICENSING BOARD. DURBAN, Monday (Reuter). — The Licensing Board completed annual session. No renewals were refused. A dozen applications for new licences were granted.



Logo and masthead of the ICWU in Johannesburg in 1923, South African Historical Papers.



A further location for printed resistance graphics developed within publications of the various sections of the 'left' political parties and the trade union movement (both white and black). Trade unions and left-wing organisations published their own pamphlets and newspapers. In 1923, the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union published *The Workers' Herald*. The newly-formed Communist Party put out *Umsebenzi/The Worker*. But these printing presses did not have the facilities to reproduce much graphic imagery. With a few notable exceptions, where these organisations did print images, these tended to be 'imported' and adopted from European revolutionary and worker art.

Photographic record and identity

South Africa established a visual heritage of photographic imagery in the early 20th century. This country was as 'advanced' as any country in the world in pioneering, and promoting, new photographic techniques. The history of photography, film, and the camera links directly to the development of colonialism in Southern Africa – both within Southern Africa itself, and in spurring innovations in the industrial world to meet the demands of colonialism. Mid-19th century travellers and explorers worked with the newest technologies of photographic glass and gel plates. The first war photo-journalism in the world recorded the South African 'Anglo-Boer War' (first South Africa War) at the end of the 19th century. The mining city of Johannesburg saw a performance of moving pictures barely two months after their first appearance in London, and six weeks after they showed in New York City. Eastman Kodak developed photographic film and 'snap-shot' photography in response to demands for portable film-making processes by travellers, hunters and explorers in Southern Africa.

Another factor may have encouraged the rapid acceptance of the photograph here. In Southern Africa at the end of the 19th century, travelers from Europe made 'realistic' drawn images as a form of reporting and record. Before photographic film became portable and preservable, and half-tone printing made it reproducible, graphic imagery for reproduction commonly consisted of lines drawn by hand over a photographically-captured image. There was little concept of drawing faces or scenes as 'art': no 'academic schools', galleries, or museums collected and preserved them. This meant that the photograph in Southern Africa did not appear to pose a challenge to, or replace, hand-drawn portraiture or fine art. It became the standard form of representation, bypassing the long debates that convulsed European fine art around how the capturing of an image using light and chemicals compared to an artist's representation of the same image with a brush, in terms of realism, sensitivity, or interpretation.



Studio Photograph of Charlotte Manye Maxake, ANC women's leader and social worker, 1920s, South African Historical Papers.

Studio portraits

From the 1920s to the 1950s, photographic portraiture became a highly popular method for honouring and documenting urban existence in the rapidly industrialising South Africa. A similar process occurred during the same time period in Europe and America. Given the lack of literacy and drawing training, photographs became one of the main ways people had of recording and remembering those people who were significant to them. This history of photographic portraiture in the emerging townships has been well studied:

'These solemn images of middle-class and working-class black families, crafted according to styles (in gesture, props and clothing) of Georgian and Victorian portrait painting, portray a class of black people who, according to my education, did not exist at the time they were made.' (Santu Mofokeng)⁹

Drawn from the international revolutionary image.

The other major source of early resistance imagery came with imported visual material from other revolutionary struggles, mainly in Europe and Russia.

Before, during and after the First World War, working-class people migrating from the chaos of Europe brought ideals of socialism and trade unionism to South Africa's shores. Too often, these ideals were jettisoned in favour of the benefits of racism and the colour bar, but along with the ideology, visual images and symbols did find a home in the South African labour movement.

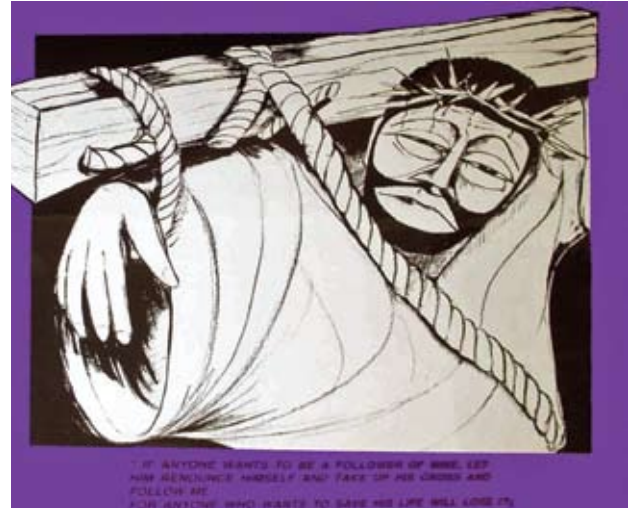
Often symbols and images used by the South African left from the 1920s through to the 1950s came directly from international revolutionary graphics. From the 1920s, the Communist Party of South Africa, and emergent (mostly white) trade unions, reprinted graphics from across the world in their newspapers and magazines. Many reflected the art of Socialist Realism, and South African communists brought back a number of posters from the new Soviet Union.

The most commonly reproduced graphics were woodcuts, linocuts and etchings – simple black and white, hard-line drawings without half-tones were easier to print and more effective visually.

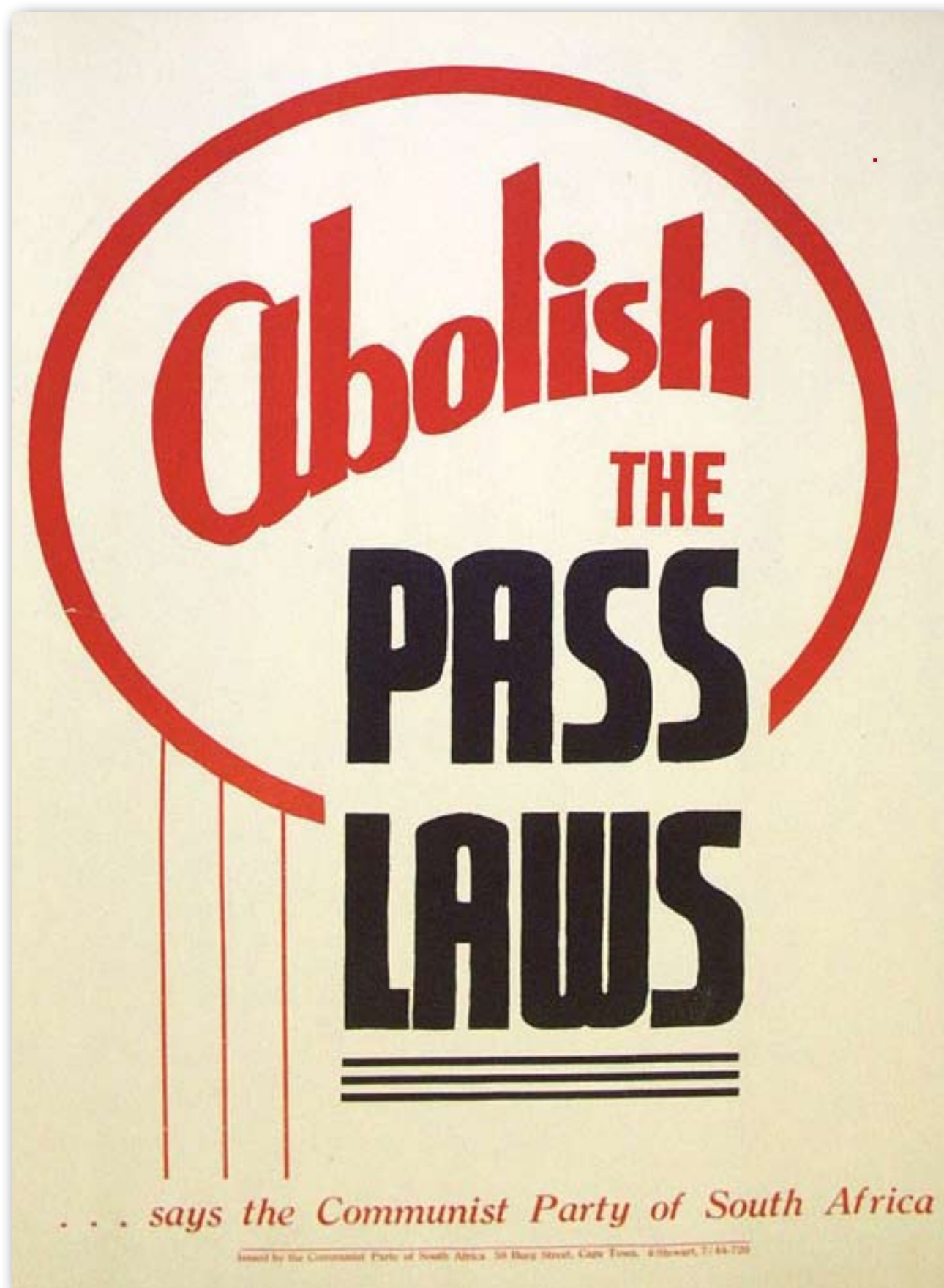
'Imported' revolutionary images could be reproduced unchanged and unchallenged, but repeating unaltered images could turn into a different comment on issues facing the South African struggle. As a result, these graphics were often adapted and made more relevant to the South African context – notably, of course, in confronting issues relating to race and class.

Detail of poster: *Christ*, artist unknown, SACC, mid 1980s, No. 2182

Detail, from one print of the linocut series *Ascent on the Cross*. Artist Charles Nkosi, Rorke's Drift, Natal. This series provides an interesting insight into the integration of Christian visual imagery in liberation symbolism in later political art, 1976.



As late as 1938, the white trade unions were still split over whether May Day celebrations should include (black) African workers. The cover of a pamphlet produced for May Day 1938 (Committee) portrays a white worker and his family flying a red banner. In contrast to this racially limited image, the pamphlet contains writing by Communist members Eli Weinberg and John Gomas: 'Let us unite in common struggle against the capitalist system of oppression, exploitation, and war, for a better social order, without race hatred, with the right of work and leisure for everybody.'



Abolish the Pass Laws, artist unknown, Communist Party of South Africa, offset litho, Cape Town circa 1942. No. 3588

First silk-screens: support for democracy – the Second World War

During the Second World War, South Africa's people were divided along pro- and anti-fascist lines. The government supported the Allies, and left-wing organisations in South Africa backed this campaign. The Communist party produced a series of posters on subjects ranging from advocating medical aid for the besieged Soviet Union, to campaigning around one of the most keenly-felt injustices within the African nationalist movement of the time: while black South Africans were sent to fight for 'world freedom' overseas, the South African government denied them the right to carry guns in this fight.

Some of the posters – with slogans such as 'Give him a gun now', 'Crush the fascist reptile', 'Avenge Tobruk' – may well be the earliest silk-screened political posters in South Africa.

In the 1940s, silk-screening of posters was still a relatively new technique. In its present form, as an inexpensive and low technology mass reproduction technique, silk-screening was developed by left-wing artists working in the US government's public works programme in the 1930s (the Works Progress Administration). It was only in the 1950s in America that silk-screening was widely adopted by industry, initially for fabric and paper printing, and subsequently taught in art schools.

Mediated and unmediated imagery

Inevitably, the most common adaptation of international revolutionary imagery came in the portrayal of race – a critical factor in the South African politics throughout the century. The poster on the left advertises a concert in support of Medical Aid for Russia; the one on the right calls for support for an Allied Victory, clearly provided by both black and white hands.



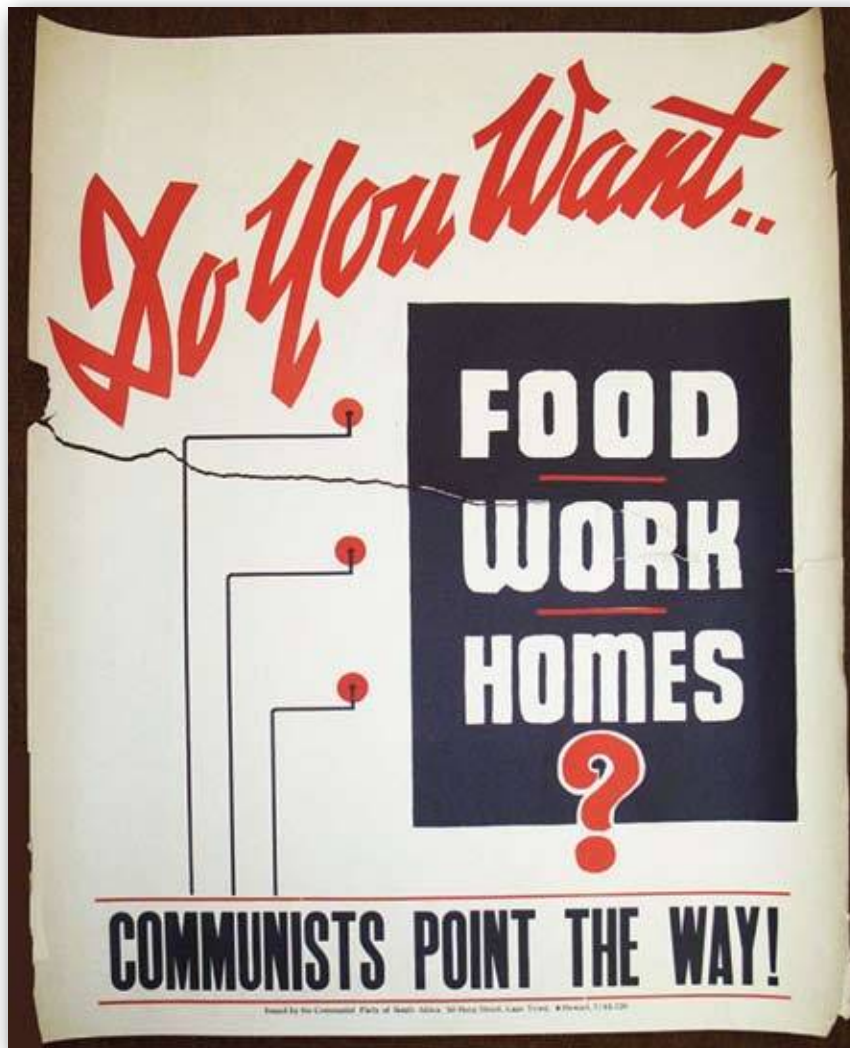
Shostakovich's Leningrad, artist unknown, Medical Aid for Russia, Cape Town, 1942. No. 3593



Avenge Tobruk by Total War, artist unknown, Communist Party of South Africa, Cape Town, circa 1942, silkscreen. No. 3589



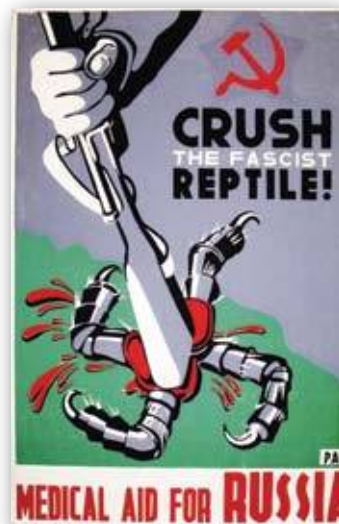
Give him a gun now, artist unknown, Cape Town, 1942, silkscreen. No. 2613



Communists point the way, Communist Party of South Africa, Cape Town, circa 1942, litho off set. No. 3591

Photograph of New Era office during World War II, with poster 'Crush the Fascist Reptile' on the wall. Editor Ruth First sits with back to the camera.

Poster: *Crush the Fascist Reptile*, CPSA, Cape Town, circa 1942, silkscreen. No.2613



Workers in Crown Mine Hostel, Johannesburg 1930s. Photo by Eli Weinberg



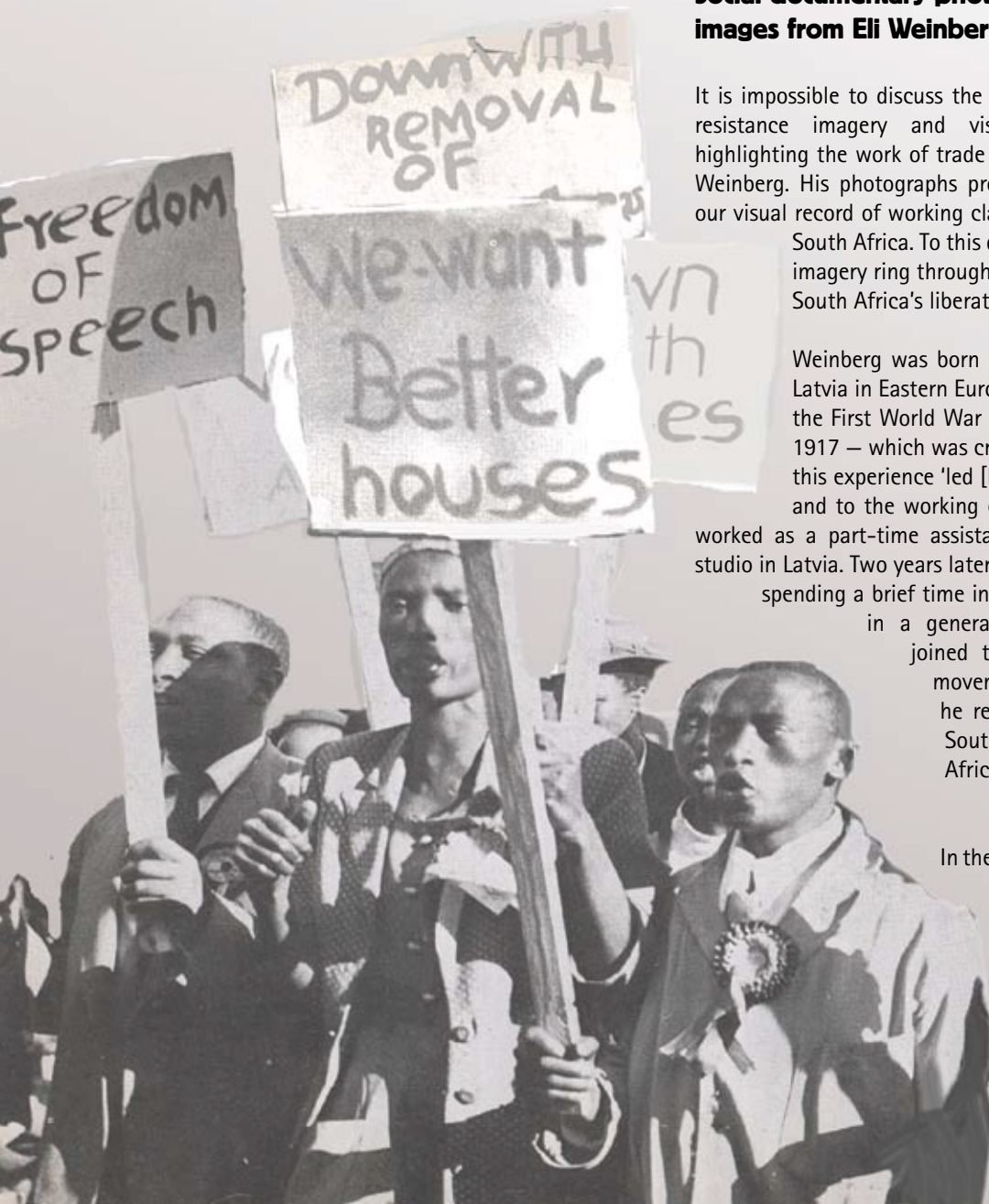
Social documentary photography: images from Eli Weinberg

It is impossible to discuss the development of South African resistance imagery and visual representation without highlighting the work of trade unionist and photographer, Eli Weinberg. His photographs provide concrete foundations to our visual record of working class conditions and struggles in South Africa. To this day, echoes of his photographic imagery ring throughout the visuals and graphics of South Africa's liberation struggle.

Weinberg was born in 1908 in Libau, now part of Latvia in Eastern Europe. As a child he lived through the First World War and the October Revolution of 1917 – which was crushed in Latvia. He claims that this experience 'led [him] in [his] youth to socialism and to the working class movement'.¹² In 1926, he worked as a part-time assistant in a friend's photographic studio in Latvia. Two years later, he sailed for Cape Town, after spending a brief time in a Latvian jail for participating in a general strike. In South Africa he joined the trade union and socialist movement. For the next five decades, he recorded his experiences of the South African working class and African nationalist struggle on film.

In the 1940s and 1950s, Eli Weinberg

People arriving at the Kliptown Congress of the People, in 1956, illegally photographed by Eli Weinberg





Photographs of 1956 Treason Trialists, taken by Eli Weinberg in small groups, and compiled in the darkroom; used in a poster made in the 1980s to commemorate the Treason Trial. Poster; *Treason Trial*, artist unknown, for the Release Mandela Committee, litho, A1, 1986. No. 2185

worked as photographer for a range of pro-ANC and socialist newspapers: *New Age*, *Guardian*, *People's World*, *Advance*, *Clarion*, *Spark*. He was banned and restricted by the apartheid government in 1953. Nonetheless he photographed events such as the Congress of the People in 1956 (taking pictures illegally from a roof across the street), and a group portrait of the 142 accused in the 1956 Treason Trial (taken in small groups to comply with banning orders, and then compiled into a 'group photo' in the darkroom).

When government restrictions made it increasingly difficult for Eli Weinberg to publish his own photographs, he trained other photographers – the most notable being New Age photographer and journalist Joe Gqabi.

Eli Weinberg went into exile in 1978. In 1982, the International Defence and Aid Fund in London published a book of his photographs, *Portrait of a People*. The book was promptly banned in South Africa. Nonetheless, *Portrait* became a visual mainstay of progressive artists inside South Africa. Lou Almon, who worked as an artist for the trade union movement in the 1980s, still has the copy she used. She remembers:

'We used all of the old Eli Weinberg photos. At one police raid, at five in the morning, they found a box of newspaper clippings, photos, including that book of Eli's (*Portrait of a People*). Literally a whole box of photo images, which I used as reference. The police took great delight in it. They took it, but I got it back eventually.'¹³

—JOE GQABI—
MURDERED 31ST JULY 1981



—OUR GRIEF WILL—
FUEL OUR STRUGGLE

Joe Gqabi, Thami Mnyele and J. Siedman, silkscreen, Gaborone, 1982. No. 2147

Joe Gqabi, trained by Eli in photography in the 1950s, was himself a leading political activist. In the 1960s he was imprisoned at Robben Island.

On his release he advised the Soweto Student Representative Council during the unrest of 1976, and then went into exile. He was assassinated by the security police in Zimbabwe in 1981.

This poster, to commemorate his death, was drawn by Thami Mnyele and Judy Seidman, based on a photograph by Eli Weinberg in his book *Portrait of a People*.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Es'kia Mphahlele, *Introduction. Art and Ambiguity, Perspectives on the Brenthurst Collection of Southern African Art*, Johannesburg Art Gallery, 1991, p. 6.
- 2 For a discussion of the genocide of Khoi-San hunter-herders, see Freedom Park document; Genocide of the Khoi-San People at freedompark.org.za/backend/newsdocs/eastern%20cape%20genocide%20of%20the%20khoisan%20people.doc; also see text panels and explanations at the Origins Centre, Wits University, Johannesburg (2007)
- 3 For full description, see display, text and audio tape on rock-painting in cave at the Makabeng Hills, at the Origins Centre, Wits University, Johannesburg (2007)
- 4 Thami Mnyele to Judy Seidman, personal comment in 1983.
- 5 Phillipa Hobbs' comment on awareness of rock paintings at Rorke's Drift Art Centre, during talk at JAG exhibition Empowering Prints, July 1984.
- 6 Thenjiwe Mtintso, interview September 1999.
- 7 Judy Seidman, personal experience, 2004.
- 8 Simons Jack and Ray, *Class and Colour in South Africa: 1850-1950*, IDAF, London, 1983, p. 136.
- 9 Santu Mofokeng, *Sunday Independent*, 1999.
- 10 Weinberg, Eli, *Portrait of a People*, IDAF, London, 1981, p106
- 11 Franco Frescura, Interview, 5 November 1999.
- 12 Op. Cit., Eli Weinberg, *Portrait of a People*, p. 5.
- 13 Lou Almon, Interview, 11 April 2005.

