

Collaboration vs complicity in apartheid south africa



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“ Askari” is a word with Arabic origins meaning “ soldier”. In South Africa, the word was used to identify those formerly of the ANC who “ turned” and were converted into counterinsurgents and informants for the apartheid regime. Askaris are often viewed uniformly as traitors, but their motives for switching sides are scarcely deeply explored. However, in Jacob Dlamini’s book, *Askari: A Story of Collaboration and Betrayal in the Anti-Apartheid Struggle*, Dlamini aims to challenge the automatic association between askaris and traitors by including facts about Glory Sedibe’s life that could have complicated his decision to switch sides. Consequently, he asserts that switching sides is a gray area, rather than a black or white decision.

As a member of the ANC, Glory Sedibe was respected and hailed as one of the organizations future leaders. By providing this background, Dlamini demonstrates how complicated the act of betrayal truly is. Dlamini describes the ANC’s anti-apartheid struggle as Sedibe’s “ first defining cause”. In his 9 years of involvement with the ANC and the MK (the militant branch of the ANC), his close friends described him as nothing short of a “ trusted military genius”. Even his then-enemy Eugene De Kock stated,

“ MK September was well-known to the security police as an excellent and successful operative: wily, crafty, and keeping to all the basic rules of security and counter surveillance and hard to catch... His personal security police file had one piece of information that made him different from all the other ANC members operating in Swaziland or elsewhere. It said: ‘ He cares greatly for his operators and agents and takes good care of them.’ To me, this was a man to respect, even as an enemy”.

Clearly, Sedibe (or September, as he was known in the ANC) was a devoted and highly-regarded member of the anti-apartheid struggle, a cause he seemed to believe in so deeply that he was willing to die for it (as evidenced by his membership in the MK). By providing this background information in the first chapter of his book, "The Insurgent", Jacob Dlamini seems to ask the question: What could make this man, who was so entrenched in the struggle, switch sides? Although he offers no explicit answer to this question, Dlamini seems to suggest through his description of "the insurgent" version of Sedibe, that he was not a man who would easily waver.

Dlamini elicits sympathy and deep reflection about Sedibe's life as a counterinsurgent through his description of what many abducted members of the ANC were put through. Dlamini ironically entitled chapter 4 "The Choice", directly underneath the title of which he included a quote by Nadine Gordimer, a South African writer and political activist,

"Some fled the country, some were held solitary in their cells and, refusing to speak, were kept on their feet under interrogation until they collapsed. Some did speak. Max was tried and sentenced to five years' imprisonment but he was called as a State witness after serving fifteen months, and he spoke. He was beaten when he was first arrested, that we know, but what else he was confronted with later, what else they did to him in himself, we do not know- but he spoke."

In choosing to start off the chapter in this way, Dlamini is attempting to illustrate that often times, the "choice" to work for the other side, was not a choice at all. While Dlamini recognizes that Sedibe chose to speak only hours

after his capture, what he suggests by the inclusion of the above quote is that we cannot ever know the pressures or tortures Sedibe was subject to after his abduction from Swaziland. This of course is true of all askaris. In presenting this information, Dlamini makes it much more difficult to pass judgement as he urges the reader to recognize the complexity of the situation these men and women found themselves in when faced with their “choice”.

Aside from torture, there were other motivators that could have pushed Sedibe to switch sides and become an Askari. Although Sedibe married his wife, Cao, in 1983, their life together was described as a “hide-and-seek game”, as Sedibe’s life as a fugitive required constant movement. Dlamini also writes, “De Kock told the TRC, being reunited with his wife and their daughter was one of the conditions on which Sedibe agreed to switch sides”. After Sedibe agreed to work for the regime, De Kock took care of Sedibe’s wife and child by putting them up in a white-only hotel in Piet Retief. Dlamini’s presentation of these facts seems to suggest a connection between Glory Sedibe’s family and his willingness to cooperate with the apartheid regime. Unfortunately, Sedibe’s premature death at age 40 has left few answers about his true motivations, or what his thought process was in making his decision. However, including an anecdote about Sedibe’s family life exposes another facet that could have led to his sudden commitment to a regime he once detested.

Dlamini effectively shows how complicated life was as an askari. Although it is easy to classify askaris as “traitors” automatically, his explanation of Glory Sedibe’s life raises questions about what it truly means to collaborate. <https://assignbuster.com/collaboration-vs-complicity-in-apartheid-south-africa/>

By revealing the various components of Sedibe's life, he is essentially asking the reader to reassess whether or not askaris were truly making a "choice" when they decided to work for the apartheid regime. Although neither Sedibe or Dlamini can offer real answers about what happened, Askari: A Story of Collaboration and Betrayal in the Anti-Apartheid Struggle offers another side to the askaris' stories.