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Blowing up apartheid: MK's strategic targets from sabotage to armed propaganda

Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) was formed by leaders of the African National Congress and the South African Communist Party in 1961, signalling a turn to armed struggle, initially in the form of sabotage, after decades of non-violence. The reasons for this change in strategy are multiple and complex and have been the subject of much historiographical debate. Less attention has been given to the targets of sabotage – not people, but government buildings and infrastructure such as electricity and telephone lines – and the effects these armed actions were meant to achieve from a military, economic and symbolic point of view, while avoiding civilian casualties. While the ANC turned to guerrilla warfare as the next phase of armed struggle this was difficult to implement and from the 1970s, following another period of strategic review, armed propaganda assumed an increasingly central role as a foundation of people's war. This paper provides an exploration of MK's sabotage and armed propaganda operations with a view of identifying case studies for future in depth research.



MK Sabotage. Photograph by Drum photographer, Baileys Archives.