

POLITICS AND VIOLENCE IN THE 'RUSSIAN ZONE':
CONFLICT IN NEWCLARE SOUTH, 1950–7*

BY GARY KYNOCH

Dalhousie University

THE urban townships of South Africa have been contested terrain since their inception. Different groups have struggled to control territory, various resources and political activities within the confines of the locations and, all too frequently, violence has been an integral part of these struggles. Groups as varied in composition and ideology as squatter movements, well-organized criminal outfits, student groups, vigilantes, traditional courts (*makgotlas*), migrant gangs, youth gangs, municipal political groups and national political movements – with much overlapping between these categories – have all at one time or another sought to impose their will on township residents and have regarded violence as an essential element in their campaigns.

While much attention has been deservedly devoted to the violence employed by the state as a means of subjugating, dividing and controlling township residents, the different ways in which black urban groups struggled to assert control over their environments have received relatively little scrutiny. These processes cannot be regarded in isolation from the state's quest for control, but neither should they be subsumed by the larger focus on a revolutionary struggle. Rather, I would argue that a more informed understanding of the conditions and challenges faced by black urbanites requires study of the nature of localized power and violence within the townships. African groups pursued agendas which served their own interests and had a considerable impact on social relations and perceptions of power and authority, both within the locations and in the broader context of national/racial politics.

This article concentrates on the migrant Basotho gangs known as Marashea or Russians, in particular the eight-year period in the 1950s when they were the single most dominant force in the freehold area of Newclare (known by Basotho as *Siteketekeng*), a township on the western fringes of Johannesburg. With the collusion – and sometimes active assistance – of the South African police (SAP), the Russian gangs emerged victorious from a series of battles with various opponents and effectively annexed the southern portion of Newclare. They maintained their dominance and functioned as an alternative form of government until Africans were expelled from the township as part of the Western Areas Removal Scheme at the end of the decade.

Russian gangs of the 1950s have been the focus of two scholarly articles, the first, by Guy and Thabane, following the life of Rantoa, a member of the Matsieng faction based in 1950s Newclare. Rantoa's recollections provide a window into Russian life, revealing how Russianism was deeply embedded in a collective Basotho identity, the factional battles that defined the different gangs, the Russians' complex and contradictory relations with the police and

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the importance of lawyers to the gangs' survival. This is a fascinating account, but it is concerned with the life experiences of one man and does not attempt to explain the Russians' rise to power nor assess the impact of their activities on the larger population. Secondly, Bonner explores the Russian phenomenon from its beginnings on the Reef in the late 1940s to the close of the 1950s. This work provides a basis for further studies of the Russian gangs, examining as it does the formation of the Russians and their contribution to ethnic chauvinism in the townships and squatter camps on the Rand. Bonner touches on the conflicts in Newclare and highlights the Russians' relationship with the police, but his focus is much broader and details are limited.¹

The purpose of this article is twofold: it explores the manner in which the Russians established and maintained supremacy over Newclare South in the 1950s (paying particular attention to their relationship with the SAP) and then assesses the legacy of their reign over the area that came to be known as the 'Russian Zone'.

THE MARASHEA

The Russians had their genesis in the migrant Basotho gangs established in the mining compounds and locations on the Rand since the early years of the century. Faction fights on the mines often assumed ethnic dimensions and Basotho (like other groups) tended to band together for collective security. Much the same process occurred in the townships (town and compound life were intricately connected) where migrants were often targeted by more urbanized criminals. Although they most likely began as defensive associations, as migrant gangs consolidated their power their efforts invariably extended to attempts to control urban resources – territory, women and revenue-raising schemes – which led to more aggressive, predatory behaviour.

The Russians proper seem to have been born in the late 1940s and to have taken their name from the recent victors of the Second World War.² Regional animosities rooted in Lesotho's history of succession disputes and royal infighting were reflected in the internecine rivalries which distinguished the different Russian groups:

The factions of Matsieng and Ha-Molapo/Masupha reproduced and reignited the historical antagonism between the royalists of south Lesotho, followers of Moshoeshoe's [the founding King of Lesotho] heir, Letsie I, with his capital at Matsieng, and the restive collateral nobility of north Lesotho led by Moshoeshoe's second and third sons, Molapo and Masupha, whom he installed at Peka and Thaba Bosiu, and who consistently defied or rebelled against the paramouncy.³

¹ J. Guy and M. Thabane, 'The Ma-Rashea, a participant's perspective', in B. Bozzoli (ed.), *Class, Community and Conflict* (Johannesburg, 1987), 436–56; P. Bonner, 'The Russians on the reef, 1947–1957: urbanisation, gang warfare and ethnic mobilisation', in Bonner, P. Delius and D. Posel (eds.), *Apartheid's Genesis, 1935–1962* (Johannesburg, 1993), 160–94. Others have made passing mention of the Russians, but these remain the only two published works that have the Russians as their primary topic.

² This is by far the most popular explanation that informants have given and confirms the findings of both Bonner and David Coplan.

³ D. Coplan, *In the Time of Cannibals: The Word Music of South Africa's Basotho Migrants* (Chicago, 1994), 187.

The feud between the Molapo/Masupha faction – known collectively as Matsekha – and the Matsieng became a feature of Russian life in South Africa and persists in various forms to this day.

The earliest documented flare-up of this rivalry in South Africa took place in Vereeniging in the early 1940s and continued through to 1947 despite the best efforts of chiefs sent from Basutoland in 1946 to bring an end to the fighting. These early conflicts between Matsieng and Molapo involved Basotho from Vereeniging, Evaton and the East Rand.⁴ In fact, the story of Newclare South is not unrelated to these disputes as, by 1950, Solomon Hlalele of the Matsiengs had been chased out of Evaton by the Molapos only to establish himself as the leader of the Newclare Russians.⁵ Hlalele's group, led by Lenkoane after Hlalele was deported in 1954, was at the heart of the violence which engulfed Newclare South for the remainder of the decade.

SITEKETEKENG

The freehold township of Newclare was even more impoverished than the neighbouring areas of Sophiatown, Martindale and Western Native Township. Housing was of a poorer standard, overcrowding was more prevalent and a larger proportion of the population supplemented their income (or supported themselves) through beer brewing. The southern portion of Newclare, divided from the north by a railway line, was regarded as an extremely rough neighbourhood. Predominantly populated by Basotho migrant labourers and female beer brewers, *Siteketekeng* suffered from the highest reported incidence of crime in the Western Areas.⁶ Free of the control exercised by the city council, and sparsely policed (with the exception of beer and pass raids) Newclare, and especially the South, was known as a haven for criminals.⁷ It was in this environment that the Russians flourished and Matsieng, which operated in various townships across the Reef, set up its Johannesburg headquarters.⁸

The Russians of Newclare South began to appear in official correspondence and newspaper accounts in 1949 as a result of their battles with ethnically organized gangs and *tsotsis* (young gangsters who often targeted migrant workers for assault and robbery), as well as their demands for

⁴ Central Archives Depot, Pretoria (hereafter CAD) NTS 4179, file 33/313, Native Commissioner Vereeniging to the Director of Native Labour Johannesburg, 6 Dec. 1946; CAD, NTS 7691 file 375/332, Chart of Native Unrest 1946-7; CAD, NTS 7689 file 325/332, Director of Native Labour to the Secretary of Native Affairs, 6 May 1949, Enclosure – Statement by Joel Molapo, clerk in the office of the Agent for the High Commission Territories, 26 Apr. 1949.

⁵ Interview, M. C., Lesotho, 30 May 1998; Guy and Thabane, 'The Ma-Rashea', 451; Bonner, 'Russians on the reef', 163.

⁶ City of Johannesburg Non-European Affairs Department, *Survey of the Western Areas, 1950*, 27, 50, 63; City of Johannesburg Non-European Affairs Department, *Report on a Sample Survey of the Native Population Residing in the Western Areas of Johannesburg, 1951* (issued 1955), 19, 183.

⁷ CAD, NTS 7674 file 90/332. Undated notes of Gideon Pott, Agent for the High Commission Territories.

⁸ Interview, P. L., Lesotho, 24 May 1998; Bonner, 'Russians on the reef', 177; Guy and Thabane, 'The Ma-Rashea', 446.

protection fees from Newclare residents.⁹ The violent nature of Russian activities did not escape police notice and prior to the Civilian Guard–Russian conflict of late 1951 and 1952, dozens of Russians were arrested in Newclare, mainly on charges of public violence.¹⁰ The murder of a police detective who had arrested several Russians was widely rumoured to be an act of revenge, and a meeting of the Johannesburg City Council, the Native Commissioner and senior police officers was convened in February 1951 to discuss strategies to break the power of the Russian gangs.¹¹ Up to this time, it is clear there was an official consensus that the Russians represented a threat to security and order in Newclare. This was to change during the course of the Russian conflicts with the Civilian Guard and its allies.

THE CIVILIAN GUARDS AND THE SQUATTERS

Communal policing initiatives had been in place in the Western Areas of Johannesburg since the early 1920s. They were generally welcomed by residents because of the high incidence of violent crime which the police were unable or unwilling to check. Indeed, because of the incessant and often brutal raids for liquor and passes, the police were commonly regarded as persecutors, not protectors. Military enlistment, which reduced the numbers of the Johannesburg police during the early years of the Second World War, resulted in the formation of the government-administered Civilian Protection Service (CPS). The CPS attracted over a thousand volunteers from across the black townships of Johannesburg, and while the neighbouring areas of Western Native Townships and Sophiatown contributed significant numbers of these volunteers, none came from crime-ridden Newclare. Following the demise of the CPS in 1947, disbanded by the authorities who regarded it as a wartime contingency, residents of the Western Areas persistently, albeit fruitlessly, petitioned for permission to form a replacement organization. Finally, in August 1951, in the face of police opposition and despite the lack of official sanction, residents, acting through their Advisory Boards and Ratepayer's Associations, formed a Civilian Guard.¹² Guard groups on the Rand were viewed with trepidation by the state primarily because of their links with the African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Communist Party (SACP). The police saw the guards as an embarrassment, a testament to the fact that the SAP was unable to control crime in the locations. The self-proclaimed mandate of these guards was to patrol the streets, to disarm people found with weapons and to turn offenders over to the police. Just as in the past, this latest communal policing movement garnered little if any support in Newclare South where the Russians were determined to consolidate a power base.

Shortly after the northern-based guards began their patrols in *Siteketekeng* in November 1951, fighting erupted. Given the mandate of the guards –

⁹ CAD, NTS 7722 file 145/333. P. Grobler, Chief Inspector SAP, Johannesburg to Deputy Commissioner SAP, Witwatersrand Division, 1 July 1949.

¹⁰ *Star*, 20 Mar. 1951.

¹¹ *Sunday Times*, 11 Feb. 1951; *Bantu World*, 24 Mar. 1951.

¹² The information in this paragraph is taken from D. Goodhew, 'The people's police force: communal policing initiatives in the Western Areas of Johannesburg, c. 1930–62', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 19, 3 (1993), 447–470.

especially with regard to disarming residents – and the nature of the Russian gangs, conflict was unavoidable. A description of an early guard patrol in Newclare South illustrates the inevitability of the Russian-guard clashes:

In this 'Russian'-infested area, many armed with sticks and missiles were rounded up. Those who put up opposition against being searched were dealt with in the language they would best understand. A large collection of weapons was made in the thorough combing of the township at the weekend.¹³

Many of the former Russians interviewed for this article were adamant that the guards assaulted everyone found on the streets at night. 'Those people were whipping the people who were walking at night and that became worse when they were beating innocent people. We came together as Marashea to fight them.'¹⁴ A Matsieng member from Benoni reports that: 'The Civil Guards were searching Basotho women at the railway station in Johannesburg. They would even search under their dresses. We did not like that and told the Civil Guards to stop but they refused and... we travelled to Newclare to fight them'.¹⁵ The conflict was initiated when the guards arrested and assaulted alleged Russians, according to a former Matsekha commander who was much praised by the police for his role in the Newclare battles:

The Civil Guards arrested innocent people saying that they were Marashea. They took them to an isolated place where there was a hall and they whipped them. That meant they were no longer interested in working with us. One person came running to my home to tell me people had been arrested by the Batswana Civil Guards. I called a man named Maliehe, who is now dead, and I told him to blow the whistle. Marashea then came to my home... We then went to the hall and... rescued those people. That was how the fight began.¹⁶

The Russians retaliated with a vengeance and attacked patrolling guards on Christmas Day, 1951. In the ensuing battle eight men were killed and twenty injured. Violence flared up again in March when thousands of guards and Russians clashed. This time the death toll reached eleven, 95 were hospitalized and 'all available policemen were necessary to quell the disturbance'.¹⁷ Russian reinforcements came from the mines and several townships, especially Benoni, while the guards were supported by their colleagues in Sophiatown and Martindale.¹⁸

Following this latest clash, the divide between northern and southern Newclare became increasingly rigid. The guards controlled the north, where they continued their patrols, while the Russians maintained their hold south of the railway tracks. The conflict received much attention in the

¹³ *Bantu World*, 17 Nov. 1951.

¹⁴ Interview M.C.; also P.P., Lesotho, 24 May 1998 and S.C., Lesotho, 7 June 1998.

¹⁵ Interview, M.K., Lesotho, 8 Aug. 1998.

¹⁶ Interview, S.T., Lesotho, 23 Aug. 1998.

¹⁷ CAD, SAP 332 file 1/168/40/2, Deputy Commissioner SAP, Johannesburg to Commissioner SAP, Pretoria, 17 May 1952; CAD, WRAD file 352/2, Native Commissioner, Johannesburg to Director of Native Labour, Johannesburg, 8 Apr. 1952; *Star*, 14 June 1952; *Bantu World*, 5 Mar. 1952.

¹⁸ Interview, M.C.; CAD, NTS 4573 file 51/313(1), Summary of the Riots in Newclare, Johannesburg in which Basutos were involved, 23 Sept. 1957.

Johannesburg press, the vast majority of it unfavourable to the Russians, who were branded as thugs opposed to the crime-fighting agenda of the guards.¹⁹ By this time, however, the Russians, under the leadership of Solomon Hlalele, had managed to gain the support of the police. Hlalele's stories of guard aggression were sympathetically received by a police force which found it expedient to accept his portrayal of the Russians as the opponents of communism and staunch supporters of the government.

Hlalele claimed in his statements to the press and in various meetings with police and township officials that he had initially supported the formation of a civilian guard because his people were also victimized by *tsotsis*. However:

After watching the activities of the civilian guards we have come to the conclusion that: (1) We would not desire to associate ourselves nor encourage others to do so on the ground that they have little respect for the law and do not respect the police; (2) We would keep out of their movement because it has been refused recognition by the government of South Africa; (3) We would not have this movement in our sector because some of its members were desperate *tsotsis* who found it an opportunity to rob and assault people without reasonable cause... All we desire is peace.²⁰

Hlalele's campaign served the interests of the police who regarded ANC/Communist activists as a grave threat, but perhaps primarily because the guards' very existence 'was a powerful critique of their failure to tackle crime'.²¹ Reacting to township officials who praised the civilian guard and the generally favourable press coverage of guard activities, the Deputy Commissioner of the Johannesburg SAP sent an eight-page indictment of the guards to the police Commissioner. Most of the report was devoted to listing the various guard members who were accused of committing offences (very few were convicted) while 'on duty'. It claimed that this list 'provides constructive proof that the members of this body have in fact constituted a grave danger to their own people'. For good measure, the report concluded that the guards 'are under the control of persons who are antagonistic towards the existing laws of this country for the control of natives and its present social structure'.²²

It would seem that the convergence of police and Russian interests produced a marriage of convenience. Hlalele reported that he was in close communication with the Newlands police station and when he wished to attack the guards, he would go there and report that the guards were molesting Basotho. He would then return to Newclare in the company of the

¹⁹ The English press campaign against the Russians may well have been partially inspired by anti-National Party sentiment among the liberal papers like the *Star* and the *Rand Daily Mail*, which were eager to point out the failure of the National Party to manage 'relations with the Natives'. For instance, in the midst of the squatter crisis, the *Star* published an article, complete with statistics, claiming that racial disturbances under the Nationalists were more common than under United Party rule. *Star*, 5 Dec. 1952. Influential figures such as Father Trevor Huddleston, who was adamant that the National Party would not act against the Russians because the conflict suited their political agenda, also contributed to an English media climate which demonized the Russians.

²⁰ *Bantu World*, 22 Mar. 1952. ²¹ Goodhew, 'People's Police Force', 465.

²² CAD, SAP 332 file 1/168/40/2, Deputy-Commissioner SAP, Johannesburg to the Commissioner SAP, Pretoria, 17 May 1952.

police and on his pre-arranged signal, his men would attack the guards.²³ One of Hlalele's followers remembers:

We reported everything to the police and they would let us fight and only stop the fight when people were dying. We had a translator because our leader Hlalele did not know how to speak English... He would tell the police what happened because those [guards] provoked us and we did not allow them to do that.²⁴

There can be no doubt that the police lent their endorsement to the Russians. Police correspondence and reports elevate the Russians to the status of national heroes, protecting the law-abiding and peace-loving residents of Newclare South from the blatant aggression and subversive influence of the communists. In a meeting of various officials to discuss the disturbances at Newclare, Major Talliard of the SAP informed the other participants, 'after the establishment of the Civic Guard there were quite a number of murders and it was found that those murdered were Basutos. That is what put the Basutos against the Civic Guards'.²⁵ One police report concluded, 'the Civilian Guard was organised by known Communists, is still controlled by Communists and is directly responsible for the critical situation which exists at Newclare'.²⁶ Such reports were forwarded to various government departments.

A new element was grafted on to the Russian-Guard conflict in May 1952, when the supporters of Mamalinyane Dhlamini, the leader of the non-Basotho people in Newclare South, and a former ally of the Russians, were forced out of *Siteketekeng*. This group was often referred to as the Hlubi because Dhlamini and many of his followers came from the Matatiele area on the southern border of Lesotho where a large settlement of Hlubi resided. Dhlamini's people squatted in Newclare North on land administered by the city council, a move that considerably expanded the number of parties interested in Russian activities. The Hlubi immediately sought the support of the civilian guard in their conflict with the Russians and large-scale battle once again became a feature of life in Newclare. As political interest in the situation increased, the Russians, aided by the police, stepped up their propaganda campaign. Dhlamini and the squatters were castigated as aggressors indistinguishable from the communist guards.

Documentary evidence indicates that the Russian-Hlubi dispute erupted over the misuse of funds collected by Hlalele and his supporters to provide for the legal defence of all residents of Newclare South engaged in the fights against the civilian guards. Although the Russians were at the forefront of the battles with the guards, non-Basotho residents who also resented guard activities fought at their side. The fallout was explained by one of Dhlamini's supporters:

It was said [by Hlalele and his deputies] that the main objects and aims of the fund would be for the protection and defence of all tribes in Newclare should they find themselves involved in a court case... At that time all other tribes living in

²³ Bonner, 'Russians on the reef', 182.

²⁴ Interview, M.C.

²⁵ CAD, WRAD 352/2. Minutes of a Round-table Talk Held in the Office of the Director of Native Labour, Johannesburg on the Question of Disturbances at Newclare, 18 June 1952.

²⁶ CAD, NTS 7674 file 90/332. Major Prinsloo, SAP, Johannesburg to the Commissioner, SAP, Pretoria, 28 July 1952.

Newclare South supported the Basutos in their struggle against the Civic Guards wholeheartedly. The disturbing factor came immediately after the members of the S. A. Police had effected the arrest of the persons suspected as ringleaders. Of the arrested persons were Basutos, Xosa, Zulu, Bacas, Shangaans and Hlubis and Betsvanas. This occasion offered a testing ground for the purpose of the tribal fund. The only people who got assistance from the fund were Basutos and the others were left to fight on their own.²⁷

S.T. provides the Russian account:

One day while we were resting I was with Hlalele when Mathabane arrived to tell us that Mamalinyane was outside the location ready to attack. He was at the ground where I used to play football. I said that Mamalinyane was on our side, so we organized ourselves and went to hear from Mamalinyane. He was with some Pondos and people were running all over the place because Mamalinyane was with many people outside the location. We went to them and asked what they were doing. They said we should fight but Mamalinyane stopped them when we reminded him of our agreement. We asked him why he had turned from our agreement because we were given the authority to guard our location and we were friends. Some of Mamalinyane's people had even married Basotho women. They said that we misused the contribution because the money was supposed to pay for lawyers.²⁸

At this point Dhlamini, previously a close associate of Hlalele's, severed his ties with the Russians and, along with his adherents, refused to pay into the 'protection fund'.²⁹ While the disagreement over funds may well have sparked the conflict, the testimony of a number of Russians supports the view of W. J. P. Carr, manager of Johannesburg's Non-European Affairs Department, that the fighting was a result of a struggle for supremacy between Dhlamini and Hlalele and their respective followers. M.C. remembers that the Hlubi were determined not to be dominated by the Russians:

We were staying together as one group and they separated themselves from the Basotho saying they would not be ruled by Basotho and that was how the fight started'. Another Russian asserts, 'we fought against Mamalinyane because he wanted to be the leader and we objected to that and told him to rule the people of Matatiele and then we beat him with *melamu* [fighting sticks].³⁰

Shortly thereafter, in mid-May 1952, conflict broke out as the Russians reportedly insisted, 'there can be no two bulls in one kraal'.³¹ Dhlamini and his (badly outnumbered) supporters suffered considerable losses in a series of clashes and were forced to retreat to Newclare North, where

²⁷ CAD, NTS 7674 file 90/332, Sworn statement of Joubert Nhlela at the office of the Native Commissioner Johannesburg, 27 May 1952. See also, same file, Dhlamini affidavit to the Native Commissioner, 28 May 1952; and *Star*, 14 June 1952; *Bantu World*, 17 May 1952.

²⁸ Interview, S.T.

²⁹ CAD, WRAD 158/15 vol. 1, Superintendent Western Native Township to the Manager of the Non-European Affairs Department, Johannesburg, 5 Sept. 1952; CAD, NTS 7674 file 90/332, Native Commissioner, Johannesburg to the Director of Native Labour, Johannesburg, 4 June 1952.

³⁰ CAD, WRAD 158/15 vol. 1, Report No. 22/1952 of Manager, Non-European Affairs Department, to Non-European Affairs Committee, 26 June 1952; Interviews, M.C. and T.T., Soweto, 18 June 1998.

³¹ *Bantu World*, 24 May 1952.

between 200 and 300 families took refuge by squatting on council-owned land.³² Apparently the Russians were given a free hand in this initial conflict with Dhlamini's people. 'We asked the police for five minutes for fighting and we promised the police that by that time the MaHlubi would be out of that place. They gave us time and many people died because the fight became uncontrollable.'³³ A second set of battles ensued as the Hlubi, now allied with the guards, launched attacks on Newclare South in an attempt to drive out the Russians and regain their former homes. The Russians repulsed these invasions, retaliated with raids of their own, and maintained complete domination over *Siteketekeng*.³⁴ S.T. relishes the final humiliation suffered by the squatters, recalling, 'We fought and beat Mamalinyane until they moved to the other side of the train tracks and they were living in a shanty town during the winter. We stayed in *Siteketekeng* and ate all their chickens and cats'.³⁵

During this time, the plight of the squatters, who were living in deplorable conditions, was featured in numerous press reports and caused considerable hand wringing amongst township officials, especially members of the city-council. The Russians had clearly demonstrated their superiority on the battlefield and now, when the arena of conflict shifted into the realm of politics, public relations, and behind-the-scenes manoeuvring, they proved every bit as proficient.

The local government departments' preferred solution to the crisis, which was garnering damaging publicity, was simply to repatriate the squatters to their former homes. This seemed the easiest and, most importantly, the least costly solution to the problem. The squatters, however, refused to return unless the Russians were removed from Newclare or, at the very least, the men identified as leaders of the gang were deported.³⁶ Various township officials urged the police to act accordingly.³⁷ However, neither the police nor the Minister of Native Affairs were inclined to move against the Russians. Once again, the Russians' ace-in-the-hole proved to be the allegedly communist leanings of their opponents, a card Hlalele played for maximum effect. The anti-communist Russian gangs were much lauded by the police, as the following excerpt from a police report describing a Russian-Hlubi (squatter) clash illustrates:

A strong group of Hlubis, supported by Civilian Guards attacked the Basutos... They entered a portion of the Southern Township occupied by the

³² CAD, NTS 7674 file 90/332, Native Commissioner, Johannesburg to the Director of Native Labour, 4 June 1953; CAD, WRAD 158/15 vol. 1, Report of the Manager, Non-European Affairs Department to the Non-European Affairs Committee, 26 June 1952.

³³ Interview, M.C.

³⁴ CAD, WRAD 158/15 vol. 1, Report of the Manager, Non-European Affairs Department to the Non-European Affairs Committee, 26 June 1952; *Star*, 14 June 1952.

³⁵ Interview, S.T.

³⁶ CAD, NTS 7674 file 90/332, undated affidavit by Dhlamini given to Sergeant Papendorp; Dhlamini affidavit, 28 May 1952; Native Commissioner, Johannesburg to the Director of Native Labour, Johannesburg, 4 June 1952; Major Prinsloo, SAP to the Commissioner, SAP, Pretoria, 28 July 1952; *Bantu World*, 15 July and 23 Aug. 1952.

³⁷ CAD, NTS 7674 file 90/332, Acting Town Clerk, Johannesburg to the Minister of Native Affairs, Pretoria, 11 July 1952; Director of Native Labour, Johannesburg to the Secretary of Native Affairs, Pretoria, 30 June 1952; *Umteteli Wa Bantu*, 20 Dec. 1952; *Star*, 14 June and 18 Aug. 1952; *Egoli*, 1 June 1952; *Bantu World*, 24 May 1952.

Basutos under Hlalele and commenced to loot the dwellings. They were met by about 50 Basutos under the leadership of Edward Mohale, a person who hates Communism.³⁸

The report then describes with some satisfaction the Russians' victory. Every police report covering the conflict in Newclare identifies the civilian guards and squatters/Hlubis as the aggressors and emphasises their communist connections. The Russians, by contrast, are represented as a pro-government force standing up for order in the township as 'the Basutos refused to co-operate with the Hlubi against the government...this is the reason for the hostilities between the two sections'.³⁹

Without the co-operation of the police, township officials were helpless to act against the Russians and were forced to find another solution to the squatter crisis. In the end, no attempt was made to re-settle the squatters in Newclare South. Instead, they were removed to an emergency camp in Moroka. Police condemnation convinced the government to ban all civilian guards in Johannesburg in mid-1952, and those who continued to patrol were arrested. *Siteketekeng* remained the exclusive domain of the Russians.

THE RUSSIAN VICTORY

It is useful at this point to examine the convergence of circumstances that resulted in the Russian victory. The first stage of the conflict was won on the battlefield where fighting prowess and the frequent superiority of Russian numbers allowed them to carry the day. Though one does not wish to make too much of this, the Russians were renowned for their bravery and fighting skills. In Bonner's words, 'the Russians on the Reef were above all, a fighting machine'.⁴⁰ The overwhelming majority had learned the art of stick-fighting as herd-boys, and were extremely proficient in the use of *melamu*; battle axes and swords were also popular weapons. As one Newclare resident remembers, Russian ferocity was legendary:

We came to associate the name 'Russians' with violence. They would descend upon the township in great battalions, clad in brightly coloured blankets, pants belted high, with white shoes and the inevitable stick, which was a deadly weapon in the hands of a Mosotho. I had seen a man's jaw shattered at one fell swing of that stick. If you heard a whistle blow, you had to clear off the streets if you valued your life. They were insanely brave, those 'Russians'. It seemed to them that violence was just a game.⁴¹

A former Sophiatown *tsotsi* gang-leader, Don Mattera, also remembers the Newclare Russians as a formidable fighting force. His gang avoided conflict with them if possible because, 'they were deadly guys. These guys never retreated, they came at you all the time'.⁴²

The Russians did not rely solely on their proficiency with *melamu*. Throughout the 1950s, guns also became an increasingly important part of their arsenals. These were acquired in a number of ways, including

³⁸ CAD, NTS 7674 file 90/332, Major Prinsloo, SAP to the Commissioner of the SAP, Pretoria, 28 July 1952.

³⁹ CAD, NTS 7674 file 90/332, Native Affairs Department, undated memo. Newclare Squatters: Police Report.

⁴⁰ Bonner, 'Russians on the reef', 175.

⁴¹ Moteane Melamu, 'The "Russians" are coming', in *Children of the Twilight* (Johannesburg, 1987), 139. ⁴² Interview, Don Mattera, Johannesburg, 19 Feb. 1998.

appropriation from fallen enemies and through theft, but most firearms were purchased from Chinese, Indians or whites. 'There was a white man who supplied us with guns. We met him at night and his car dimmed the lights. We would make appointments with him and we would contribute in order to buy those guns.'⁴³

Just as important as fighting skill and battlefield tactics was the Russians' ability to call upon a wide network of affiliated gangs for reinforcements. These came from nearby mines, and on numerous occasions fellow Matsieng were summoned from neighbouring townships to lend assistance. A man who fought with Matsieng in the 1940s and 1950s explained, 'since Newclare was a place of many fights, we were always fighting there, and that was the place I used to fight with the group controlled by Hlalele'.⁴⁴ Dhlamini also asserted that miners greatly augmented the Russian forces in Newclare South in the evenings and on weekends and it was these reinforcements which made the Basotho so formidable.⁴⁵ Hlalele's forces seem to have had a particularly close relation with Rand Leases gold mine where it was reported, 'the Induna and at least three of the Basuto Police-boys...are Hlalele's Underdogs'.⁴⁶ The *Bantu World* also noted the movement of 'foreign' Russians into Newclare:

The Basuto have been inviting comrades from all over the country and one lorry-load of men and taxis came from Benoni; from Kliptown men came by train; from St Helena and Welkom in the Free State men came by lorries; three lorries came from Vereeniging – two of which were intercepted by the police and one escaped. These vehicles come to Newclare by night, and, after unloading, the men kept in the township in locked rooms.⁴⁷

Along with reinforcements, the Russians were able to gain the assistance of the police on many occasions – this could be helpful in such ways as having opponents disarmed, having members of the police (especially fellow Basotho) actually join in the fighting, and having enemies arrested. The Russians always took great pains to manipulate their relations with the police to their advantage. Guy and Thabane's informant, Rantoa, asserted that bribery was used frequently, 'that is one of the things we used. After he has got the money he is now a person who is on our side'.⁴⁸ On occasion, Basotho police actually fought with the Russians, as was the case in 1954 when an off-duty Mosotho sergeant armed with his service revolver was arrested for participating in a large Matsieng–Masupha clash in *Siteketekeng*.⁴⁹

⁴³ Interview, P.P.

⁴⁴ Interview, P.P.; Interview, S.C., Lesotho, 22 Apr. 1998; interviews M.C. and T.T.; CAD, SAP 367 file 15/60/44 vol. 2, Deputy Commissioner SAP, Witwatersrand to the Commissioner SAP, Pretoria, 9 Sept. 1956; CAD, WRAD 352/2, Native Commissioner to the Director of Native Labour, 9 Apr. 1952; CAD, NTS 7674 file 90/332, Chief Commissioner Native Affairs, Witwatersrand to the Secretary of Native Affairs Pretoria, 23 Feb. 1957; *Rand Daily Mail*, 20 May 1952; *Bantu World*, 2 Sept. 1950 and 31 May 1951.

⁴⁵ CAD, NTS 7674 file 90/332, Native Commissioner, Johannesburg to the Director of Native Labour, Johannesburg, 13 June 1952.

⁴⁶ The Employment Bureau of Africa (TEBA) Archives, Johannesburg, NRC Files, A.9, Pad 1, Assaults and Disturbances Files, Inspector, Native Recruiting Corporation, LTD., Memorandum to the Chief Inspector, 13 Nov. 1951.

⁴⁷ *Bantu World*, 24 May 1952.

⁴⁸ Guy and Thabane, 'The Ma-Rashea', 450.

⁴⁹ *Bantu World*, 5 June 1954.

Throughout the conflict with the guards and the Hlubi faction, Hlalele was in constant contact with the police and made public declarations time and again, 'we of Siteke-Siteng regard the police as our friends... We always assist the police'.⁵⁰ The evidence indicates that Hlalele was successful in his campaign. As Detective Sergeant Papendorp of the Special Branch reported in the course of his investigation of the Newclare conflict:

Hlalele was neatly dressed, appeared friendly towards us and expressed himself prepared to assist the Police or authorities in any way possible in order to restore peace at Newclare... I made a careful psychological (sic) study of this man. He openly replied to questions put to him and explained to me his desire to tell the authorities the cause of all the trouble.

This favourable impression extended to the entire sector under Hlalele's control, where 'people were friendly and keen to speak to us and assist in every possible way'. Papendorp's report on Dhlamini was entirely negative. He emphasized Dhlamini's hostility towards the authorities and concluded, 'the Hlubi leader, December Dhlamini, is trying to think out a story to suit his purpose, and I did not trust him'.⁵¹ Evidently, the police were able to persuade at least some local government departments to endorse their version of events. For example, in a letter to his superior, the Under Secretary of Native Affairs advised:

The Police now have evidence (which we cannot refute) that the Civilian Guards alias Hlubis are the real aggressors and that they are communist inspired. The removal of the leaders of the 'Russians' who are said to support the Police and be in favour of law and order may therefore serve no good purpose. In fact, the Police fear that such a step would be regarded as a victory by the Hlubis who may then attempt to take further violent action against the remaining 'Russians'.⁵²

The Russians' confidence in the extent of police support for their cause is apparent in their request that a senior official 'who is fully conversant with the situation' be present when their lawyers met with the Minister of Native Affairs, Hendrik Verwoerd, to discuss the situation in Newclare.⁵³ The Russians also gave numerous press interviews and often met with government officials to present their version of events. In an effort to secure further support, the Russians petitioned Gideon Pott, the agent for High Commission territories, and convinced him that the civilian guards were dominated by a criminal element which preyed on all Basotho. Pott then recommended to the South African authorities that the guard be disbanded. Through Pott, the Russians also corresponded with prominent chiefs in Lesotho, claiming they were the victims of the hostilities in Newclare.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ CAD, NTS 7674 file 90/332, Meeting of Various Russians with the Native Commissioner, Johannesburg, 22 Apr. 1952; Hlalele affidavit, 19 July 1952; Bonner, 'Russians on the reef', 182.

⁵¹ CAD, NTS 7674 file 90/332, Sworn Statement of Detective Sergeant Gerhardus Paulus van Papendorp, Special Branch, 20 July 1952.

⁵² CAD, NTS 7674 file 90/332, Under-Secretary Native Affairs to the Secretary for Native Affairs, Sept. 1952.

⁵³ CAD, NTS 7674 file 90/332, Gratus Sacks and Bernard Melman, Solicitors, Notaries and Conveyancers, Johannesburg to the Secretary of Justice, Pretoria, 21 Aug. 1952.

⁵⁴ CAD, NTS 7674 file 90/332, A series of statements collected by Pott along with his notes on same, Feb.-Mar. 1952.

Dhlamini and some of the civilian guard leaders like Ben Kenosi mounted public relations campaigns of their own. However, Kenosi and his associates fought a losing battle in this regard as they were automatically stigmatized by police and government officials because of their affiliation with the ANC and the SACP. For his part, Dhlamini antagonized the police by virtue of his alliance with the guards, and alienated potential supporters among local authorities as a result of the illegal brewing and squatting activities he sanctioned amongst his followers. He especially angered township officials when it was discovered that he had informed the squatters he was authorised by the Johannesburg City Council to collect funds from them. The animosity towards Dhlamini reached such a level that W. J. P. Carr informed Dhlamini's lawyer, 'this department proposed separating the Newclare Squatters for settlement at Moroka with the obvious intention of breaking up the present groups and destroying the power of December Dhlamini'.⁵⁵ Clearly, Dhlamini lacked Hlalele's talent for gaining white patrons.

The Russians' manipulation of the justice system was crucial to their survival. The gangs depended heavily on lawyers to keep them out of prison and paid them accordingly. Residents living in areas controlled by the Russians were required to pay protection fees that were used to subsidize legal expenses. Each group had a communal fund for this purpose, and also to bribe police and other officials and to cover the cost of burials. 'We raised money lovely', remembers a Molapo veteran. 'Every weekend all the people staying in that area, they were all paying 5s. Even if they are not Russians, they are paying. I was collecting money.'⁵⁶ Relatively few Russians were imprisoned because they routinely bribed the police, employed excellent legal counsel, intimidated potential witnesses and because the nature of their activities rendered prosecution difficult. Achieving convictions against individuals involved in large-scale confrontations was often problematic. An advocate who represented Russians in a large number of cases explains that the gangsters typically issued blanket denials of involvement and provided false alibis. The lawyer's job was then to 'dispute identification and we usually got them off without any difficulties.'⁵⁷ Russians also devised strategies to assist in their own defence, as K. F. explains, 'if ten of us were arrested we would put the blame on one man and the lawyer would represent that man instead of all ten... If such a man is found guilty, he will go to jail for us all but we will also collect money to pay his fine'.⁵⁸

The different Russian factions all had their specific lawyers on retainer. Because of his ability to speak English, P. G. acted as his group's liaison with their lawyer and was responsible for handling the legal fund. He dealt with one lawyer in particular, Isaacs, 'the best lawyer in my life' who regularly charged up to £500 for his services. Isaacs delivered value for money, especially in the case of a Masupha leader arraigned on murder charges:

⁵⁵ CAD, WRAD 158/15 vol. 2, W. J. P. Carr to F. Lowenburg, 18 Dec. 1952; W. J. P. Carr to the Chairman, Non-European Affairs Committee, 27 Oct. 1952; CAD, NTS 6472 file 5/3135(2), Chief Native Commissioner, Witwatersrand to the Native Commissioner, Johannesburg, 22 Dec. 1952.

⁵⁶ Interview, P. G., Soweto, 20 Dec. 1998.

⁵⁷ Interview, Michael Hodes, Johannesburg, 3 Mar. 1998.

⁵⁸ Interview, K. F., Lesotho, 12 Sept. 1998.

[Matsabang] shot about three people dead in the night. We were working together in the General Post Office in Johannesburg. He was arrested and immediately I went to see Isaacs. He paid the bail for him. Really the case was very, very difficult, but he was discharged on those murders.⁵⁹

Another Matsekha commander claims his group would phone their lawyer prior to pre-arranged fights so he would be at the police station to bail out those who had been arrested.⁶⁰ A large part of the Russians' financial resources was spent defending their members in court, and those involved remember, 'we used to win almost all the cases against our members' – an assessment substantially supported by archival and newspaper references.⁶¹

Advocate Lakier's meeting with Verwoerd illustrates a number of Russian strategies. He stressed that the English papers sympathized with the Russians' opponents, advised Verwoerd, 'communists are behind the agitation against the Russians' and assured him that the Russians were in close touch with the police. Verwoerd replied that he was aware of the communist agenda of the guards and the Hlubi.⁶² The Minister of Native Affairs' statements to the press indicate that Lakier's entreaties did not fall on deaf ears. Thus, Verwoerd stated that secret government sources had convinced him, 'the so-called "Russians" are at least as much, if not more, sinned against as sinning'.⁶³

Fortunately for the Russians, the conflict in Newclare dovetailed perfectly with Verwoerd's political agenda to expedite the Western Areas removal scheme. As Van Tonder explains:

After the passing of the Group Areas Act in 1950, which became the cornerstone of apartheid, Verwoerd was to become personally responsible for a whole string of legislation that not only aimed at manipulating urban space in order to create separate residential areas designated for occupation by specific racial groups, but also which gradually destroyed any existing rights which Africans might have had in urban areas... The Newclare squatter movement therefore presented Verwoerd with a perfect chance to intervene actively in the Western Areas of Johannesburg in 1952, and thereby to make a preliminary attempt to implement his more grandiose apartheid schemes.⁶⁴

Commenting on the problem that the conflict in general and the squatters in particular presented, Verwoerd made his intentions plain. 'There is only one solution', he declared, 'and that is that both South and North Newclare must disappear and their residents must be settled in better and properly municipal-controlled Native residential areas'.⁶⁵ Verwoerd had no interest in resolving the conflict and repatriating the squatters, either of which would have meant taking action against Hlalele's Russians. A *de facto* alliance with the police, coupled with the complicity of the Minister of Native Affairs who

⁵⁹ Interview, P. G.

⁶⁰ Interview, S. T.

⁶¹ Interview, M. C.

⁶² CAD, NTS 7674 file 90/332, Interview between Dr H. F. Verwoerd, the Honourable the Minister of Native Affairs and Advocate Mr Lakier and Attorney Mr Bernard Melman representing Gratus Sacks and Bernard Melman, 6 Sept. 1952.

⁶³ *Star*, 10 Sept. 1952.

⁶⁴ Deon Van Tonder, 'Gangs, councillors and the apartheid state: the Newclare squatters' movement of 1952', *South African Historical Journal*, 22 (1990), 102.

⁶⁵ *Star*, 10 Sept. 1952.

turned a blind eye to their transgressions, enabled the Russians to annex Newclare South.

Undoubtedly, the Russians benefited from a serendipitous set of circumstances: they were fighting a force which the police regarded as threatening, and the Newclare troubles suited Verwoerd's political ambitions. That said, Hlalele and his followers displayed keen political acumen and supplied the police and Verwoerd with much-needed ammunition. For the violent tendencies of the Russians did not go unnoticed in either press or local government reports, and in order to support them their backers needed to demonize the guards and the Hlubi. This was achieved with the assistance of Hlalele and various other Russians who assured white South Africa that the Basotho of Newclare supported the government and fought only in self-defence against communist agitators.

Once the guards had been disbanded and the squatters removed to Moroka, the situation changed entirely. Neither the police nor any government department stood to benefit from the Russians' presence. Instead, a protracted war between Hlalele's Matsieng and a rival Masupha faction united the authorities in the view that the Russians now constituted an undesirable element in the township. Increasing numbers of Russians were arrested, imprisoned and deported to Lesotho upon the completion of their sentences. Indeed this was Hlalele's fate.⁶⁶ No longer a useful ally, the Russians came under much greater police pressure as the decade wore on. Having allowed the Russians to become ascendant, the authorities then battled for years to break the gangs' hold on Newclare, but only succeeded with the advent of the removals scheme.

THE MATSIENG-MASUPHA FEUD, 1953-57

Masupha members living in *Siteketekeng* joined in the fight against the guards and the Hlubi and co-existed peacefully with the Matsieng until a dispute over leadership erupted into general conflict between the two factions in Newclare South in mid-1953. P. G. reports that after the Russians vanquished the guards and the squatters, 'Hlalele wanted to rule all Basotho living in Newclare. Matsabang was the ruler of Masuphas and Molapos and he denied that saying that no he cannot be under Hlalele – that is where the division comes'.⁶⁷ The old enemy of Matsieng, Mamalinyane Dhlamini, joined in the battle on the side of Masupha until 1957 when he killed a prominent Masupha named Bifa in a quarrel and was in turn slain by the dead man's colleagues.⁶⁸

According to a Matsieng veteran, the Masupha-Matsieng feud in Newclare marked the beginning of the widespread use of firearms in the battles

⁶⁶ *Bantu World*, 12 Sept. 1953; Bonner, 'Russians on the reef', 185. The top level legal counsel employed by the Russians (along with bribery) ensured that a high percentage of those charged still gained acquittals.

⁶⁷ Interview, P.G. S.T. remembers that it was a shooting related to a leadership dispute that sparked the conflict while M.S. reports that it was squabbles over women that split the two groups. Interview, S.T.; Interview, M.S., Lesotho, 16 Aug. 1998.

⁶⁸ Interview, H.M., Lesotho, 22 Aug. 1998; interview, M.K.; CAD, NTS 4573 file 51/313(1), Chief Superintendent of Townships, Johannesburg to Native Commissioner, Johannesburg, 8 Nov. 1957.

Table 1. *Matsieng–Masupha clashes in Newclare, 1953–7^a*

Date	Number of police involved	Number of Russians involved	Dead	Wounded	Arrested
25.8.53	50	200	1	1	13
4.5.54	36	150		9	11
19.5.54	62	100		9	24
30.5.54	39	100			8
13.6.54	17	40		6	8
4.7.54	61	200	1	11	26
22.9.54	90	400		4	
6.10.54	42	500	2	14	
20.10.54	24	200		3	
21.10.54	69	500		1	8
25.10.54	47	700		5	
30.10.54	22	200	1	5	
5.6.55	53	400	1	14	31
12.6.55	30	1000		5	30
18.9.55	26	200			62
27.11.55	5	70		5	3
3.12.55	18	300		2	2
7.12.55	32	400		4	
9.12.55	16	300	1	4	
9.9.56	43	800	1	26	
7.12.56	11	200	1	5	
25.12.56	16	100		13	
30.12.56	3	300			2
30.12.56	23	500		4	
17.1.57	3	30		3	1
20.1.57	18	500		5	
23.1.57	18	200			
23.1.57	12	1000		19	
27.1.57	19	1000	1	39	3
3.2.57	31	500	1	30	
10.2.57	153	20 ^b	1	87	26
Total number of fights: 31	1,089 ^c	11,110 ^d	12	345	250

^a CAD, NTS 7674 file 90/332, undated police chart. While these figures provide an idea of the scale and severity of Russian conflicts they are merely a record of fights the police knew about and bothered to make official note of. They are in no way comprehensive, even for internecine Russian disputes, and do not include ethnic battles in which the Russians were involved.

^b It seems likely that this figure should be 200 given the number of arrested and wounded.

^c Corrected from 1079.

^d If the number of Russians involved on 10.2.57 was 200 then this figure becomes 11,290.

between Russian factions. 'That fight was caused by Leshoailane from Ha-Masupha. They wanted to rule us and we fought with them that was when the guns began. The people from Leribe were very strong because they were many and they used guns.'⁶⁹ Shortly after the fight began, the Masupha got the upper hand and many Matsieng people fled the area, while the victors 'ran through the township, blowing whistles, brandishing battle axes, sticks and other weapons'.⁷⁰ The Matsieng did not accept their defeat and the conflict continued even after Hlalele was jailed in 1953. Later that year, Hlalele's supporters informed the Native Commissioner in Johannesburg that they were determined to return to their former homes, while the Masupha were equally adamant that they 'were not prepared to have [the Matsieng] back in Newclare South under any circumstances'.⁷¹ By mid-1954, the Matsieng had rallied their forces and reoccupied a section of *Siteketekeng*, a development that intensified the conflict.⁷²

Battles between the two factions raged for five years, often involving thousands of participants. At an open air meeting in 1954, Captain de Villiers of the SAP pleaded with a large crowd to end the fighting and 'strongly warned the Basutos that if they continued to fight they would be severely dealt with by the law. They would even be sent back to their homes in Basutoland'.⁷³ However, it took little to spark renewed brawls and a few months later, one of the biggest fights to date was reportedly initiated 'when a Masupha woman went over to a Matsieng man'.⁷⁴ In that same year, the papers began referring to the fighting as the 'Newclare War', and in 1957 a police captain described Newclare South as 'one of the hottest trouble spots. It is really a vicious place'.⁷⁵ By the mid-1950s, firearms were increasingly the weapons of choice and the cause of the majority of serious casualties. In a 1956 conflict involving 1,000 Russians, police recorded the use of a variety of weapons, ranging from revolvers to shotguns.⁷⁶

The relationship between the police and the Newclare Russians had undergone a significant deterioration by 1957. Not the least of the reasons for this was the casualties which the police sustained when they attempted to separate or arrest Russian combatants. There are numerous references in police files to Russian attacks on patrolling officers in just such circumstances, and former Russians confirm these clashes.⁷⁷ Animosity seems to have peaked in early 1957. The commander of the Newlands police station called the Masupha and Matsieng leaders into his office in an attempt to put a stop to the feud. 'I warned them that the continuation of the fighting would carry

⁶⁹ Interview, T.T.

⁷⁰ *Bantu World*, 26 Sept. 1953.

⁷¹ CAD, NTS 7674 file 90/332, Native Commissioner, Johannesburg to the Director of Native Labour, Johannesburg, 18 Dec. 1953.

⁷² Interviews, M.C., P.P. and T.T.; see also CAD, NTS 7674 file 90/332, Native Commissioner, Johannesburg to Director of Native Labour, Johannesburg, 7 May 1954.

⁷³ *Bantu World*, 17 July 1954.

⁷⁴ *Bantu World*, 2 Oct. 1954.

⁷⁵ *Bantu World*, 23 Oct. 1954; *Star*, 21 Jan. 1957.

⁷⁶ CAD, SAP 367 file 15/60/44 vol. 2, District Commander Newlands Station to the Deputy Commissioner SAP, Johannesburg, 22 and 24 Jan. 1957.

⁷⁷ Rantoa sheds some light on the Russians' attitudes towards the police. When asked why he engaged in a clash with the police, Rantoa responded: 'We fought because we were protecting *melamu*. It was a way that they also – it was their standing in front of us – it was a way to make them afraid of us – they should not treat us with contempt'. Guy and Thabane, 'The Ma-Rashea', 453. See also interviews with N.N. and T.T.

heavy penalties for the natives involved and, when I told them that in the end many of them would be shot by the police, both groups said this would be the only solution.' Shortly thereafter, during a clash between a police patrol and a group of Masupha in Newclare South, one officer was stabbed to death. The response was predictably ferocious. 'The follow up actions of the police resulted in 70 natives including [Masupha leader] Ephraim ending up in the hospital with injuries.'⁷⁸

Russian violence had exasperated the police and township authorities who were now making every effort to break up the gangs. The aforementioned District Commander at Newlands, when invited to address a 1957 meeting of the Western Areas Resettlement Board, informed members about the conditions in Newclare South and asked that a start be made as soon as possible on the removal of residents to Meadowlands. Consequently, the Department of Native Affairs explored the possibility of changing existing legislation in order to expedite the deportation of those identified as Russians. In the words of the Chief Commissioner, 'I don't see any reason why Basutos should have a right to stay in the city and make the lives of the officials, the police and other natives impossible'.⁷⁹ Later that same year, the Chief Commissioner of Native Affairs recommended, 'that there should be machinery to push these aggressive Basotho out of the city'.⁸⁰ The Minister of Native Affairs also became an advocate of deportation, quoting amended regulations which expedited the process:

In view of the continuous rioting at Newclare caused by Basuto factions and the difficulties experienced by the police in dealing with the culprits, I have drawn the attention of the Chief Native Commissioner, Witwatersrand, to these provisions and he in turn will discuss the matter with the police in order, if possible, to obtain the removal of the leaders of the two factions to Basutoland.⁸¹

The police consequently concentrated on identifying Russian leaders in Newclare South and concluded in their sworn statements implicating individuals, 'it is in the interest of the state natives that he is sent back to Basutoland'.⁸² However, despite increased police pressure and numerous deportations, the authorities only won their battle with the Newclare Russians when the township was finally cleared of Africans by 1958.⁸³

⁷⁸ CAD, NTS 7674 file 90/332, Affidavit of Gideon Daniel Pienaar, District Commander, Newlands Police District, 27 May 1957. For other accounts of Russian-police clashes in Newclare see, CAD, SAP 367 file 15/60/44 vol. 2, Deputy Commissioner, SAP, Witwatersrand to the Commissioner, SAP, Pretoria, 11 Sept. 1956; and CAD, NTS 4573 file 51/313(1), Chief Commissioner Native Affairs, Johannesburg to the Minister of Native Affairs, Pretoria, Summary of the Riots in Newclare, Johannesburg in which Basutos were involved, 23 Sept. 1957.

⁷⁹ CAD, NTS 7674 file 90/332. Chief Commissioner Native Affairs, Witwatersrand to the Secretary of Native Affairs, Pretoria, 23 Feb. 1957.

⁸⁰ CAD, NTS 4573 file 51/313(1), Chief Commissioner Native Affairs, Johannesburg to the Minister of Native Affairs, Pretoria, 15 May 1957.

⁸¹ CAD, NTS 7674 file 90/332, Memo. Native Affairs Department, March 1957.

⁸² CAD, NTS 7674 file 90/332, Affidavits of Sergeant James Swanepoel, 15 May 1957; Constable Samuel van Jaarsveld, 16 May 1957; Sergeant Johannes Makasela, 17 May 1957.

⁸³ See Bonner, 'Russians on the reef', 185, for various police measures against the Russians.

RUSSIAN RULE

What remains to be assessed is the legacy of eight years of Russian supremacy in Newclare South. Bonner claims that the Russians' activity on the Reef throughout the 1950s caused 'a hardening of ethnic boundaries and a reworking of ethnic identities on all sides'.⁸⁴ Perhaps nowhere was this more evident than in Newclare. Alongside the Matsieng-Masupha feud, the Newclare Russians continued to engage in large-scale conflict with other ethnic gangs. Both Matsieng and Matsekha members active in the 1950s remember occasions when internecine disputes would be put aside and Basotho would unite to do battle with Zulu, Xhosa or Mpondo adversaries.⁸⁵ Such disputes may well have contributed to the strength of the Russian gangs as they presented themselves as the defenders of the Basotho community. Hlalele repeatedly asserted that his men mobilized to protect all Basotho from the indiscriminate assaults of the civil guards. It is difficult to judge how Basotho residents on the Rand, and in Newclare in particular, responded to Hlalele's ethnic appeals, but for township officials:

The words 'Basutos' and 'Russians' in so far as their meaning is understood by the other tribes at Newclare are synonymous as is their opinion all the Moshoeshoes (Basutos) living at Siteke-Tekeng are associated with the activities of the so-called Russians.⁸⁶

Because the Russian gangs were almost exclusively Basotho, the entire group was often castigated as Russians, or at least Russian supporters, and a degree of fear and resentment was directed indiscriminately at all Basotho. No doubt Hlalele's claims that Basotho were targeted for assault by the civilian guards, the Hlubi and other groups were to some degree accurate, although he never publicly acknowledged the motives behind these assaults. During the clashes with the guards and the Hlubi, a police officer stated that, 'anyone wearing a blanket at night was a "dead duck" if found north of the railway line at night'.⁸⁷ The plight of two men caught in this very situation was reported by *Bantu World*:

Two Basuto mineworkers had a narrow escape at Newclare North on Sunday morning when the police rescued them from a mob believed to be members of the Reno Square squatters camp. Neither man knew the Basuto side of the area, and so when they alighted from the train they entered the northern side of Newclare. They were held up and thrashed by a mob suspecting them to be 'Russian' spies.⁸⁸

This state of affairs forced some Basotho to make difficult choices. As one resident explained: 'You see, at that time it did not matter whether you belonged to a group. As long as you were a Mosotho you would be a victim. For security and protection you had to join the group'.⁸⁹ At the height of the battles with the guards and the Hlubi, it was reported that civilian guard

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Interviews, P.L., Lesotho, 13 May 1998 and N.N., Lesotho, 20 May 1998; also P.P. and T.T. See also, CAD, NTS 4573 file 51/313(1), Chief Commissioner Native Affairs, Johannesburg to the Minister of Native Affairs, Pretoria, Summary of the Riots in Newclare, Johannesburg in which Basutos were involved, 23 Sept. 1957.

⁸⁶ CAD, NTS 7674 file 90/332, Director of Native Labour to the Native Commissioner, Johannesburg, 4 June 1952.

⁸⁷ *Star*, 14 June 1952.

⁸⁸ *Bantu World*, 19 July 1952.

⁸⁹ Bonner, 'Russians on the reef', 186.

groups throughout the Western Areas were forcing Basotho to leave their homes, and while there may well have been an element of anti-guard propaganda in this account, there is too much evidence of widespread animosity to dismiss it out of hand.⁹⁰ Hapless Basotho were attacked by urban residents who directed their fury with the Russians against all Sesotho-speakers, while at the same time the gangs demanded fealty from Basotho who lived in areas under Russian control and punished those who refused to support them or whom they suspected of acting as spies.⁹¹ It is likely that many residents of Newclare supported the Russians primarily out of a sense of self-preservation.

While the Russians evoked dread, in the absence of any formal political authority in Newclare South they were also the foremost structure dispensing patronage, protection and justice. The gangs did not rely wholly on coercion to consolidate their support base, especially when it came to fellow Basotho. For example, both oral and documentary evidence indicates that housing in Newclare South was allocated by the Russians almost exclusively on an ethnic basis. T.T. remembers that this was a source of tension with Dhlamini's people and the civil guards, as 'the Indians gave us accommodation in their quarters and we helped other Basotho so that when a vacancy became available we would invite only Basotho and not other tribes and the fight started there'.⁹² Once the Hlubi were forced out of Newclare South, their vacated houses were given to Basotho, including those from Benoni who had assisted in the conflict.⁹³

Moreover, living under Russian rule would have appealed to many migrant Basotho. Newclare was a haven for such people, the majority of whom lacked any marketable skills and often the legal right to reside in South Africa. Relatively free from government scrutiny in *Siteketekeng*, these migrants were able to engaged in income-generating activities that allowed them to scratch out a living. A 1950 survey of the Western Areas found that 'in Newclare a considerable number of Basuto women were living either by themselves or with a group of unrelated men, and apart from brewing had no legal means of support'.⁹⁴ Miners flocked to the locations on the weekends for Russian meetings and dances and were a key source of income for these women (and their male dependants), who sold beer and worked as prostitutes under Russian protection.

The Russians interviewed for this study were adamant that the residents of the neighbourhoods in which the gangs operated appreciated their presence because they forced *tsotsis* out of these areas and punished common criminals. Female respondents, generally more critical of the gangs, concurred with their male colleagues that many township dwellers applauded the Russians' ability to keep the *tsotsis* under control.⁹⁵ N.N. recalls: 'If the

⁹⁰ CAD, NTS 7674 file 90/332. Major Prinsloo, SAP to the Commissioner, SAP, Pretoria, 29 July 1952.

⁹¹ CAD, NTS 4573 file 51/313(1), Summary of the Riots in Newclare; CAD, WRAD 352/2, Native Commissioner to the Director of Native Labour, 8 Apr. 1952; CAD, NTS 7674 file 90/332, Agent for the High Commission Territories to the Native Commissioner, Johannesburg, 18 Mar. 1952; *Drum*, Dec. 1955, 31-2.

⁹² Interview, T.T.

⁹³ CAD, NTS 7674 file 90/332, Director of Native Labour to Native Commissioner, Johannesburg, 14 June 1952.

⁹⁴ *Report on a Sample Survey*, 19.

⁹⁵ Multiple interviews.

people who were not Marashea had problems with tsotsis we would go and find that tsotsi and ordered him to return what he took from that person, and we even gave him some strokes'.⁹⁶ The rudimentary Russian code also dictated that ordinary residents were not to be preyed on, old people were to be respected, and only *tsotsis* and members of rival ethnic groups or Russian factions were to be targets of assault. Of course, gang members did not obey these rules uniformly, but their very existence served to limit offences against fellow residents.

The Newclare Russians dispensed rough justice. Not only wayward youths were disciplined; older offenders were also subject to judgement and punishment. One Newclare veteran relates the following story:

I remember when one man made a mistake; he was Motswana and he slept with his daughter and made her pregnant. So the rule of the Marashea was that that man was supposed to be killed. We blew the whistle and went to his house. We took him and pushed him to the *lekhotla* [Russian advisory council] and we beat him until he died. The people were all under Marashea control. Like that man, he was not *Lerashea* but he was living in the same location as Marashea.⁹⁷

These disciplinary bodies were the forerunners of the *makgotla* traditional courts whose members policed many Soweto townships in the 1970s and meted out floggings and fines to a variety of offenders. The *makgotlas* operated with the assistance of Russian groups and enjoyed widespread popular support in crime-infested and abysmally policed locations.⁹⁸ The Russians utilized a carrot-and-stick strategy to command the allegiance of the people of Newclare South – they offered a range of benefits to a significant section of the local populace and terrorized the remaining residents into submission. In this manner, the Basotho gangs consolidated their control and turned *Siteketekeng* into the 'Russian Zone'.

Newclare South was the headquarters of the Matsieng faction for a number of years and the Masupha were also able to establish a strong presence in the area. Despite years of internecine conflict, *Siteketekeng* remained a Russian stronghold throughout the 1950s. It is not difficult to conceive that their success in this regard helped to cement the Russians' presence on the Reef and encouraged the proliferation of affiliated gangs in areas like Benoni and Germiston, as well as throughout the townships of Soweto. A Matsieng leader who joined in 1959 reports that 'our headquarters were at Booyens, which controlled other locations like Phiri, Naledi and Molapo, but it began at Newclare'.⁹⁹ Many Newclare Basotho moved to the Sotho-designated zones of Soweto – Mapetla, Moletsane, Molapo, Naledi and Tladi – and it seems more than coincidental that Russian assaults resulting in headlines such as 'Sotho site-and-service residents live in fear' began to appear at the same time, or that Russian clashes became a feature of life in these areas.¹⁰⁰ Although the government succeeded in removing the Russians, along with all other Africans, from Newclare, the gangs had been able to establish far-reaching networks during their decade-long reign. Thus,

⁹⁶ Interview, N.N.

⁹⁷ Interview, M.S.

⁹⁸ For *Makgotla* activities, ideology and connections with the Russians, see C. Glaser, 'Youth, culture and politics in Soweto, 1958-76' (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1994), 266-74.

⁹⁹ Interview, P.L.

¹⁰⁰ *World*, 5 Jan. 1957 and 31 May 1958.

the removals in no way threatened the survival of the Russians. Instead, the government's plan backfired to an extent. As a Matsieng leader testifies: 'We scattered all over Johannesburg and others escaped to the Orange Free State where there are many Marashea now'.¹⁰¹

CONCLUSION

The Newclare conflicts reveal two contradictory elements of power politics in the apartheid-era townships. Firstly, the importance for black groups of a well-placed patron, especially if a popular support base was lacking.¹⁰² For the Russians' purpose, no entity was better placed to influence their activities than the SAP. Largely exempt from police persecution during their battles with the guards and the Hlubi, indeed at times actively assisted by them, the Newclare Russians acted with impunity. Secondly, at least from the residents' perspective, the limits of the government's authority in day-to-day life in the township could not have been more apparent. The real power-brokers in Newclare South were the Russians. Access to housing, as well as the approval needed to operate informal and illegal business ventures, required Russian sanction, granted only with the payment of 'protection' fees. Non-payment meant eviction from the area and quite possibly physical retribution. The Russians also levied taxes for burial expenses and reportedly press-ganged recruits.¹⁰³ The SAP provided virtually no protection against these or any other Russian practices and there can be no doubt that it was the Russians, not the government, which wielded power in its most immediate sense in Newclare South. With no alternative, residents paid taxes to the gangs and depended on them to police and administer justice in the townships. In addition, many Basotho women entered into an economic partnership with the Russians. Visiting miners were sure to pay their bills and behave in a more or less orderly fashion when they patronized shebeens under Russian protection.¹⁰⁴

The era of Russian dominance in Newclare South brings to light much about the nature of power in African townships and the wider contemporary significance of gang and vigilante activities, and crime, in urban South

¹⁰¹ Interview, P.L.

¹⁰² Although the Russians controlled Newclare South, enjoyed a degree of popular support amongst Basotho migrants, and could call on reinforcements from the mines and other townships, they were ethnically, geographically and, to an extent, politically isolated on the Rand.

¹⁰³ *Bantu World*, 16 June 1951; *Sunday Express*, 23 Sept. 1951; *Drum*, Dec. 1955, 31–2; Bonner, 'Russians on the reef', 166; Guy and Thabane, 'The Ma-Rashea', 455. A *Siteketekeng* resident I spoke to told me that whenever the Russians in Newclare were involved in a large-scale fight they would come and rouse non-members like himself to supplement their forces. Reporting on a Russian–civil guard clash in which twelve people were killed, the *Bantu World* quoted a witness who claimed that '[a]ll male residents in the Russian sector, irrespective of who they were, were awakened and commandeered to join the Russian gang'. *Bantu World*, 15 Mar. 1951.

¹⁰⁴ Present day Russian gangs have much the same relationship with female inhabitants of the mine settlements they control. The leader of Matsieng in the Free State explains: 'These people prefer to live with us here because they are protected and they live a safe life... There is no one who can drink their beer without paying them or do anything without the consent of the owner. They have to pay us something because we provide protection'. Interview, B.M., Virginia, 24 Oct. 1998.

Africa. Their success stemmed from their adoption of a grand strategy designed to serve their needs in an urban environment in which the white-ruled state wielded ultimate power. The Russians employed fighting skills learned in their youth and established an urban network of affiliated gangs which replicated regional alliances in Lesotho and allowed the different groups to call on reinforcements. The gangs' distinctive blankets, which served as a uniform, along with their dances, songs and other social customs all reflected their Sesotho heritage. Moreover, the Russians relied heavily on traditional doctors and medicine to strengthen them for fights and courtroom encounters. Such traditional practices and beliefs were married with new tactics – the use of firearms,¹⁰⁵ the enforcement of large scale protection rackets, the manipulation of the justice system, the management of relations with the urban authorities and the exploitation of the political climate. This combination produced a syncretic ideology ideally suited for survival in a hostile urban environment, a phenomenon which continues to have striking parallels with present-day South Africa.

The Russian-police alliance in Newclare South during the clashes with the guards and Hlubi furnishes an early example of typical apartheid-era police tactics. State support for various groups which acted against the government's political opponents was a recurrent theme of the apartheid years. These groups readily accepted government sponsorship in order to further their own agendas. The National Party-Inkatha relationship is the best known contemporary example of this phenomenon. Criminal elements used, and were in turn used by, the government and security forces. But they were not simply tools that could be laid aside once they had served their purpose; when alliances came to an end, such groups continued to pursue agendas which were often at variance with the government's revised interests.

The Newclare Russians took full advantage of the political climate, wooing the police and playing the part of anti-Communist crusaders in the public arena. In return, they were allowed to operate against their enemies virtually unhindered by the forces of the law. Once the guards and their allies ceased to be a threat, and the Russians had outlived their usefulness, the Basotho gangs were sufficiently powerful to survive police efforts to eradicate them. The police had assumed the Frankensteinian role of helping to create an entity which they were unable to control. This situation is in many respects analogous to the current disastrous state of affairs in the Cape Flats, a working class area in the Western Cape that is dominated by criminal gangs. Some of these gangsters prospered under police protection in the 1980s and early 1990s in exchange for assisting the apartheid authorities in their campaign against the ANC and other political opponents. In this way, the Russians of Newclare South were a precursor of later groups which the National Party government sponsored to suppress political opposition and to sow discord in the townships.

¹⁰⁵ Of course, Basotho were no strangers to firearms, for the Gun War of 1880-1 resulted from Basotho resistance to the Cape Colony's decree that they surrender their guns and other weapons. That said, the consolidation of colonial control meant that firearms were not commonly available in Lesotho in the 1950s. Informants (excepting those few who did military service in the Second World War) insist they had no experience with guns until they arrived in South Africa.

SUMMARY

This article deals with the migrant Basotho gangs known as Marashea, or Russians, during the 1950s, when they were the most dominant force in the freehold area of Newclare, a township on the western fringes of Johannesburg. Newclare South was a battleground where different Marashea factions vied for supremacy and fought with civilian guards, *tsotsis* and ethnically-organized gangs in a series of conflicts. The Russians relied heavily on battlefield proficiency to rout their enemies, but also demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of governmental political concerns and proved adept at negotiating the maze of official urban structures which affected their interests. Additionally, commandeering the support of local residents and gaining the allegiance of mineworkers from neighbouring compounds were crucial elements in the Russians' campaigns. Their success stemmed from the adoption of a strategy designed to serve their needs in an urban environment in which the white-ruled state wielded ultimate power, but where their immediate antagonists were fellow black residents. The Newclare conflicts reveal two contradictory elements of power politics in apartheid-era townships. Firstly, the importance of police collusion with 'conservative' black groups is evident. The Russians of Newclare South were a precursor of later groups which the government sponsored to suppress political agitation and to sow discord in the townships. Secondly, at least from the residents' perspective, the limits of the government's authority in day-to-day life could not have been more apparent. The real powerbrokers in Newclare South were the Russians. This article explores the manner in which they established and maintained supremacy over Newclare South, and assesses the legacy of their reign.