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THEGUARDIAN

Friday September 6 1991

Poison' In the

ANCis ranks

The mysterious death of Thami Zulu

two years ago continues to haunt

the liberation movement of which

he was a hero. David Beresford

fUniversity .of the

reports from Johannesburg

N NOVEMBER 1989 a eu-

rious funeral took place in

a Swaziland cemetery.

The mourners were lim-

ited almost entirely to

members of the dead man's

family. Which was what made

it curious. because they were

burying a hero.

If there had been any doubt

that he was a hero, it was dis-

missed by a statement read out

at the graveside. Signed by Joe

Modise and Chris Hani - com-

mander and chief of staff

respectively of the ANCis mili-

tary wing. Umkonto we Sizwe

("Spear of the Nation") - it

contained ringing tributes to

the man who was being buried:

the glorious army of our

people salute you. . . we

remember your eiticency and

competence. . . we recall with

sheer pride and emotion. . .this

giant and gallant tighter. 1

But for all the tributes, the

statement had to be read out by

the dead man's sister. because

the few antioapartheid activists

present at the burying of the

hero were too scared to do it

themselves. And thestory

which lies behind that fear - a

tale of paranoia, personal trag-

edy and that most cowardly

form of murder, by poison - is

one which haunts the South

African liberation struggle and

could have an impact on its

eventual outcome.

He was buried as Muziwakhe

Ngwenya, which is his real

name. But he will always be

remembered by his nom de

guerre: Thami Zulu. He was

born in Soweto, the eldest child

of two school principals. Which

was an advantageous beginning

'for a township boy in a country

where the authorities made the

stunting of young black minds

a matter of policy. And he took

full advantage of his parentage,

claiming tirst-class honours at

school in Soweto and then in

Swaziland - where the bright-

est of black South African chil-

dren escaped the limitations of

apartheid's system of Bantu

education. He had wanted to go on _to Johannesburg '5 white itwaters-
rand to study civil engineering. 'but was refused racial exemp-
tion. Instead he enrolled at the Umverslty of Botswana, but
abandoned his studies in his first year to join the ANC.
His rise in South Africa's main liberation movement was sensational. He was sent for training in the Soviet Union where. by one account, he was so successful that an attempt was made to recruit him into the Soviet army. But 'he returned to become a com-
mander of the Umkonto we Sizwe (MK) training camps in southern Angola. It was there that he was spotted by the chief of staff, Chris Hani, .and ap-
pointed to overall command of the Natal theatre of operations. basing himself initially in Swa-
ziland and later in the Mozam- bique capital of Maputo. Natal was a difficult battle-
ground fought over with partic- After the killings
the organisation
Was reduced
to a state of
paranoia ,
about informers
ular viciousness by both the South African security services and the ANC. Thami's prede-
cessor as regional chief of oper- ations, Zwelakhe Nyanda, had been assassinated by South
African agents. During his time Thami managed to step up the onslaught to the point where
the coastal city of Durban be- came known as South Africa's bomb capital and he was soon
being talked of as a future suc- cessor to Hani.
But his career came to an abrupt end after two disastrous incidents in 1988 near the town
of Piet Retief in the south east- ern Transvaal. In a matter of a few days, the ANC Natal com-
mand suil'ered a traumatic set- back after nine of their combat- ants were massacred in two
separate ambushes after cross- ing the Swaziland border. i
The killings had a traumatic impact on the ANC. which was reduced to a state of paranoia
about informers in its ranks. Thami's deputy, eode-named qCyril," and his wife. 'fJessica."
were summoned to Lusaka. Cyril subsequently died myste- riously in detention. having
refused to sign a confession

that he was a South African agent. His wife was imprisoned as a suspected spy. Then Thami himself was called in by headquarters placed under house arrest and eventually formally detained

Under the ANC's command structure the Security Department, responsible for the detentions, was completely separate from the military and had overriding investigatory powers. Thami's detention, which came as a shock to the military, was without the sanction of either Modise or Bani. The two commanders made furious demands inside the ANC National Executive to know the basis of Thami's detention and to have access to him. Both were refused. Hani did manage to see him briefly at an early stage, in the company of Thami's father who had flown to Lusaka from Johannesburg to find out what had happened. Thami insisted he had no idea on what basis he had been held.

The former Natal commander was finally released in Lusaka - after 17 months in detention, at least part of it in solitary confinement - on November 11, 1989. Five days later he was dead, at the age of 35.

Furious controversy ensued in the ranks of the ANC. The leadership was forced to set up an internal commission of inquiry under the chairmanship of Albie Sachs, the law academic who had himself nearly been killed by a cartoon the previous year. The findings of the commission were never publicly announced, but rumours about its conclusions were widely circulated. It was said - and it appears to be true - that there was no evidence Thami was a South African agent. The cause of death was variously reported to have been Aids, pneumonia, or tuberculosis.

The true story of his death is an extraordinary, if still confused one. It appears Thami was seriously ill when he was freed on that Saturday morning. He went to stay with a friend who was a doctor, who was himself suddenly taken ill - it is believed with a burst ulcer - and rushed to hospital. When he came around after the operation he sent a message to MK to check on Thami. Rani and Modise themselves went to

the house, but found the gate

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'-&34!

locked. The two commanders

scaled the wall and found

Thami inside, too weak to get

out of bed. ible to view bf the virulent only a few months before Thar

On the Tuesday Hani spttheadoftheTB_- which could. mi's death the South African

returned to the house-to-and been due to the collapse of Church leader and anti-apart-

Thami still in a bad stateHe immune system. heid activist, Dr Frank Chi-

did not want medical help and

appeared to be worried that the

Security Department was going

to utinish me. off" if he got into

their hands.

On Wednesday night vHani

called in a doctor to attend to

him and left two members of

MK to keep watch at his bed-

side, Thami was suffering

severe attacks of vomiting and

diarrhoea. On Thursday he

started gasping and was rushed

to hosp ital where he died

The l)Gtuatrdian has obtained a

copy of the Lusaka post mortem

rem lt concludes that Thami That traces

died as amniosh fo'dhd itiW'haml'a body hi

read like w'ildiire'iduring his

tention. it is mot known

ether he hadsaids, but 'it is

Whether or not Aids was a

compounding factor the post

ntortem finding of death by TB

Wed by a Dr Zhurovich -

ispextraordinary. The Guardian

has also obtained a copy of a

rqioi't of an analysis made of

'lhami's blood and stomach

after his death. And this repott

states that "Diazon, an organo

phosphorous pesticide was de

team in both specimens!

pesticide is a particularly toxic

point. The fact it was found in

the uhlood means that it killed

hlm.rather than the TB. - a

of pois

it' ls known that Thami had TB known for some time

- he had been treated for it in commanders and has le to sus-

pitions in their ranks that it

mortem it appears that this had was administered while he was.

Swaziland -- and from the post

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inedetention. it is known that
the South African security
forces used such poisons -
kane. had fallen ill with organo
phosphate poisoning.
These two factors, coupled
with the absence of any appar-

ent grounds for Thami's detention, led to suspicions that a South African agent had infiltrated the Security Department to a high level and was using the position to target key figures in the army.

The Guardian has however, shown the analyst 5 report and the Mt. mortem findings 'to South Africa's leading forensic pathologist, Dr Jonathan Cluck. He said:

"The Steve Biko inquest. Dr Gluckman said. It is on the basis of the medical reports - while the tuberculosis was so 'likely' here.

Dr MK's report will continue to be handed out bilion years and later item. 311-1111 for some time by the owner of the era in mortgage to abolish their tax peitai. you. life. . .

T- widespread that it would eventually have proved fatal - the immediate cause of death was, without question, poisoning. The presence of the poison in the dead man's stomach "and blood signified that 'he had drunk it. The toxicity of the poison was such as to suggest that it was taken within 24 hours of death at the most.

The implications are obvious. Unless Thami Zulu committed suicide, the tinger of suspicion points to those in attendance on him in the final hours of his which includes members of Umkonto we Sizwe itself. .

To describe the death of Thami Zulu as a cause celebre within the C is almost to understate it. In evaluating the story one has to take into account the bitter 311p 'halite we Sizwe to the

Security Department figures involved much political importance 3 AND ANALYSIS 3

14/. Lck M O-v(M- .1, u - 3W4 " .

Chris Bani, on the military aide, topped the elections for the National Executive at the recent ANC Congress and must be seen as the heir apparent to Nelson Mandela. The head of Security, Joe Makhela. He is a man of the past. But the head of counter intelligence who falls under him, Jacob Zuma, is another key figure - both as Assistant-General Secretary of the ANC and one of their five-man team to negotiate the country's

1future. Divisions between such
men are serious enough. It, in
addition, the South Africans
have infiltrated an agent into
the upper echelons of the ANC
who was res pon-sible tor the-
murder of Thami the potentiai . H
for manipulationiaohvioua; . . 12'
who boasted 4.11 the m
. . .-. bra warrior but he a
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