CHAPTER 4
HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT OF THE SITE

INTRODUCTION

Three pre-colonial archaeological sites have been found on Robben Island, two containing stone tools and the third containing fossilised mammal bones. The former are very ephemeral stone artefact scatters, consisting of quartz irregular cores and flakes. The sites with stone tools are close to each other, situated in an area west of the Maximum Security Prison (MSP). The third site, containing fossilised mammal bones of Eland and the now extinct Rhebok, is below ground level adjacent to the waste management plant in the northeastern area of the Island.

Robben Island’s history is often described as multi-layered, as different authorities used the Island for different purposes during different periods — extracting resources, imprisoning and banishing people, isolating the ‘diseased’, and as a static battleground. Despite the varied regimes and purpose of the Island, many similarities and continuities are evident, for example, the exploitation of resources, often through hard labour and segregation according to status, class, ‘race’, or gender — often the custodians were ‘white’ and the imprisoned or isolated ‘black’. After 1963 all the warders were ‘white’ and the prisoners ‘black’. ‘White’ prisoners, with the exception of Tsafendas were not incarcerated on Robben Island.

Tafendas was the assassin of Verwoerd, Prime Minister of South Africa and architect of apartheid. Tsafendas had been classified as ‘white’ despite having a ‘black’ mother. Shortly before the assassination, Tsafendas, having fallen in love with a coloured woman, applied for reclassification as coloured. For more details see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dimitri_Tsafendas

Responses to ill-treatment also show continuities in the form of resistance and attempted escapes, by struggling for better conditions, by smuggling articles or messages, and by engaging in activities to organise and provide sports, education and recreation. Resistance and spirituality are themes that recur throughout the layered history of Robben Island.

PRE-COLONIAL ERA

Robben Island, originally part of the mainland, forms a pinnacle of an ancient, now submerged mountain. Over the last 700 000 years on twelve different occasions, rising and falling sea levels changed the shape of the outcrop that became an Island. The most recent change occurred about 12 000 years ago after the last Ice Age when the sea level rose and created a channel between the Island and the mainland.

Sailors sketched domestic animals

The first recorded landing on Robben Island in recent history indicates that a group of Portuguese sailors took refuge there and stayed overnight in a cave in 1498. A further visit documented by sailors, records that there were thousands of seals and penguins, and also many tortoises, inhabiting the Island; and in 1503 sailors killed and feasted on these resources. This began Robben Island’s role as a source of fresh food for sailors en route to or from the East Indies. Later in the 1600s sailors left sheep to fatten on the Island’s grass and shrubs; however human occupation was limited and of short duration until the establishment of a Dutch settlement at the Cape.

COLONIAL EXPANSIONISM AND BANISHMENT

Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC) period (1652-1795)

After the Dutch established a permanent settlement at the Cape in 1652, they soon realised the usefulness of the Island as a place for growing vegetables, as well as for keeping domestic animals, such as sheep and cattle to supply passing ships. Rabbits were also introduced to supplement the supply of fresh meat. There were attempts to control the extraction of the resources even then, as Jan van Riebeeck issued strict instructions that passing vessels limit their Island foraging to one penguin per two sailors per day.

However, the Island changed over time, particularly its flora and fauna, as humans exerted pressure on the resources and brought new species as well. Many of the species introduced in this way have become part of Robben Island’s cultural landscape as we know it today, reflecting a dynamic and ever-evolving landscape of numerous layers.
Within a few years the Dutch found a new role for Robben Island as a secure site for imprisoning opponents of the Dutch East India Company or Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC) from both the Cape and the East Indies. These prisoners were sent to the Island for punitive exile. The earliest recorded Robben Island prisoners were slaves and prisoners of war (POW) brought from the East Indies in 1657. These prisoners however, were soon joined in 1658 by the earliest indigenous prisoners to be sent to the Island, namely Autshumato, a leader of the Khoi, and three other prisoners. In addition, common law prisoners were also housed on the Island in order to perform hard labour. The prisoners were forced to cut stone and mine lime, which was used to build some of the early structures at the Cape. Later, prisoners also burnt shells for lime, lit the signal fires and tended the company’s sheep on the Island.

After 1722, political and religious leaders from the East Indies, where the VOC was fighting for control over the lands with which it traded, were sent in greater numbers to Robben Island. In order to differentiate leaders who had been exiled, from other political and common law prisoners, leaders did not endure forced labour and were given allowances.

The Muslim influence on Robben Island is manifest in a kramat and unmarked graves of Muslim exiles who died there. A simple shrine was erected to mark the death of an Asian Prince of Madura, Pangerau Chakra Deningrat. Although his body was sent back to his place of birth, the burial of the Prince of Madura is currently symbolised by the kramat. There are a number of other gravesites in the area including that of Hadjie Matarim who died on Robben Island in 1755

Another event that marks Muslim history in South Africa was the writing of an important text on Islamic jurisprudence by Tuan Guru, a prince from Tidore in the Ternate Islands, who was imprisoned on Robben Island from 1780 until 1793. The imprisonment of Muslim leaders from the East on the Island has therefore left an indelible mark on the people of the Cape.

**British occupation (1795-1802; 1806-1910)**

After the British took over from the Dutch, they continued to use the Island as a favourite place of banishment for indigenous leaders who opposed colonial expansion and land dispossession both in the eastern and northern regions of the Cape Colony and later in Natal as well. Chiefs who led the resistance against the British advancement were seen as a hindrance to European civilisation and needed to be silenced.¹

For almost the entire nineteenth century, numerous leaders of Xhosa, Khoi, Gcaleka in the Eastern Cape, the Korana in Northern Cape, and the Hlubi in Natal, were banished to the Island at different times. They constructed and lived in crude structures in their traditional style to the north of the bay, geographically separated from the village in the southeast.

During the later years of Dutch rule at the Cape, the Dutch cattle farmers trekked east and north from Cape Town. Initially they clashed with the Khoikhoi and San inhabitants, and later also with the Xhosa in the Zuurbeld. The more numerous Xhosa who had settled in these areas many years earlier, were also cattle farmers. The resulting, often violent, clashes over land and cattle continued for over one hundred years involving nine frontier wars, or wars of dispossession, the last ending in 1878. Under British colonialism, from 1806, a combination of guile and warfare to increase the Dutch and British settlers’ landholdings resulted in the diminishing power of indigenous leaders to resist the continual annexation of land. The final annexation of land on the East Coast was that of Pondoland in 1879, giving the Cape Colony governance over the land stretching over 1 000 km to the southern border of Natal.

It is interesting to note that the people of Pondoland engaged in one of the most extensive revolts against the apartheid system in 1960.

Clashes between the British and Khoi led to the arrest and imprisonment of Robben Island of David Stuurman in 1809. This was followed by the arrest and banishment of Makhanda, an important Xhosa leader, and a number of his followers in 1819.² Another group of Xhosa chiefs including Maqoma, Fadana, Stokwe and others, were sent to the Island in the 1850s.³ After the last war of dispossession in 1877-78, fourteen Xhosa leaders, including the sons of Maqoma and Sandile were imprisoned on Robben Island. They were separated from other prisoners in a wooden hut near Murray’s Bay.⁴

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¹ For details on the British occupation, see HIST 184: A History of South Africa.
² For details on the arrest of Stuurman, see HIST 183: A History of South Africa.
³ For details on the arrest of Makhanda, see HIST 183: A History of South Africa.
⁴ For details on the arrest of Maqoma, see HIST 183: A History of South Africa.
In the northwestern borderlands of the Cape Colony, white farmers living south of the Orange River came into conflict with the Korana people as their encroachment deprived local inhabitants of their grazing land and sources of water for their livestock. This sparked confrontation and resistance from the Korana people who, under their chiefs, waged war against this colonial intrusion. By 1870 the conflict resulted in the capture of several Korana chiefs, three of whom were seen by the colonialists as the most dangerous – Jan Kivido, Piet Rooy and Carel Ruiters. They were convicted and banished to Robben Island where they served their sentences. In 1879 another Korana chief named Lucas, with a number of other leaders captured by the British, were also sent to the Island. Lucas died on the Island in 1880 while serving his sentence. Most of the Koranas were categorised as convicts and were housed in a room adjacent to the convict station on the edge of the Village. These were, however, not the only chiefs imprisoned as there were others imprisoned on the mainland as well. In addition, the British conflict with the Hlubi in Natal led to the banishment of Chief Langalibalele to the Island in 1874.

Between 1880 and 1884 all the indigenous leaders banished or imprisoned on Robben Island, were either pardoned and released or transferred to the Breakwater Prison at Table Bay Harbour where they worked in the docks.

**GENERAL INFIRMARY – ROBBEN ISLAND AS A PLACE OF EXCLUSION (1846-1931)**

In 1846 a General Infirmary was established on Robben Island to cater for three specific categories of the sick in the colony who were poor – the insane, the chronically ill, and those with leprosy. As new facilities were developed for the mentally ill and the chronically ill on the mainland, the Infirmary was gradually reduced in scope. However this period is remembered primarily for the isolation of people with leprosy. While introducing progressive methods of treating mental illness, forms of punishment were at times extremely harsh. Patients were segregated on the basis of race, class and gender, as Robben Island reflected the predominant attitudes and values of the time. This subsequently led the way to implementing a policy of formal racial segregation in the wards at various stages from the 1860s, and provided an example of racial segregation that was followed by many other Cape institutions in the 1890s.

By accepting the patients least likely to be cured, the Robben Island Infirmary smoothed the work of hospitals and gaols on the mainland, and removed from the streets those people whom middle-class Cape Town found most threatening to their social order. The social and medical profile of the Robben Island patient made the General Infirmary more of a place of exclusion for those who weighed heavily on the hands of government, than a place of healing. Another motivation for the establishment of the General Infirmary on Robben Island was for economic reasons, being a place with “an abundance of stone, lime and labour.” Putting the chronically ill, those with leprosy and the mentally ill together in one place as opposed to being scattered in hospitals on the mainland would relieve the tax burden.
voluntary measures. This compulsory segregation was rarely implemented in other countries.

At this time Robben Island was the only leprosarium in the colony and it was swamped in 1892 by the unexpectedly large number of people with leprosy, black and white, who were classified under the Act. When other leprosaria were built in that decade, Robben Island continued to house the majority of the patients (close to a thousand at any one time). It was specifically used to detain escapees or patients who protested in other ways against their incarceration in mainland hospitals.

All leprosarium wards were demolished in the 1930s because of a fear that the disease would spread and contaminate people moving into the buildings.

However, as treatment improved over time, a growing number of people with leprosy were diagnosed as non-infectious and were allowed to leave the Island. The leprosaria were closed in 1931 due to rising costs and decreasing caseloads, thus ending Robben Island’s many years as a place of exclusion for those who were sick and marginalised by South African society because of their disease.

The Role of the Church
During the period of the General Infirmary when hundreds of people with leprosy were isolated on Robben Island, the Christian church was very active and became an important source of spiritual comfort. At the peak of the involvement of the church, there were as many as seven consecrated churches on the Island, representing the Anglican, Dutch Reformed Church and Roman Catholic Church. In addition, pastors representing the Moravian and other church denominations visited the Island regularly to conduct services and to provide pastoral care. A number of churches were constructed at different times on the Island, including those built for specific groups, such as women with leprosy. Most of the churches were constructed in the leprosaria and, with the exception of the Church of the Good Shepherd, were demolished in the early 1930s, along with the wards, houses and other structures of the leprosaria.

The construction of separate churches for Dutch Reformed, Catholic and Anglican congregations suggests a degree of interdenominational rivalry at the time. That separate churches were built for men and for women in their respective settlements, illustrates the strict segregation of male and female leprosy patients.

The role of the Christian church in the history of Robben Island, however, is an ambivalent one. On one hand, the church was an important source of spiritual comfort to those who were forcibly moved to the Island and to their custodians. On the other hand, the church was seen to be an extension and a partner of the colonial administration, as it was perceived to do little to challenge the authorities or champion the rights of patients. There are some chaplains who are said to have actually sought biblical justification for the continued isolation of those suffering from disease, for instance, the church did not speak out against the segregation of people with leprosy from society. In one case, individuals with leprosy refused to listen to their ministers sermonising about ‘lepers’ in the bible.

However to simply dismiss the importance of the church in providing spiritual strength to leprosy patients is as dangerous as to completely embrace it without critical evaluation. Thus despite the church at times collaborating with the state, it was an important institution that played a major role in the lives of the people of the Island in different periods of time.

MILITARY DEFENCE (1939-1945)

During WW2 Robben Island was chosen as the key site to protect Table Bay and Cape Town from threat of enemy
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Attack. Its role changed during the war from that of a static battleship and a battery of 9.2" guns to an anti-submarine detector station. Artillery training took place through most of the war. To facilitate these varied functions, gun batteries and related fortifications, new buildings for accommodation, storerooms, an airstrip and numerous other structures were built. This required the landing of 150 000 tons of equipment and material on the Island. To cater for this, the first priority was the construction of a harbour capable of landing the material. A large labour force was required for the building of the harbour and other structures, and approximately 2 000 workers, possibly rising to 5 000 at times, were engaged in this major project.

As white male soldiers departed to serve in North Africa, many opportunities arose for white women by the creation of new units, including artillery specialists in the Women’s Auxiliary Army Service (ASWAAS) and harbour defence operators in the South African Auxiliary Naval Service (SWANS). Training of over four hundred women in the ASWAAS took place at the artillery school on Robben Island, after which a number of these women continued to serve in the batteries on the Island. The SWANS played a key role in operating the various detection systems.

Conditions on the Island during this period continued to be more difficult for black people who were segregated and housed in inferior accommodation – the Cape Corps were housed in a derelict building and then in tents in the northern region of the Island close to the Cornelia Battery, and African workers engaged in construction were housed in a ‘native compound’ on the site of the present-day Maximum Security Prison (MSP), just west of the harbour. In contrast, white women were housed in the Village or ‘Logistics’ and were closely guarded at night. White soldiers and engineers were in barracks in the Village or in the southern region of the Island, thus continuing the geographic separation according to race and gender, to a degree. This institutionalised racial segregation on the Island, ironically, took place during a war against Fascism and Nazism.

Another continuity was the use of the Island as a place of imprisonment – a group of Vichy prisoners of war were housed on the Island after they were captured during the interception of a Vichy fleet that sailed from Madagascar and attempted to reach West Africa. After WW2 a small prison holding approximately 60 long-term prisoners sentenced to hard labour was established on the Island. These common law prisoners maintained the roads and kept the Island clean, and were also available to work for the Island’s residents as gardeners or domestic workers. Thus imprisonment, segregation and discrimination remained part of the daily life of the Island even during times of war against others who also committed social injustices. The large Island population at this time also brought with it its negative environmental impact, including a near decimation of the penguin colony.

Although the 9.2" and 6" batteries were never used against enemy craft, they played a crucial role in training coastal and anti-aircraft gunners, many of whom served in North Africa. A majority of the people, including black men and white women who served and were trained on Robben Island during the war, were trained out of public view to abide by the official position that black men should not be armed. Unofficially, many men of the Cape Corps, a black unit, were armed and trained in order to perform duties in the rear, including the guarding of prisoners of war. However, 2 000 men of the Cape Corps were trained in gunnery on Robben Island and did duty as coastal gunners on the Island or engaged in active combat with anti-aircraft regiments in North Africa.

SWANS training
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The South African Navy handed control of Robben Island to the Prison Services on 24 March 1961. This was to mark the beginning of the most notorious period of the Island’s history with the establishment of a Maximum Security Prison (MSP).

Arrival of a group of common law prisoners

The years 1960 and 1961 were a key turning point in South Africa’s recent history, after a decade of peaceful protest and mass actions during which the principles of Gandhi’s satyagraha protest action held sway.

The Maximum Security Prison

Satyagraha is roughly translated as non-violent force. It is interesting to note that Gandhi developed his ideas of passive resistance or non-violent force in South Africa while struggling to improve the civil rights of Indians in South Africa. The Natal Indian Congress formed in 1894 became an ally of the ANC in the 1950s and a number of their members were incarcerated on Robben Island. Albert Luthuli, President of the ANC in the 1950s and awarded The Nobel Peace Prize, as well as other members of the Congress Alliance were very influenced by Gandhi’s ideas.

Passive Resisters, 1908

In March 1960 the apartheid state responded violently to protests against ‘pass laws’ in various places, including Sharpeville (south of the city of Johannesburg) and Langa (in Cape Town), as well as in Pondoland (in the former Transkei). The Pondoland revolt against the imposition of Bantu Authorities and control over land, was a widespread uprising in 1960 in the Transkei area of the Eastern Cape. In crushing the uprising many hundreds of men were arrested and a number were sent to, and imprisoned on, Robben Island. Despite being charged with offences under the common law, these men can be regarded as the first political prisoners on the Island under apartheid.

An example of a pass book

Pass Laws were used by colonial authorities and again by the apartheid regime to control movement of people. After the discovery of gold and diamonds, pass laws were implemented for those men classified as African in order to minimise the extent of urbanisation and restrict the majority of Africans to rural areas. Passes were one of the most hated of the apartheid laws and thus a key target of protest actions in the 1950s, especially after the state extended the pass laws to include African women.

Burning the passes

PAC march in Langa, Cape Town

In an attempt to defeat the liberation struggle, the apartheid regime created numerous laws with the result that large numbers of Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), African National Congress (ANC) and South African Communist Party (SACP) members (cadres) were arrested, tried and sentenced to different periods of imprisonment. The apartheid regime moved swiftly to ban organisations opposed to it and introduced legislation that outlawed even discussion of opposition to the state through armed struggle. After being banned, both the ANC and the PAC re-established themselves clandestinely and formed armed wings, (the ANC established uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) and the PAC set up Poqo in 1961) to continue the struggle against the regime and its harsh, discriminatory laws.
Only black men were imprisoned on Robben Island and, after the transfer to the mainland of coloured warders, all the warders were white males. The segregation of blacks to the northern part of the Island continued, with prisoners initially housed in the Ou Tronk (Old Jail) and then also in the Zink Tronk (Zinc Jail) while the prisoners built the new MSP in which they were then incarcerated. Relations between the prisoners and the warders were exacerbated by differences in age, education and even class – many political prisoners were older, well educated and from middle-class backgrounds, whereas the warders were often from poor working-class backgrounds and had little education. The latter had been indoctrinated into believing that the political prisoners were terrorists, murderers and rapists. The brutal treatment meted out by some guards was partly a result of what they perceived black men to be.

Isolation, so symbolic of Robben Island, was continuously put into practice; however from the 1960s until the recent political dispensation, it was more widely enforced. The prisoners who were regarded as political leaders or seen to be influential were isolated from the general prison population and placed in single cells in B-Section. This section became increasingly well known as the leadership section, as leading figures from all the liberation movements were placed here – leaders of the ANC, the PAC, Yu Chi Chan Club, African People’s Democratic Union of South Africa (APDUSA), as well as from Namibia’s South West African People’s Organisation (SWAPO). The following leaders, for instance, shared this section – four members of the ANC’s executive, including Govan Mbeki and Walter Sisulu; leading figures of the PAC, such as Zeph Mothopeng, Clarence Makwetu and Jeff Masemola; Toivo ya Toivo of SWAPO; Neville Alexander of the Yu Chi Chan Club; Kader Hassim of APDUSA; and Eddie Daniels, the solitary member of the Liberal Party on Robben Island. However, some very influential figures, including Harry Gwala and Johnson Miambo, remained within the general prison population.

Robert Sobukwe, the charismatic leader of the PAC, was held in solitary confinement in a house some distance away from the MSP. He was not allowed to communicate with anybody including his warders who were ordered not
to speak to him. Sobukwe could only communicate symbolically with other prisoners by using various gestures.

As a result of their activities, there was an influx of new militant prisoners to the MSP on Robben Island. They introduced ‘black power’ slogans and symbols of resistance and refused to accede to warders’ demands. Thus they had a considerable impact on the prevailing atmosphere, where the long-term prisoners had adopted a more conciliatory approach. The prison authorities responded by isolating many of the South African Students Organisation (SASO) and Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) leaders, as well as captured MK guerrillas, in A-Section, and built high walls between many of the sections in order to minimise contact between the prisoners.

As time passed, there was much pressure from within the prison and from the outside world for change in conditions inside the prison as well as in South Africa, and subsequently the lives of prisoners improved – hard labour was ended, skills training was introduced, and access to news broadcasts and newspapers was allowed for A category prisoners.

In the 1980s many of the long-term prisoners were released or transferred, including the release of the Namibian political prisoners and transfer to Pollsmoor Prison of most of the Rivonia trialists. There were however, new arrivals of prisoners who now included more captured MK guerrillas and, after the Vaal Uprising and general unrest from 1983 onwards, a steady flow into the prison of young United Democratic Front (UDF) and Azanian Peoples Organisation (AZAPO) activists. Several ex-political prisoners received second periods of imprisonment on Robben Island, including Zeph Mothopeng and Harry Gwala. At the same time, hunger strikes continued to play a role in the struggle to improve prison conditions.
During their incarceration most prisoners engaged in activities that were meant to equip them with tools for the future. These activities were carried out as part of the political agenda and included debates, studies, organisational activities, and training. The results of this ‘training’ can clearly be seen in the present free South Africa where, upon their release, many ex-political prisoners engaged in struggle activities, often taking leadership roles. Thus during and after the transition to a democratic society, many ex-prisoners played, and continue to play, key roles in many sectors of society. This has particularly been epitomised by Nelson Mandela when he assumed the mantle of president of the government of a free South Africa in 1994.26

SPORT AND CULTURAL ACTIVITIES

Sport and cultural activities were encouraged by the leadership of the prisoners and played a major role in the prisoners’ lives, while studies, formal and informal, continued to mould and shape many within the confines of the Robben Island prison. After the unbanning of political and other organisations in 1990, groups of prisoners were released, until the last political prisoners departed from the Island in 1991. Jeff Masemola, a craftsman and an artist, was the longest serving political prisoner on Robben Island who spent 26 years of his life imprisonment sentence in the MSP. Others who were sentenced to life imprisonment included the Rivonia Trialists, Petros Mashigo, Johnson Lubisi, Neph Manana, David Moisi, and numerous others.

A powerful symbol of humanity and a product of Robben Island, Nelson Mandela and his comrades Govan Mbeki and Walter Sisulu, among many, were victims of discrimination, incarceration and isolation. These were people denied their rights for over a quarter of a century. Together, and jointly with their comrades and all those who were jailed in Robben Island and other prisons in South Africa, they all suffered. They all never gave up, but came out fighting, preaching and practicing forgiveness and reconciliation. Despite all the difficulties there was a creation of a ‘rainbow nation’, South Africa. Robben Island therefore stands out as a symbol of suffering, truth, as well as forgiveness.

RESISTANCE TO OPPRESSION THROUGH THE NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURIES

One of the underlying themes of the history of Robben Island in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is that of resistance to oppression. To end this chapter the theme is analysed in more detail.

The underlying reason for the banishment of indigenous leaders to Robben Island in the nineteenth century was...
their resistance to colonial expansion. This often took the form of skirmishes, battles and even lengthy wars against the colonial powers. By banishing or imprisoning such leaders on Robben Island, the colonial governments hoped to isolate leaders from their people and break their spirit of resistance. Their imprisonment failed to achieve this as, whenever possible, they returned to rekindle the flame of anti-colonialism. Resistance to banishment and imprisonment down the years took various forms with escape being the predominant form in earlier years.

Escapes in the nineteenth century included that of David Stuurman, who, with Hans Trompetter, had been in the forefront of the Khoi-led war of 1799 to 1803. Stuurman successfully escaped in a rowing boat four months into his imprisonment on the Island. He was recaptured only ten years later and shipped to the Island with the first group of Xhosa prisoners. Stuurman escaped for a second time in 1820. Makanda who arrived on the Island in 1819 spent less than a year there before attempting to escape.

Apart from indigenous leaders imprisoned on the Island, other people held on the Island against their will, such as those with leprosy, also expressed their discontent in various ways. In 1892 men with leprosy, led by Franz Jacobs, a former teacher from Cape Town seriously challenged the Leprosy Repression Act of 1891 and drafted a petition to the authorities challenging their authority to isolate people with leprosy on Robben Island. They also demanded an improvement in their conditions. Later in 1893 women with leprosy went on strike, refusing to assist in any kind of sanitary work including cleaning their wards or sending their washing to the leprosarium laundry. Others wrote to local newspapers complaining about the quality of food and water. Thus there has been resistance and protests at all stages of the inhuman treatment that has been meted out to people on Robben Island.

A spirit of resistance was again manifest in those who fought against apartheid in the 1960s and were imprisoned on Robben Island. Activists and leaders of various liberation movements and anti-apartheid groups were arrested and transported to Robben Island to serve their sentences, often for ten to twenty years, including some sentenced to life imprisonment. Political prisoners refused to allow the prison system to break their spirit and engaged in a wide range of activities that challenged it and the apartheid authorities.

The political prisoners organised hunger strikes demanding better treatment, formed clandestine prison cell and party political structures, held political discussions to sharpen their political consciousness, developed secret communication channels to overcome the gap between the isolation and general sections of the prison, and challenged arbitrary rules and punishment. There were other forms of resistance that included, fighting for the right to pursue academic studies through correspondence, petitions, and the use of legal channels to change prison conditions.

Prisoners managed to engage in less direct forms of resistance that were designed to keep their morale up and break the feeling of imprisonment. ‘Struggle songs’ sung rhythmically with work, sourcing food from alternative sources other than that provided by the prison system, and developing prison language with terms that were not understood by warders, are examples of this indirect resistance.

Thus in the process of attempting to break the morale of the political prisoners, the prison system became a coarse stone against which the prisoners sharpened themselves and their resolve to liberate their country from an oppressive and discriminatory system of government. In these ways the survival and growth of the prisoners and their organisations defeated the apartheid government’s aim of destroying opposition to apartheid.28

PLEASE SEE FOLLOWING TABLE SHOWING THE CHRONOLOGY OF ROBBEN ISLAND
### ROLE OF AND KEY EVENTS ON ROBBEN ISLAND

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>HISTORICAL PERIOD</th>
<th>KEY EVENTS IN SOUTH AFRICA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-1488</td>
<td>Pre-colonial</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1488-1652</td>
<td>European ships passing the tip of Africa during exploration and development of a new maritime trade route to Asia.</td>
<td>• European ships passing the tip of Africa.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1652-1795</td>
<td>VOC period - colonial expansion of the Dutch in South East Asia. Resistance struggles led to leaders being captured and exiled.</td>
<td>• Establishment of a permanent refreshment station for Dutch sailors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1795-1802</td>
<td>First British occupation - during British/French war.</td>
<td>British annexed the Cape because of its strategic position.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1803-1806</td>
<td>Batavian period</td>
<td>English war.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1806-1815</td>
<td>British period</td>
<td>• British occupied the Cape.</td>
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### HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE SITE

**DATE KEY EVENTS IN SOUTH AFRICA**

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| 1806-1910 | British colonial period – peace ended as Britain and France engage in Napoleonic wars. Growing fears of leprosy and contagion led to isolating people with leprosy in many countries in 1890s. | • Britain reoccupied the Cape after the defeat of Batavian soldiers at Battle of Blouberg.  
• Xhosa and Khoi lose Battle of Grahamstown during fifth war of dispossession in 1819, and many warriors captured.  
• The Colonial Secretary in Cape Town, Montagu introduced system of convict rehabilitation.  
• Decision by Montagu to establish an infirmary on the Island for the chronically ill, people with leprosy and the mentally ill.  
• Further colonial expansion to the east and north sparked resistance by indigenous leaders.  
• Leprosy Repression Act passed in 1891 was used to isolate people with leprosy from their families and communities. | • 1806 – Whaling station re-established.  
• 1809 – David Stuurman imprisoned but escapes the same year with others.  
• 1808-1846 – Robben Island used as a prison for military, common law and political prisoners.  
• 1819 – Large group of political prisoners brought to Robben Island from Eastern Cape including Makhanda, Stuurman and Trompetter.  
• 1820 escape – Uprising and escape of prisoners including Makhanda, Stuurman and Trompetter resulted in deaths of some and recapture of others.  
• Whaling station closed and restrictions placed on fishing vessels to minimise opportunities for escape.  
• 1820s – Convict labour organised and stone cutting and lime burning resumed. About 10 per cent of the imprisoned are women also do hard labour.  
• Religious instruction for convicts began in late 1820s, followed by teaching of literacy and numeracy.  
• 1846-1931 – Robben Island as an infirmary for people with leprosy (until 1931), mentally ill patients (until 1921) and the chronically sick (until 1891).  
• 1855-1871 – Robben Island housed Xhosa political prisoners. Katyi spends twelve years with Magoma, her husband, on Robben Island after his banishment to the Island.  
• 1866-1921 – Robben Island reopened as a convict station to provide labour for the Infirmary and for the later construction of the new leprosaria.  
• 1874-1883 – Political prisoners brought from the Eastern Cape, Natal and Northern Cape.  
• 1880s & 1890s – Construction of women’s and men’s leprosaria to house large influx of people with leprosy. |
1939-1945 – WW2 between Allies and Axis countries. | • The Anglo-Boer War, 1899-1902, results in a new constitution that gives self-rule to South Africa with a heavily qualified franchise.  
• Discontented Africans react by forming the South African Native National Congress.  
• 1939-1945 – South Africa fought as member of the Allied Forces in WW2.  
• 1950s – Mass campaigns against injustices led by the ANC.  | • 1921 – Convict prison closed.  
• 1921 – Mentally ill are transferred from Robben Island to mainland.  
• 1931 – Leprosaria closed and people with leprosy transferred to leprosaria on mainland.  
• 1939-1945 – Defences established on Robben Island to protect Table Bay; training for women auxiliaries and Cape Corps.  
• 1945-1959 – Occupied by the army and navy for training and coastal defence. |
<table>
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<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>HISTORICAL PERIOD</th>
<th>KEY EVENTS IN SOUTH AFRICA</th>
<th>ROLE OF AND KEY EVENTS ON ROBBEN ISLAND</th>
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• Government responds by declaring a State of Emergency and banning liberation movements. | • 1956-1960 – Common law prison under navy control.  
• 1960 – Decision to change the role of the Island from that of a Naval training base to a maximum security prison.  
• 1960-1961 – Increase in the intake of common law prisoners imprisoned on the Island.  
• Official handover of the Island by the Navy to the Department of Prisons on 24 March 1961. |
| 1961-1994  | Apartheid Republic of South Africa                    | • A whites-only referendum ratifies the Nationalist government decision to become a republic.  
• 1961 - Formation of MK comprised of ANC and SACP activists, and Poqo linked to the PAC, engage in armed struggles against the government.  
• Trials of activists result in rapid increase of political imprisonment.  
• 1976 – Uprising of youth protesting against aspects of Bantu education began in Soweto.  
• 1980s – Reforms and new opposition organisations led to general uprisings, and States of Emergency result in detention, arrests and trials of many activists.  
• 1990-1991 – Negotiations and initial agreements led to organisations being unbanned, political prisoners released and exiles able to return. | • 1962 - First wave of political prisoners comprising mainly PAC and Poqo activists, followed soon after by ANC and MK activists.  
• 1962-1964 – Construction of the Maximum Security Prison by political and common law prisoners.  
• 1962-1977 – Political prisoners brutalised and forced to quarry stone and lime, and undertake other hard manual labour.  
• 1976-1980 – Wave of trials of youths from BCM and MK brought young radical group to Robben Island.  
• 1984-1989 – Third wave of political prisoners incarcerated on Robben Island.  
• 1990-1991 – All political prisoners released from Robben Island.  
• 1996 – Common law prisoners transferred to other prisons on the mainland. |
| 1994       | Democratic South Africa                              | • Democratic elections vote ANC government into power.  
• 1996 – Cabinet decides to declare Robben Island a national monument to be managed as a museum, and the Mayibuye Centre’s collections be incorporated into the museum. | • 1994 – Five former prisoners are appointed to the first cabinet of democratic South Africa.  
• 1995 – Reunion of ex political prisoners on Robben Island advises that the Island becomes a museum.  
• 1999 – Robben Island granted WHS status.  
• 2000 – Mayibuye Centre becomes part of RIM through a 99-year agreement with UWC.  
• 2006 – SAHRA declares Robben Island a National Heritage Site. |
CONCLUSION

This chapter has discussed the historical layering of the different periods; the continuities of imprisonment and banishment; of isolation and segregation; of hardship and punishment. An enduring aspect of the history is that in this context of hardship, an element of resistance has been present. The forms of resistance in the era of the apartheid prison were such that those released were regarded as graduates of Robben Island. The refusal by those imprisoned to give up their dignity in the face of oppression and their attempt to reach out even to those oppressing them, testifies not only to the resilience of the human spirit under trying circumstances, but also to the building of a culture of tolerance and reconciliation.29

Robben Island’s symbolism of freedom and resistance to oppression of both colonialism and apartheid therefore becomes a beacon of hope for those who face oppression, discrimination and torture in all its various forms.

ENDNOTES

8 - Strauss, T., War Along the Orange: The Korana and the Northern Border Wars of 1869-9 and 1879-9, Cape Town, Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town, 1979.
10 - Strauss, T., ‘War along the Orange’, p. 115.
13 - This section is a reworking of pages 19-20 of the Robben Island ‘Nomination Dossier for World Heritage Site Listing’ which draws on the works of Hamlet Deacon for its history of the Infirmary.
26 - Buntman, F., Robben Island and Prisoner Resistance, pp. 146ff.