



Thembisile 'Chris' Hani

Synopsis: *Chief of Staff of Umkhonto we Sizwe and General Secretary of the SACP. Born 28 June 1942 at Cofimvaba, Transkei, (now Eastern Cape), South Africa. Died at Dawn Park, Boksburg, South Africa, 10 April 1993*

Thembisile Chris Hani was born in the rural village of Sabalele, in the Cofimvaba region of the former Transkei. He was the fifth of the six children of [Gilbert](#) and Mary Hani, and one of the three that did not die during infancy. The name Chris was adopted by him as a nom de guerre, and was in fact the real name of his brother. Chris grew up a devout Christian. Hani was introduced to the politics of inequality early in life, when his father had to leave their rural home in search of work in the urban areas of South Africa. This had a profound influence on the young Chris, who became aware of his mother's struggle to run the household. Like other young men of his age, Chris tended the livestock until he reached school-going age.

Hani was enrolled at a Catholic school and soon developed a love for Latin. At this stage of his life, Hani's desire was to enter the priesthood, but his father disapproved and moved him to a non-denominational school, Matanzima Secondary School at Cala, in the Transkei. In 1954, a number of Hani's school teachers who were active in the Unity Movement lost their jobs after they protested against the introduction of Bantu education. This played a further role in developing Hani's political ideas. Hani later moved again to the Lovadale Institute in the Eastern Cape, where he matriculated in 1958.

Hani was exposed to Marxist ideology while a student at University of Fort Hare, where he also explored his childhood passion for the classics and for literature. Hani attended Fort Hare from 1959-1961 and graduated in 1962 from Rhodes University in Grahamstown, with a BA degree in Latin and English. He then moved to Cape Town and worked as an article clerk with the Schaeffer and Schaeffer legal firm from 1962-1963, but did not complete his articles.

Hani was exposed to political thought from a very young age through his father, Gilbert Hani, who was active in the ANC and eventually left South Africa and sought asylum in Lesotho. However, Hani's political involvement really began in 1957 when he became a member of the African National Congress' Youth League (ANCYL). He cites the conviction of the ANC's leaders in the [Treason Trial](#) (1956) as his main motivation to begin participating in the struggle for freedom.

While at Fort Hare, Hani's political ideas developed even further. Hani provided greater detail of his time at the university:

In 1959 I went over to university at Fort Hare where I became openly involved in the struggle, as Fort Hare was a liberal campus. It was here that I got exposed to Marxist ideas and the scope and nature of the racist capitalist system. My conversion to Marxism also deepened my non-racial perspective.

My early Catholicism led to my fascination with Latin studies and English literature. These studies in these two courses were gobbled up by me and I became an ardent lover of English, Latin and Greek literature, both modern and classical. My studies of literature further strengthened my hatred of all forms of oppression, persecution and obscurantism. The action of tyrants as portrayed in various literary works also made me hate tyranny and institutionalised oppression.

The Extension of University Education Act (1959) had put an end to black students attending White universities (mainly the universities of Cape Town and Witwatersrand) and created separate tertiary institutions for Whites, Coloured, Blacks, and Asians. Hani was active in campus protests over the takeover of Fort Hare by the Department of Bantu Education. During his years in the Western Cape Hani participated in protests against the takeover of the university by the Department of Bantu Education and came into contact with the [South African Congress of Trade Unions](#) (SACTU). This increased his awareness of the workers' struggle.

Hani's uncle had been active in the [Communist Party of South Africa](#) (CPSA), an organisation founded in 1921 but which had dissolved itself in response to the Suppression of Communism Act (1950). Ex-Communist Party members had to operate in secret, and re-emerged as the underground South African Communist Party (SACP) in 1953. Hani's frustration with the Apartheid system and the influence of leaders such as [Govan Mbeki](#), [Bram Fischer](#), [JB Marks](#), [Moses Kotane](#) and [Ray Simons](#), led him to join the underground South African Communist Party in 1961 and [Umkonktho We Sizwe](#) (MK, military wing of the ANC) in 1962. Hani went on to become a member of the MK's Western Cape leadership dubbed the "Committee of Seven." His encounters with the law began with his arrest at a police roadblock in 1962. He was found to be in possession of pamphlets containing objections to the government's notorious policy of detention without trial. He was subsequently charged under the [Suppression of Communism Act](#) and held in jail. He was granted bail of R500.00, and during this period entered Botswana to attend the 1962 ANC Conference in Lobatsi. On his return to South Africa, he was arrested at the border. He was tried and given an 18-month jail sentence. In 1963, while out on bail pending an appeal, Hani went underground on the advice of the ANC leadership. He remained underground in Cape Town for about four months and in May proceeded to Johannesburg where he was instructed to leave South Africa to undergo military training. Hani left South Africa for the Soviet Union, and returned in 1967 to take an active role in the Rhodesian bush war, acting as a Political Commissar in the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA). ZIPRA, under the command of Joshua Nkomo, operated out of Zambia. Hani was present for three battles during the "[Wankie Campaign](#)" (fought in the Wankie Game Reserve against Rhodesian forces) as part of the [Luthuli Detachment](#) of

combined ANC and Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) forces. Although the campaign provided much-needed propaganda for the struggle in Rhodesia and South Africa, in military terms it was a failure. Far too often the local population informed on guerrilla groups to the police.

In early 1967 Hani narrowly escaped into Botswana, only to be arrested and detained in prison for two years for weapons possession. Hani returned to Zambia at the end of 1968 to continue his work with ZIPRA. His imprisonment left him critical of the failure of the ANC leadership to assist him whilst he was in prison and he demanded a conference of all ANC members in exile. The Morogoro Conference took place in 1969. The decision was made to allow White and other “non-Africans” to become members of the ANC, and to ensure that political policy should guide military action, and not vice versa. As a result, The Revolutionary Council, which included Whites and Coloureds, was set up.

In 1974 Hani re-entered South Africa to establish an underground infrastructure for the ANC in the Western Cape. He entered the country from Botswana on foot and spent four months in the country, based in Johannesburg. He helped set-up underground units and a communications system. In addition, various routes through the country were established.

Hani then moved to Lesotho where he remained for about seven years. Here he organised units of the MK for guerrilla operations in South Africa. By 1982, Hani had become prominent enough in the ANC to be the focus of several assassination attempts, including at least one car bomb. He was transferred from the Lesotho capital, Maseru, to the centre of the ANC political leadership in Lusaka, Zambia. That year he was elected to the membership of the ANC National Executive Committee, and by 1983 he had been promoted to Political Commissar of the MK, working with student recruits who joined the ANC in exile after the [1976 Soweto uprising](#).

When dissident ANC members, who were being held in detention camps in Angola, mutinied against their harsh treatment in 1983–4, Hani played a key role in the uprisings' suppression – although he denied any involvement in the subsequent torture and murders. Hani continued his rise through the ANC ranks and in 1987 he became the Chief of Staff of the MK. During the same period he rose to senior membership of the SACP.

After the unbanning of ANC and SACP on 2 February 1990 Hani returned to South Africa and became a charismatic and popular speaker in townships. By 1990 he was known to be a close associate of [Joe Slovo](#), the General-Secretary of the SACP. Both Slovo and Hani were considered fearful figures in the eyes of South Africa's extreme right: the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (AWB, Afrikaner Resistance Movement) and the Conservative Party (CP). When Slovo announced that he had cancer in 1991, Hani took over as General-Secretary.

In 1992 Hani stepped down as Chief of Staff of Umkhonto we Sizwe to devote more time to the organisation of the SACP. Communists were prominent in the ANC and the Council of South African Trade Unions, but were under threat - the collapse of Marxism in Europe had discredited the movement around the world, and the policy of infiltrating other anti-Apartheid groups rather than making an independent stand was being questioned.

Hani campaigned for the SACP in townships around South Africa, seeking to redefine its place as a national political party. It was soon doing well - better than the ANC in fact – especially amongst the young who had no real experiences of the pre-Apartheid era and no commitment to the democratic ideals of the more moderate Mandela.

Hani was described as charming, passionate and charismatic, and soon attracted a cult-like following. He was the only political leader who seemed to have influence over the radical township self-defence groups that had parted from the authority of the ANC. Hani's SACP would have proved a serious match for the ANC in the 1994 elections.

On 10 April 1993, as he returned home to the racially mixed suburb of Dawn Park, Boksberg (Johannesburg), Hani was assassinated by Januzs Walus, an anti-Communist Polish refugee who had close links to the White nationalist AWB. With him was his daughter, Nomakhwezi, then 15 years old. His wife, Liphopho, and two other daughters, Neo (then 20 years old) and Lindiwe (then 12 years old) were away at the time. Also implicated in the assassination was Conservative Party MP Clive Derby-Lewis, and strangely a theory based largely on documents given to the Mail & Guardian point to a conspiracy beyond the right wing, linking the assassination to the ANC.

Hani's death came at a critical time for South Africa. The SACP was on the brink of gaining significant status as an independent political party. It now found itself bereft of funds (due to collapse in Europe) and without a strong leader. The assassination helped persuade the bickering negotiators of the Multi-Party Negotiating Forum to finally set a date for South Africa's first democratic election.

Walus and Derby-Lewis were captured, sentenced and jailed within an incredibly short period (only six months) of the assassination. Both were sentenced to death. In a peculiar twist, the new government (and constitution) they had actively fought against, caused in their sentences being lessened to life imprisonment – the death penalty having been ruled “unconstitutional.”

In 1997 Walus and Derby-Lewis applied for amnesty through the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#) (TRC) hearings. Despite claims that they were working for the Conservative Party, and therefore the assassination had been a political act, the TRC effectively ruled that Hani had been assassinated by right-wing extremists who were apparently acting independently. Walus and Derby-Lewis are currently serving their sentence in a maximum security prison near Pretoria.

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