

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Lesotho and the QwaQwa Ski Resort, 1975–82: Border Disputes and South Africa’s Increasingly Deadly Responses

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## Abstract

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the terrain of the diplomatic and security landscape of Southern Africa shifted dramatically. South Africa declared various Bantustans “independent,” but they were not recognized by other countries. Small regional states like Lesotho increasingly took more combative diplomatic stances, aided by Cold War connections and, in this case, a local border dispute. This article examines a proposed ski resort that South Africa wanted to build in the QwaQwa Bantustan on Lesotho’s border starting in 1975. Because of Lesotho’s diplomatic and military escalation, the Khoptjoane resort was never built, but the lengthy dispute contributed to the sidelining of the apartheid regime’s diplomats in favor of its securocrats. Thus, we argue the failed ski resort contributed to the atmosphere in which Pretoria greenlit the Maseru Massacre of 1982, presaging the apartheid regime’s increased 1980s willingness to use its military superiority against township residents and Southern African neighbors alike.

**Keywords:** Southern Africa; Lesotho; South Africa; apartheid; diplomatic relations; independence wars; international relations; military

By 1980 the struggle against apartheid had been ongoing for over thirty years. Liberation groups that had started as small, grassroots, non-violent protest movements within South Africa were transforming into an international *cause célèbre*. These organizations included increasingly effective armed wings conducting bombing and sabotage attacks within South Africa and training guerrilla fighters across the region, all of which were supported by sophisticated and well-connected international offices finding financial support from abroad in Lusaka, London, Paris, and more.

Yet, the apartheid regime still operated from a position of strength. Despite the 1963 voluntary arms ban on South Africa, that became mandatory in 1977, the regime had, so far, managed to build a domestic armaments industry and stave off calls for broad economic sanctions. The Organisation of African Unity (OAU) had long called for the diplomatic isolation of Pretoria, but this was only observed primarily by African and Non-Aligned States. Important allies like the United Kingdom, the United States, and other major Western governments all maintained ties, even if they occasionally spoke out against particularly egregious actions like the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960, the Soweto Uprising of 1976, and the death of Steve Biko in 1977. The elections of Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the UK in 1979 and President Ronald Reagan in the United States in 1980 presaged continuing good diplomatic relationships with key allies. Further, while the South African economy was not as dynamic by 1980 as it had been in the 1960s and early 1970s, it was still fundamentally strong with its base in mining, especially precious minerals,



and manufacturing. In 1980, the South African Rand traded at levels close to parity with major world currencies like the US Dollar and the British Pound.

Still, South Africa's position in the region and world had changed significantly, both since the inception of formal apartheid in the late 1940s and since the decolonizations of the 1960s that had led to the independence of many African states. The independence of Lesotho, Botswana, and Swaziland in the late 1960s had not appreciably damaged the security of the regime as the states were economically weak and deeply entwined with the South African economy through migrant labor and their dependence on imports from and through South Africa. Even so, the countries did provide havens for those fleeing the apartheid security forces, and Botswana provided a "pipeline" through which those who wanted to join the liberation struggle could flee further into independent Africa.<sup>1</sup>

The collapse of the Portuguese African colonies in 1975 radically shifted the calculus for the regime, as suddenly there was a socialist regime in Mozambique on the South African border and another in Angola, bordering South African-controlled Namibia/Southwest Africa. Both regimes allowed guerrillas from the African National Congress' (ANC) armed wing, uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK) and the Pan-Africanist Congress's (PAC) armed wing, the Azanian People's Liberation Army (APLA), to set up training bases and use their territory for infiltration into South Africa. These developments also saw China and USSR support for the liberation movement's armed wings increase, which meant that the conflict in Southern Africa became increasingly entangled with the global Cold War. South Africa's repeated armed interventions into Angola starting in 1974 were a response to this changing situation. This intervention and the threat of further South African military action helped drive regional leaders to form the Front-Line States (FLS), a grouping that included Mozambique, Zambia, Botswana, Zimbabwe (after its 1980 independence), Tanzania, and Angola. This grouping also led to closer economic collaboration efforts between regional states and caused the FLS to join with Lesotho, Swaziland, and Malawi to form the Southern African Development Coordination Conference (SADCC) in 1980.

Within South Africa, the bureaucratic apparatus of the apartheid regime continued to push leaders of the so-called Homelands or Bantustans to move toward declaring "independence" from South Africa. By 1980, the Transkei (1977), Bophuthatswana (1978), and Venda (1979) had already done so, and the Ciskei (1981) would follow soon after. These four were referred to as the TBVC States, but they remained unrecognized in the international community because of their financial dependence on the apartheid regime. South African officials hoped that all eleven Bantustans would end up "independent" as they pushed to make apartheid a permanent feature of the landscape of Southern Africa. The push for "independence" followed the logic of decolonization on the continent, but it was also an effort to disenfranchise the African population from citizenship and rights in South Africa proper, pushing the responsibility for African social services away from the central government.<sup>2</sup> South African officials attempted to coerce smaller regional states like Lesotho and Swaziland to diplomatically recognize the Bantustans, an effort they consistently resisted. As part of this effort, Pretoria worked in the late 1970s and early 1980s to get these states to agree to a regional grouping called the Constellation of Southern African States (CONSAS) which would have included the Bantustans, functioning as a counterweight to SADCC and the FLS. Lesotho and Swaziland refused to join CONSAS because of the presence of the Bantustans, but the apartheid regime continued pushing for diplomatic recognition.

So, by 1980, it was not clear what the future of apartheid was. Was the Southern African region consigned to constant conflict emanating from its economic behemoth, run by a minority white

<sup>1</sup>Neil Parsons, "The Pipeline: Botswana's Reception of Refugees, 156–68," *Social Dynamics* 34, no. 1 (2008): 17–32; Part T. Mgadla, "A Good Measure of Sacrifice: Botswana and the Liberation Struggles of Southern Africa," *Social Dynamics* 34, no. 1 (2008): 5–16.

<sup>2</sup>Laura Evans, "Contextualising Apartheid at the End of Empire: Repression, 'Development' and the Bantustans," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 47, no. 2 (2019): 372–411.

regime, or was there a scenario where apartheid could end, and peace could follow in the region? The 1980s would prove that this was less a military question and more a diplomatic problem. Neither side could “win” the military conflict because the guerrillas had at least the tacit support of the majority of the South African population and had significant international support. The apartheid regime, however, had overwhelming military firepower and forces to keep the insurgency in relative check, at least as long as their diplomatic support from key allies abroad continued. This article explores how the smaller, economically dependent states of Southern Africa could and did work diplomatically as part of the regional effort to oppose apartheid. The key dispute revolved around Lesotho’s efforts to thwart a ski resort that South Africa proposed building at Khoptjoane in the non-independent Bantustan of QwaQwa, situated directly on the mountain border with Lesotho.<sup>3</sup> This case shows the complicated choices that Lesotho faced when deploying and utilizing its independent diplomatic power in an effort to gain advantage for itself and to influence the struggle against apartheid, and how the cost of this effort ended up being the lives of some Lesotho citizens.

Lesotho challenged South Africa’s announced plans for the ski resort with the claim that parts of the Khoptjoane resort were situated on its side of the border, and thus illegal. Efforts to scuttle the ski resort project were part of Lesotho’s efforts to undermine the Bantustan project and apartheid as a whole, but were also grounded in more prosaic concerns like domestic politics. The Lesotho government used the Khoptjoane dispute to negotiate for the return of the “Conquered Territory” in South Africa’s Free State province that most Basotho saw as being part of historical Lesotho. Lesotho “won” the narrow diplomatic battle by ensuring that the ski resort at Khoptjoane was never constructed, despite a hefty investment. However, the country paid for this victory with years of near-constant military harassment from South African security forces through their support for the Lesotho Liberation Army (LLA), the armed wing of the opposition Basutoland Congress Party (BCP). We also link, for the first time, the ski resort specifically and Lesotho’s border disputes with South Africa more generally, to the deadly 1982 Maseru Massacre, where South African soldiers killed 42 people in their homes in the capital.<sup>4</sup> The Maseru raid marked a turn whereby the apartheid regime was now more willing to escalate diplomatic disputes into military interventions in an effort to maintain power, both outside the borders of the country in the 1980s as well as in the townships. The Khoptjoane dispute, therefore, marks a turning point where South African diplomats lost the upper hand to securocrats, setting the stage for the turbulence and bloodshed seen across Southern Africa in the 1980s.

### Khoptjoane and the International Border

The proposed ski resort at Khoptjoane would have been the African continent’s first designated ski resort.<sup>5</sup> However, there never was, nor is there today any resort at Khoptjoane — only abandoned dams built to supply water for snow cannons, one or two of which are still rusting away in the

<sup>3</sup>The spelling of Khoptjoane varies widely. For ease of comprehension, we use the Lesotho orthographic spelling. The mountains in Lesotho are referred to generally as the Maluti with the Drakensberg specifically located on the boundary between Lesotho and South Africa. We use Drakensberg to refer only to the escarpment border, and Maluti for Lesotho’s mountains in general.

<sup>4</sup>This article is based on research from the National Archives of Lesotho in Maseru, the National Archives of South Africa in Pretoria and Bloemfontein, the highly incomplete QwaQwa archives in Bloemfontein, and records from the National Archives of the United Kingdom in London. Additionally, we used a Promotion of Access to Information Act (PAIA) request to the South African Department of International Relations and Co-operation (DIRCO), the former Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for records not sent to the South African National Archives.

<sup>5</sup>Skiing started in European and Scandinavian countries, expanding to other settler colonies in North America and the Antipodes in the early twentieth century. It was and still is an activity done primarily by white-identifying individuals, though there are now places to ski in Morocco, Lesotho, and South Africa. Annie Gilbert Coleman, “The Unbearable Whiteness of Skiing,” *Pacific Historical Review* 65, no. 4 (1996): 583–614.

mountain grasslands, and the foundations of the hotel complex and police guard buildings. Because the resort was situated on un-surveyed land directly abutting the international border, the Lesotho government was able to raise enough doubt about the project to eventually scuttle it entirely.<sup>6</sup> In addition to the territorial dispute, the area around Khoptjoane was also the site of multiple skirmishes between security forces from Lesotho and LLA insurgents. The LLA formed in 1974 when members of Lesotho's opposition BCP fled the country after a failed coup attempt. Lesotho Prime Minister Leabua Jonathan, whose ruling Basotho National Party (BNP) suppressed the coup attempt, had been governing without a democratic mandate since 1970 when he annulled a general election won by the BCP. By 1980, the LLA was partially funded and trained by South African security forces. This was because from the late 1970s, Jonathan's government had increasingly allied with South African liberation movements and the Eastern Bloc, allowing operatives from MK and APLA to live in and operate from Lesotho. That this confluence of factors would result in open conflict is not surprising, given the long history of border conflict between Lesotho and South Africa, and the increased willingness of the apartheid regime to crack down on anyone they deemed a security threat.<sup>7</sup>

The Khoptjoane ski complex was first proposed in 1975, a particularly perilous year for the Lesotho government and an important moment in South Africa's attempt to secure international recognition for the Bantustans. The South African government was rapidly moving the Transkei toward a declaration of "independence." Since the Transkei had a larger population, land area, and economy than Lesotho, the Jonathan government feared being forced to recognize the Transkei or being used as a foil by the Transkeian administration to claim international political legitimacy. Lesotho also feared a loss of tourism revenue — one of the few viable industries Lesotho had built after independence — if the apartheid regime supported tourism ventures like Transkei's beaches and the Khoptjoane ski complex.<sup>8</sup> With both the Transkei and QwaQwa abutting the country, and Lesotho's economy still highly dependent on migrant labor remittances, South African officials hoped that Lesotho would provide the first international recognition.

The issue of recognizing Transkeian "independence" was the first big diplomatic test for Leabua Jonathan's newly independent foreign policy. In the first years after Lesotho's 1966 independence, Jonathan had cozied up to the apartheid regime and even discussed formal recognition that would have involved the exchange of diplomats. However, after abruptly changing course in the early 1970s, Jonathan and Lesotho had started taking stronger anti-South African positions at international organizations like the UN and OAU. Thus, by 1975 relations between the countries had deteriorated to the point that the Lesotho government decided to fight the Khoptjoane ski proposal by manufacturing a border dispute around the resort's land. Border disputes and groups taking advantage of border regimes are, of course, quite common in African history.<sup>9</sup> Mapping, counter-mapping, and defining boundaries have long been key components of claiming or contesting state

<sup>6</sup>As David Ambrose noted in personal correspondence, it was poorly designed as the ski slopes were north facing. Thus, they would have received the sun's full force, and it would have been hard to keep them supplied with snow.

<sup>7</sup>For these conflicts the literature is voluminous, but see Lennart Bollinger, *Apartheid's Black Soldiers: Un-National Armies and Militaries in Southern Africa* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2021); Jamie Miller, *An African Volk: The Apartheid Regime and Its Search for Survival* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Paul Moorcraft, *Total Onslaught: War and Revolution in Southern Africa Since 1945* (Barnsley, England: Pen and Sword, 2018), 311–16; Janet Smith and Beauregard Tromp, *Hani: A Life Too Short* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2009).

<sup>8</sup>John Aerni-Flessner, "Permitless Crossing and Tourism: Constructing Border Regimes in the Drakensberg Mountains, 1950s-Present," in *Migration, Borders, and Borderlands: Making National Identity in Southern African Communities*, eds. Munyaradzi Mushonga, John Aerni-Flessner, Chitja Twala, and Grey Magaiza (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2024), 47–67; Jacob Dlamini, *Safari Nation: A Social History of the Kruger National Park* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2020); Christian Rogerson and Jayne Rogerson, "The Bantustans of Apartheid South Africa: Transitioning from Industry to Tourism," *Revista Română de Geografie Politică* 25, no. 1 (2023), 1–16.

<sup>9</sup>Francis Musoni, *Border Jumping and Migration Control in Southern Africa* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2020); Paul Nugent, *Smugglers, Secessionists and Loyal Citizens on the Ghana-Togo Frontier: The Lie of the Borderlands Since*

legitimacy and sovereignty.<sup>10</sup> In the colonial period, defining borders was a long, tedious, and contentious process that often took into account global geopolitics as well as local concerns and conditions.<sup>11</sup> The drawing of a border could transfer communities from one entity to another, sometimes causing groups to move to put themselves on the “proper” side of a boundary. There were also contestations over infrequently used spaces, such as at Khoptjoane. As Paul Nugent has argued, though, the state often defined itself through “some sense of territoriality” that was “materialized in spaces that are formally bounded.”<sup>12</sup> These bounds confer legitimacy, though he points out that states are also “a constant work-in-progress,” and this was certainly true with the ski resort dispute.<sup>13</sup>

At Khoptjoane, the diplomacy was complicated by the fact that the border was situated at the intersection of sovereignty claims by Lesotho, South Africa, and the QwaQwa Bantustan, of which only Lesotho and South Africa had international recognition. Even without recognition though, the administration in QwaQwa was only too real for those who came under its jurisdiction. Additionally, it could and did influence policy and events in both of its neighboring states. Looking at the impact and implications of this partial sovereignty-without-recognition in the context of a diplomatic dispute adds to recent scholarship on the Bantustans that continues to see their contemporary presence despite their formal legal demise in 1994. Maano Ramutsindela noted that “space, once constructed, is difficult to transform.”<sup>14</sup> This insight has been at the heart of recent historical scholarship that has examined these spaces as being at the “centre of South African social and political relations” and having “pervasive and durable legacies” for those still living in those spaces.<sup>15</sup> The degree to which Bantustans and independent African states interacted has received less attention. Building on Laura Evans’s idea that South Africa’s Bantustan policy should be understood as “explicit mimicry of British decolonization,” the Khoptjoane dispute highlights the degree to which sovereignty and recognition mattered less than the ability to contest access to space.<sup>16</sup> Despite having vastly different diplomatic power on the international stage, QwaQwa, Lesotho, and the apartheid regime all played independent and important roles in the dispute but also faced limitations on their sovereign actions.

When the ski resort was announced, the land around Khoptjoane had never been formally surveyed and so the border, defined only vaguely in nineteenth-century treaties, remained ill-defined and contested. Border disputes between Lesotho and South Africa happened frequently.<sup>17</sup> The land

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2014 (London: James Currey, 2002); Paul Nugent and Anthony Asiwaju, eds., *African Boundaries: Barriers, Conduits and Opportunities* (London: Cassell/Pinter, 1996).

<sup>10</sup>James Ackerman, ed., *Decolonizing the Map: Cartography from Colony to Nation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017); Julie MacArthur, *Cartography and the Political Imagination: Mapping Community in Colonial Kenya* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2016).

<sup>11</sup>Gregor Dobler, “On the Border to Chaos: Identity Formation on the Angolan-Namibian Border, 1927–2008,” *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 25, no. 2 (2010): 22–35; JoAnn McGregor, *Crossing the Zambezi: The Politics of Landscape on a Central African Frontier* (Oxford: James Currey, 2009); Keren Weitzberg, *We Do Not Have Borders: Greater Somalia and the Predicaments of Belonging in Kenya* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2017).

<sup>12</sup>Paul Nugent, *Boundaries, Communities and State-Making in West Africa: The Centrality of the Margins* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 12.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup>Maano Ramutsindela, “Resilient Geographies: Land, Boundaries and the Consolidation of the Former Bantustans in Post-1994 South Africa,” *The Geographical Journal* 173, no. 1 (2007): 53.

<sup>15</sup>Shireen Ally and Arianna Lissoni, “Preface: ‘Let’s Talk About Bantustans,’” *South African Historical Journal* 64, no. 1 (2012): 1; Steffen Jensen and Olaf Zenker, “Homelands as Frontiers: Apartheid’s Loose Ends—An Introduction,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 41, no. 5 (2015): 939.

<sup>16</sup>Evans, “Contextualising Apartheid,” 375.

<sup>17</sup>David Coplan, “A River Runs Through It: The Meaning of the Lesotho-Free State Border,” *African Affairs* 100, no. 398 (2001): 81–116; Martin Lelimo, *A History of Lesotho’s Conquered Territory, 1842–1868* (Moriya, Lesotho: Morija Museum and Archives, 1998); C. C. Eloff, *Oranje-Vrystaat en Basoetoland* (Pretoria: HSRC, 1984); C. C. Eloff, *The So-Called Conquered Territory: Disputed Border Area between the Orange Free State (RSA) and Lesotho (Basutoland)* (HSRC: Pretoria, 1979); Sean

at Khoptjoane itself was not permanently occupied. It was rarely used, and what use it had was primarily by people from the Lesotho side of the border grazing animals on the high Khoptjoane plateau that was inaccessible from the South African side due to a series of sheer cliffs in the area. Thus, the Khoptjoane plateau fell in a legal gray area between state sovereignties. This allowed Lesotho to claim the plateau and use its disputed status to open new diplomatic avenues for claiming the “Conquered Territory” in the Free State. While this did give Lesotho leverage in this dispute, enlarging the complaint over the ski resort to encompass areas that the regime in South Africa saw as part of its political heartland also, in part, caused that regime to turn to violence when diplomacy had run its course.

Defining the mountain boundary between Lesotho and South Africa has long been an issue that bedeviled officials from all territories.<sup>18</sup> The border was initially defined in the 1869 Convention of Aliwal North and modified only slightly after the 1871 Cape Colony annexation of Lesotho. It was defined as running from the source of the Mohokare (Caledon) River to the peak of Mont-aux-Sources and from there “westward along the Drakensberg, between the watersheds of the Orange [Senqu] River and the St. John’s [Mzimvubu] River, to the source of the Tees [Telle River].”<sup>19</sup> This wording was left vague, largely because none of the signatories had ever been in the mountains, and the border was un-surveyed.

The Free State challenged the border marking in 1888, settling the dispute only after a joint party went to the source of the Mohokare and marked a new border beacon.<sup>20</sup> Another dispute arose around the construction of a fence in certain areas during the 1898 rinderpest outbreak.<sup>21</sup> The first detailed topographical maps of the Drakensberg boundary were not created until 1904–5, and since they were British military maps, were not widely available.<sup>22</sup>

The 1909 Act of Union that created South Africa included a promise to eventually incorporate the three High Commission Territories (today’s Lesotho, Botswana, and Eswatini), but South African officials remained interested in surveying and defining the mountain border with Lesotho. In 1925, South African Prime Minister J. B. Hertzog proposed an “official survey” to construct border beacons to formally mark the boundary, but colonial officials and Basotho Paramount Chief Griffith Lerotholi both rejected the idea because they did not want to upset the status quo whereby Basotho could utilize land laying high in the mountains that was technically part of South Africa but inaccessible from there because of the Drakensberg cliffs.<sup>23</sup> The two governments sent an inspection team along the boundary in 1926 to document these contested parcels of land.<sup>24</sup> Basutoland officials suggested amending the 1871 annexation act to define the boundary as the cliff-

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Maliehe, *Commerce as Politics: The Two Centuries of Struggle for Basotho Economic Independence* (New York: Berghahn, 2021).

<sup>18</sup>Lesotho under King Moshoeshoe did not have a formal name, and after Britain took over, it was officially called Basutoland. Most Basotho refer to the land as Lesotho and this article will do so unless directly referencing the colonial administration. Similarly, the Free State Province also went by Orange Free State and Orange River Colony. We will use Free State unless directly referencing a government. South Africa, too, was the Union of South Africa and Republic of South Africa. We will use South Africa unless referring to a specific government.

<sup>19</sup>South African National Archives, Pretoria (SANAP) PM 1-4-25 EM 1/20, Grens Tussen Suid-Afrika en Basoetoland, Memo, “The Border Between South Africa and Basutoland,” n.d.

<sup>20</sup>Connie Walton, “Discovery and Exploration of Basutoland II: Tracing the Source of the Caledon River,” *Basutoland Notes and Records* 2, ed. James Walton (Maseru: Education Department, 1960), 27–36.

<sup>21</sup>Christopher Konz, “‘Wisdom Does Not Live in One House’: Compiling Environmental Knowledge in Lesotho, Southern Africa, c. 1880–1965” (PhD dissertation, Boston University, 2017), 103–29; Pule Phoofolo, “Face to Face with Famine: The Basotho and the Rinderpest, 1897–1899,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 29, no. 2 (2003): 503–27.

<sup>22</sup>Konz, “Wisdom,” 110.

<sup>23</sup>Lesotho National Archives, Maseru (LNA) S3-7-4-2, Basutoland-Natal Border, Hertzog to High Commissioner, 24 Sep. 1925.

<sup>24</sup>LNA S3-7-4-2, Basutoland-Natal Border, Assistant Commissioner Jenner, Qacha’s Nek to Government Secretary Maseru, 12 June 1926.

line due to the accessibility issues, but South African officials refused.<sup>25</sup> A further South African request for a joint survey in 1936 was again rejected by officials and chiefs in Lesotho.<sup>26</sup>

Following the National Party takeover in South Africa in 1948, the colonial administration in Maseru saw no benefit in tackling tricky border issues with apartheid officials. Nationalist politicians in Lesotho made the return of the “Conquered Territory” central to their calls for independence. In a 1962 rally, Lebenya Chakela, a member of the BCP, called on South Africa to return “parts of the Free State” that had been “unlawfully annexed” in the nineteenth century.<sup>27</sup> South African officials saw one final opportunity to finally survey the border and end discussions about the “Conquered Territory” prior to independence. They approached British officials in 1965 asking to “urgently...settle all outstanding border issues” before Lesotho’s 1966 independence so the country could “embark upon its independence with the possibility of friction in the field of its international relations reduced to a minimum.” Basutoland officials understood how unpopular that would be and refused.<sup>28</sup>

### Lesotho’s Shifting Foreign Policy and the Impact of Bantustans

After independence, Lesotho had few diplomatic allies on the African continent due to Jonathan’s initial choice to have a South Africa-friendly foreign policy. This made most OAU states wary of developing close ties with Lesotho.<sup>29</sup> Since Lesotho was enclaved within South Africa, many African governments worried that Lesotho would be forced to function as a virtual Bantustan without the ability to have an independent foreign policy. South Africa’s moves toward declaring Bantustans “independent” in the mid-1970s, thus, increased the pressure on Lesotho’s leaders.

At Lesotho’s independence in 1966, it bordered four separate Bantustans: Transkei, Ciskei, QwaQwa, and KwaZulu. By 1975, this was reduced to two — the ethnically Basotho Bantustan of QwaQwa in the north that included the Khothjoane plateau and the Transkei, which shared long stretches of Lesotho’s southern border.<sup>30</sup> Transkei’s 1976 “independence” declaration was threatening to Lesotho’s sovereignty, and Lesotho’s escalation of the Khothjoane dispute often closely tracked the political situation in Transkei, especially around actions that impacted their shared border.

By the early 1970s, Jonathan shifted away from close ties with South Africa. His “engagement policy” in the 1960s was aimed at procuring direct development assistance, but this was not forthcoming.<sup>31</sup> Jonathan’s change of direction allowed Lesotho to start garnering significant aid from Western and Western-aligned countries by the mid-1970s.<sup>32</sup> Jonathan’s pleas for aid were complicated somewhat by his 1970 coup. After annulling the elections, he suspended the constitution, cracked down on the opposition, and had been ruling undemocratically ever since.<sup>33</sup> His new-found

<sup>25</sup>LNA S3-7-4-2, Basutoland-Natal Border, Resident Commissioner Garraway to High Commissioner, 25 May 1926.

<sup>26</sup>South African National Archives, Pretoria (SANAP) PM 1/4/24 EM 1/20, Basutoland Border, High Commissioner to Secretary for External Affairs, 9 July 1936.

<sup>27</sup>Readex: African Newspapers, “Basutos Claim Parts of OFS,” *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), 27 Dec. 1962, <https://www.readex.com/products/african-newspapers-series-1-and-2-1800-1925#title-list>.

<sup>28</sup>The National Archives of the UK, London (TNA) CO 1048-640, Border Issues Between RSA and Basutoland 1963–65, Aide Memoire, South African Department of Foreign Affairs to UK Embassy Cape Town, 26 May 1965.

<sup>29</sup>David Hirschmann, “Changes in Lesotho’s Policy toward South Africa,” *African Affairs*, 78, no. 311 (1979): 182–83.

<sup>30</sup>In 1975 the small piece of KwaZulu that abutted Lesotho was taken from that Bantustan and the Herschel District on Lesotho’s southwestern border was transferred from the Ciskei to the Transkei as part of Transkei’s “independence” package. Luvuyo Wotshela “Territorial Manipulation in Apartheid South Africa: Resettlement, Tribal Politics and the Making of the Northern Ciskei, 1975–1990,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 30, no. 2 (2004): 317–37.

<sup>31</sup>John Aerni-Flessner, *Dreams for Lesotho: Independence, Foreign Assistance, and Development* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018), 155–59, 182–89.

<sup>32</sup>Hirschmann, “Lesotho’s Policy,” 186.

<sup>33</sup>Bennett Khaketla, *Lesotho 1970: An African Coup Under the Microscope* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1972).

militancy on apartheid was, thus, both an effort to win development funding and an effort to co-opt popular opposition policies, like support for the South African liberation movements and calling for the return of the “Conquered Territory.” This was seen, for instance, in a speech Jonathan gave at a 1974 rally calling for taking the diplomatic dispute over the “Conquered Territory” to international adjudication bodies.<sup>34</sup> Simply raising the issue of the “Conquered Territory” was certain to draw South Africa’s ire, but the Pretoria regime’s dim view of the UN and international multilateral bodies, which they saw as being intractably opposed to South Africa, made this rhetoric doubly provocative.

Tensions between Lesotho and South Africa continued to rise in 1975–76 as the Bantustans received new political powers from Pretoria. QwaQwa obtained “self-governing” status in 1974, though the dependency of the administration on South African funding made a mockery of this declaration.<sup>35</sup> The Transkei was moving rapidly toward an October 1976 declaration of “independence” that would be the biggest international test yet for the legitimacy of the Bantustan system.<sup>36</sup> Transkeian “independence” threatened Lesotho because the country’s internal roads did not connect the southern Qacha’s Nek district to the capital Maseru, necessitating transit through South Africa (and the Transkei) to reach this part of the country. Further, the only official border posts in the Qacha’s Nek and Quthing districts bordered the Transkei. It was not clear how Lesotho could resist recognizing Transkei while still protecting the rights of its citizens to legally cross the border. It was during these heightening tensions that QwaQwa authorities announced plans for and started construction on ski resort infrastructure around Khoptjoane.

### The Khoptjoane Dispute, 1975–79

The QwaQwa Bantustan was the smallest and most densely populated Bantustan. QwaQwa’s population grew over eight-fold between 1970 and 1980, increasing from about 24,000 to almost 200,000 — with much of this increase due to ethnic Basotho being forced out of Free State farms and towns.<sup>37</sup> Chief Minister T. K. Mopeli needed new economic development to forestall an unemployment crisis. He also needed more land. Mopeli wanted more land for the growing population, but also because he hoped to open negotiations with Lesotho on a political union. In a July 1975 rally, Mopeli said more land would allow QwaQwa to “amalgamate as an equal partner” with Lesotho, forestalling the possibility that QwaQwa would be “annexed by Lesotho as if we were a conquered territory.”<sup>38</sup> Mopeli’s hope was theoretical since Lesotho refused to recognize any Bantustan, much less have formal talks about amalgamation. The speech, however, showed how Bantustan leaders used Lesotho’s sovereignty as a foil, trying to catapult QwaQwa into talks that would implicitly involve diplomatic recognition. The interventions Mopeli made in the dispute over Khoptjoane in the intervening years also show how, despite their financial dependence, Bantustan leaders made life difficult for the apartheid regime by crafting policies that undercut the regime’s diplomatic priorities.

To create the trappings of sovereignty, many Bantustans created national development corporations to pursue economic projects that could be branded “national” endeavors.<sup>39</sup> The QwaQwa Development Corporation (QDC) was founded in September 1975 and its first announced project was the

<sup>34</sup>Mohokare Trust Archives, Ladybrand, South Africa (MTA), “Lesotho Claims OFS Towns Again,” *The Friend* (Bloemfontein), 30 Dec. 1974.

<sup>35</sup>Chitja Twala, “The QwaQwa Civil Service, 1975–1994,” *African Historical Review* 50, no. 1–2 (2018): 79–80.

<sup>36</sup>Roger Southall, *South Africa’s Transkei: The Political Economy of an “Independent” Bantustan* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 247–51.

<sup>37</sup>Rachel Slater, “Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Contested Livelihoods in QwaQwa National Park, South Africa,” *The Geographic Journal* 168, no. 2 (2002): 119.

<sup>38</sup>MTA, “QwaQwa Must Have More Land—Chief,” *The Friend*, 22 July 1975.

<sup>39</sup>For more on National Development Corporations, see Peris Sean Jones, “Mmabatho, ‘Mother of the People’: Identity and Development in an ‘Independent’ Bantustan, Bophuthatswana, 1975–1994” (PhD dissertation, Loughborough University, 1997), 155–59.



construction of the aerial cableway for the Khoptjoane resort.<sup>40</sup> Befitting its small stature, the QDC's announcement landed quietly, with no initial reaction even from Lesotho. It was not until 1976, when plans for Transkeian "independence" seemed imminent that the Lesotho government first acted.<sup>41</sup>

Given its limited diplomatic options, Lesotho seized on the Khoptjoane resort as a venue through which it could challenge South Africa's unilateral Transkeian "independence" declaration. In January 1976 the Lesotho Department of Foreign Affairs filed a formal complaint with their South African counterparts, arguing that a data-collection weather station constructed at Khoptjoane was within Lesotho's territory. Lesotho's Foreign Minister Charles "C. D." Molapo raised the issue directly in a February 1976 meeting in Pretoria.<sup>42</sup> Molapo highlighted Lesotho's newly aggressive foreign policy toward South Africa by linking Khoptjoane to Lesotho's desire for a joint boundary commission to discuss mountain boundaries along the Drakensberg escarpment as South Africa had long desired, but also the return of the "Conquered Territory" in the Free State. South African Foreign Minister Hilgard Muller rejected this linkage, tersely noting that South African territory was "not negotiable."<sup>43</sup>

After these initial salvos, the dispute sank into the background for a few months as other diplomatic endeavors took precedence. Molapo and Muller met again in May 1976 without the issue coming up, though they did agree to reopen formal talks on the long-discussed plans to build dams in the Maluti Mountains to supply water to South Africa.<sup>44</sup> The water project talks were set to kick off on 18 June 1976. South African Water Minister Abraham Raubenheimer traveled to Maseru to attend this important event, but the brutal crackdown on protesters in Soweto that started on 16 June 1976 caused the Lesotho government to send the delegation home in protest with the talks once again delayed.<sup>45</sup>

The South African crackdown in Soweto hurt relations with Lesotho, and the wider world, but Lesotho found the passage of the Transkeian Independence Act on 24 June just as threatening. Without direct leverage over South Africa, Lesotho officials again turned to Khoptjoane as a convenient, seemingly low stakes pathway to protest South African actions. On 9 July, South African officials affirmed to their Lesotho counterparts that the Khoptjoane weather station was situated on South African territory. In response, Lesotho escalated the dispute by sending a group of individuals "some dressed in [Lesotho] police uniforms" to "chase away the caretaker," threatening to "lock him in the hut if he was found at the site again" on 16 August.<sup>46</sup>

The willingness of Lesotho officials to send armed police across the disputed border suggests the degree to which Transkeian "independence" was seen as a threat. Transkei's diplomats had been utilizing Lesotho in their argument for international recognition, with Digby Koyana, who would become Foreign Affairs Minister, arguing to British officials that the only difference between Lesotho and the Transkei was an "accident of British colonial history." Since the UK recognized Lesotho, he argued, they should also recognize Transkei.<sup>47</sup> With the Lesotho government garnering significant international foreign aid because of its enclave status, the prospect of new, internationally recognized enclaves potentially threatened their ability to continue to procure funding at current levels.

<sup>40</sup>MTA, "QwaQwa Projects for Development," *The Friend*, 26 Aug. 1975.

<sup>41</sup>William Harvey and W. H. B. Dean, "The Independence of Transkei—a Largely Constitutional Inquiry," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 16, no. 2 (1978): 191.

<sup>42</sup>SANAP BAO 2/1753 T8/9/6/2/3, Border Fence Lesotho 1973–1981, Consolidated Memorandum: Events Surrounding the Zozo Weather Station: Khoptjoane Border Issue, 12 Jan. 1978.

<sup>43</sup>South Africa Department of International Relations and Co-operation (DIRCO) BTS 1/159/6/1, Oxbow and Kau Hydroelectric Schemes (vol. 6), Records of meeting between C. D. Molapo and Dr. Muller, 4 Feb. 1976.

<sup>44</sup>MTA, "Muller Breaks Lesotho Ice," *The Friend*, 21 May 1976.

<sup>45</sup>DIRCO, BTS 1/159/6/1, Oxbow and Kau Hydroelectric Schemes (vol. 6), Timeline on water talks.

<sup>46</sup>SANAP BAO 2/1753 T8/9/6/2/3, Border Fence Lesotho 1973–1981, Consolidated Memorandum: Events Surrounding the Zozo Weather Station: Khoptjoane Border Issue, 12 Jan. 1978.

<sup>47</sup>TNA FCO 45-1777, Political Situation in the Homelands 1975, Letter Reid, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) to Ford, FCO 27 Oct. 1975.

With Transkei's "independence" looming in October, Lesotho again escalated the Khoptjoane dispute. In September 1976, the QDC had announced that a West German consortium was going to invest either ten or fourteen million rand (sources varied) to build the aerial cableway, construct three dams, install snowmaking machines, and also create trails and hiking camps.<sup>48</sup> The Commissioner-General for QwaQwa, the South African-appointed administrator who held real power in the territory, grandiosely claimed the resort would become "another Monaco."<sup>49</sup> Lesotho's Secretary for Foreign Affairs, T. J. Mashologu reacted to this by making further claims to the "Conquered Territory," noting Lesotho claimed "certain land currently in South Africa, which we believe is Lesotho territory. QwaQwa occupies part of the land under discussion."<sup>50</sup>

Still, South African officials granted "independence" to the Transkei and turned over the administration of border posts with Lesotho to Transkeian officials on 26 October. With Lesotho refusing to recognize the Transkei or have any official contacts, this caused problems for Basotho attempting to cross the border. The government appealed to the UN, which sent a team led by Assistant Secretary-General Abdulrahim Farah to examine the border situation in January 1977.<sup>51</sup> Still resenting any UN presence in Lesotho, South Africa retaliated by removing a subsidy on grain that immediately raised the cost of importing a ton of grain into Lesotho by R15 (\$17.25).<sup>52</sup> South Africa left in place similar subsidies for Botswana and Swaziland, making clear this was direct retaliation for Lesotho's Transkeian protests.

Facing this asymmetrical diplomatic power differential, the Lesotho government took their dispute to the public. On 20 January 1977, Radio Lesotho announced that the South Africans had "violated the international border by beginning work on a ski resort on [Lesotho's] territory in the remote Maluti mountains."<sup>53</sup> Lesotho officials claimed that QwaQwa was allowing their territory to be "used by the South African government to infringe on Lesotho's territorial integrity."<sup>54</sup> This specific framing seemed designed to drive a wedge between Basotho officials in QwaQwa and South African officials.<sup>55</sup>

Lesotho's efforts were not wholly unwelcome to QwaQwa's Chief Minister Mopeli, who had long sought more land. Mopeli had to, however, go against the public statements of QwaQwa Commissioner General Jacobus Pansegrouw. It was Pansegrouw who ultimately held the power on the Khoptjoane project, since QwaQwa was not "independent" and, thus, could not issue the formal governmental guarantees that the German lenders demanded to offer loans in early 1977. These could only be signed by the South African government. Important businessmen involved in the project understood this dynamic, too, as Sun Hotels magnate Sol Kerzner, who wanted to run the hotels at the resort, met only with Pansegrouw and not Mopeli in November 1976. At this meeting, he secured a monopoly contract for a casino in QwaQwa and received "first option to operate the food and beverage facilities in the ski area."<sup>56</sup> Still, Mopeli was not powerless, as the Bantustan project was predicated on the idea that African leaders were in charge. Mopeli made Pansegrouw's job harder by echoing Lesotho's calls for a joint border commission. He couched his request in the language of economic development saying that a lack of clarity on the boundary would "deter the investors" and thus risk the future of the venture.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>48</sup>MTA, "Massive Border Tour Planned," *The Friend*, 15 Sep. 1976.

<sup>49</sup>MTA, "Scheme Will Bring Skiing to OFS Border," *The Friend*, 20 Sep. 1976.

<sup>50</sup>MTA, "QwaQwa Ideal Gets a Boost," *The Friend*, 16 Sep. 1976.

<sup>51</sup>MTA, "UN Man to Lead Border Inquiry," *Rand Daily Mail*, 19 Jan. 1977.

<sup>52</sup>MTA, "SA's Subsidy to Lesotho is Cut," *The Friend*, 4 Jan. 1977.

<sup>53</sup>MTA, "SA Ski Resort a Violation, Says Lesotho," *The Cape Times* (Cape Town), 21 Jan. 1977.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup>Twala, "Civil Service."

<sup>56</sup>South African National Archives, Bloemfontein (SANAB), QwaQwa Archive (QQA), CMQ 3/4/2, Commissioner General Correspondence, Letter Hendrik Fors to J. Pansegrouw, 22 Feb. 1977; SANAB QQA CMQ 3/4/2, Commissioner General Correspondence, Letter Sol Kerzner to Pansegrouw, 17 Nov. 1976.

<sup>57</sup>SANAB QQA CMQ 3/4/2, Commissioner General Correspondence, Letter Mopeli to Pansegrouw, 7 Mar. 1977.

The uncertainty caused by Lesotho's border intervention slowed the project's progress. South African and QwaQwa officials conducted a joint inspection of the Khoptjoane area in February 1978. In an effort to resolve the dispute, in June 1978 South Africa invited a delegation from Lesotho to physically inspect Khoptjoane. The party, which included high level South African civil servants, top officials from QwaQwa, and civil servants from Lesotho led by the Secretary for Foreign Affairs, took a helicopter from the Free State border town of Ficksburg. They first inspected the treaty-defined boundary marker at the source of the Mohokare River and then proceeded uphill to the planned ski area. While on the mountain divide, Lesotho officials continued to push their argument for "prescription," the legal theory that because Lesotho citizens had long grazed cattle on the land with chiefly permission, Khoptjoane belonged to Lesotho, despite it falling outside the nineteenth-century treaty-defined boundary.<sup>58</sup>

The joint inspection marked the start of a concerted effort by the South African government to solve this dispute so the expensive project could move forward. South African Law Advisor Jan Heunis spent many hours on Khoptjoane issues over the next two years. He drafted a September 1978 memo disputing the "prescription" theory by analyzing the nineteenth-century boundary treaties.<sup>59</sup> He took a follow-up trip to QwaQwa in 1979 to interview "six Sotho [*sic*] gentlemen who had been residents of the area for a considerable time" as well as two European-descended former shopkeepers to obtain testimony on land use dating back to the 1930s.<sup>60</sup> While Heunis's investigation carried into mid-1979, the Khoptjoane dispute had already tied up the ski resort project for almost four years, long after it was originally scheduled to open. While the Lesotho government had not achieved its stated objective of reopening talks about the "Conquered Territory," prolonging the Khoptjoane dispute served as a tangible way to protest Transkeian "independence" and garner international attention and financial support for Lesotho's precarious position within apartheid South Africa. After 1978, this diplomatic strategy would take a more violent turn as South African patience for diplomacy ran thin.

### The Khoptjoane Dispute and Proxy Wars

By the late 1970s, the apartheid regime's international position was even more precarious. No other states recognized the "independence" of Transkei, Bophuthatswana, or Venda. With the number of young South Africans going into exile for guerrilla training increasing rapidly after Soweto, the South African government redoubled its pressure on smaller regional states like Lesotho to recognize the Bantustans and expel the liberation movements. As a means of resisting this pressure, Lesotho formalized diplomatic connections with countries from the socialist world. This was a deliberately provocative diplomatic move but was in line with the deterioration of relations between Lesotho and South Africa. In response, South Africa escalated existing tensions by supporting the LLA, which started carrying out attacks in Lesotho in 1979. With LLA bases in QwaQwa, the planned ski resort at Khoptjoane emerged as a physical as well as diplomatic battlefield between 1979 and 1982. Fighters from the LLA crossed into Lesotho and Lesotho Paramilitary Force (LPF) soldiers went the opposite direction.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>58</sup>SANAP BAO 2/1753 T8/9/6/2/3, Border Fence Lesotho 1973–1981, Record of Meeting, and 22 June 1978 Visit to South Africa (QwaQwa)/Lesotho Boundary in Khoptjoane, 22 June 1978.

<sup>59</sup>SANAP BAO 8/295 X43/3/8, Bantu Administration, Agreements on Lesotho, 1978–79, "Some Comments on Lesotho's Views Regarding the Boundary in the Khoptjoane Area and on Prescription as a Means of Acquiring Territory," by J. C. Heunis, Law Adviser, 14 Sep. 1978.

<sup>60</sup>SANAP BAO 8/295 X43/3/8, Bantu Administration, Agreements on Lesotho, 1978–79, "The Boundary Between South Africa and Lesotho," J. C. Heunis, Law Adviser, 11 July 1979.

<sup>61</sup>At independence, the closest Lesotho had to a military was four platoons of the police with upgraded training, called the Police Mobile Unit (PMU). Gradually upgraded through the 1970s, in 1980 it was changed by statute into the Lesotho Paramilitary Force (LPF). After the military coup of 1986, the name was changed again to the Royal Lesotho Defence

The progression of Lesotho's diplomatic ties with the Eastern Bloc and its support for the liberation movements moved in tandem with the conflict over Khoptjoane. Jonathan had laid the groundwork for these alliances earlier in the decade, starting with building ties to the Non-Aligned Movement. But it was in April 1978 that this intensified when Jonathan invited representatives from Mozambique, Algeria, Cuba, Zambia, the ANC, and the PAC to the twentieth anniversary celebration of the founding of his BNP in Maseru.<sup>62</sup> Through his growing ties with Mozambican leader Samora Machel, Jonathan arranged for an official Cuban delegation to visit Maseru in June 1979, at a time when South Africa was engaged in direct combat with Cuban troops in Angola.<sup>63</sup> Lesotho officials took the Cubans to the disputed border crossings with the Transkei, thereby directly linking Eastern Bloc connections with Lesotho's border policies and opposition to Bantustan recognition.<sup>64</sup> It was, not coincidentally, shortly after this that South African security forces assisted or allowed the LLA rebels to first launch attacks in Lesotho. This was the first sign that the securocrats in Pretoria had gained an upper hand over the diplomats in the spat with Lesotho.

South Africa was not responsible for the initial formation of the LLA, which BCP members in exile formed in the mid-1970s. However, the South African security establishment saw an opportunity to co-opt the group for its own purposes by the late 1970s, when South African security forces interdicted the first LLA fighters trying to infiltrate across South African territory. Thus, the timing of the first successful LLA attacks in Lesotho in August 1979, only two months after the Cuban visit, highlights the connection between Lesotho's confrontational foreign policy and South African support for the LLA.<sup>65</sup> Most LLA attacks took place in the far north of the country, including a December bombing of fuel storage tanks at Oxbow, not far from Khoptjoane.<sup>66</sup> But Khoptjoane and the partially-built ski complex soon became a part of this conflict. On 14 January 1980 five uniformed members of Lesotho's Paramilitary Force visited the guards at Khoptjoane, Moeketsi Mofokeng and Tikhoe Motaung, and demanded to know why Lesotho nationals were not employed there. LPF forces returned on 16 January, beat the two guards and "searched the locker room for weapons." Mofokeng and Motaung could only report this to South African police on 21 January because they had no means of communication. This led the South Africans to increase security, stationing "10 well-armed black policemen" at the complex starting 1 February.<sup>67</sup> Despite the presence of these new guards, Lesotho forces continued to target the area, with another incursion on 8 February.

During this escalation, Lesotho announced on 1 February 1980 that it was establishing formal diplomatic relations with the USSR. While Lesotho's opening of relations with Cuba in 1979 was provocative, ties that would lead to the opening of a Soviet embassy *within* apartheid South Africa was another escalation entirely. Thus, it was not surprising that late February saw the biggest conflict yet at Khoptjoane. There were conflicting reports about what happened. Radio Lesotho claimed that "three hundred men armed with South African firearms" invaded Lesotho on 22 February, killing three Basotho and wounding two. South Africa, meanwhile, denied the claim publicly. In private, their diplomats complained that Lesotho forces had crossed into QwaQwa pursuing

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Force (RLDF) and in 1993 at the return of democracy renamed the Lesotho Defence Force (LDF). We will refer to it here as the LPF because that was its name for most of these events.

<sup>62</sup>MTA, Dennis Gordon, "Lesotho to Attack Apartheid," *Rand Daily Mail*, 7 Apr. 1978.

<sup>63</sup>Piero Gleijeses, *Visions of Freedom: Havana, Washington, Pretoria, and the Struggle for Southern Africa, 1976–1991* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

<sup>64</sup>MTA, "Cuban Visit to Transkei Border," *Daily Dispatch* (East London), 3 June 1978.

<sup>65</sup>Mafa Sejanamane, "Lesotho in Southern Africa: From an Assertive to a Submissive Foreign Policy," *Lesotho Law Review* 4, no. 2 (1988): 11; Roger Southall, "The Lesotho Liberation Army: A Synopsis and Challenge to Research," *NUL Journal of Research* 9 (2002): 63.

<sup>66</sup>MTA, "Fuel Tanks Blasted in Lesotho," *The Friend*, 19 Dec. 1979.

<sup>67</sup>DIRCO 1/159/3, Memo Major General C.F. Zeitsman to Secretary of Foreign Affairs and Commissioner of Police, 18 Feb. 1980.

the LLA. They claimed that on 23 February, Lesotho forces came to the ski complex to “have coffee with” the guards before continuing into QwaQwa. The guards “heard shooting [in QwaQwa]” and saw the Lesotho forces return late on 24 February “with the bodies of four persons slung across the backs of horses.”<sup>68</sup> South Africa was reticent to publicize this, we can speculate, because they would have to admit that armed Lesotho forces had crossed the border with seemingly no reaction from South African security forces. However, by May of 1980 South Africa was constructing new accommodation for police at the site of the ski chalet that included rooms, kitchens, and pack rooms so that the police could patrol on horseback, in direct response to these incursions.<sup>69</sup> Without further archival sources coming to light, the details of this armed conflict will likely remain contested, but the events show how the purely diplomatic dispute of the late 1970s had escalated into physical violence and cross-border raids due, in part, to the Cold War and shifting regional geopolitics around the liberation struggle.

That said, diplomacy did continue. South African Foreign Minister Roelof “Pik” Botha met with Lesotho Foreign Minister Molapo, in January and February to defuse tensions. The meetings were cordial, but Molapo continued to press “Conquered Territory” claims, noting that Lesotho was interested in incorporating QwaQwa, as well as the Transkeian districts of Herschel and Matatiele that had significant Sesotho-speaking populations. Any incorporation, however, would require South Africa to declare the lands part of “historical Lesotho,” rather than an annexation based on ethnicity.<sup>70</sup> Incorporating land simply because it contained Sesotho-speakers risked undermining Lesotho’s diplomatic position that it was a sovereign state and not part of the ethnic project of the Bantustans. Not surprisingly, Botha rejected Lesotho’s land claims, but after one more small attack on a police post in Butha Buthe in March 1980, both sides paused attacks in the hope of achieving a diplomatic solution.

In February, Botha and Molapo had laid the groundwork for a meeting between their respective heads of government. At this point in 1980, South Africa had not yet decided on a single path forward to resolve the conflict with Lesotho about Khoptjoane. In August 1980, Botha publicly proposed that Lesotho, Botswana, and Swaziland “could be made more viable by the addition of large areas of land and millions of blacks presently or formerly part of South Africa.”<sup>71</sup> This announcement was part of conversations in South Africa about the “consolidation” of the Bantustans — efforts to combine their non-contiguous territory in a final effort to gain international recognition. While there were no specifics in his public proposal, it did highlight the fact that South African security forces were willing, at least for the moment, to restrain the LLA and let diplomacy play out. These diplomatic efforts culminated in the September 1980 meeting at the Peka Bridge border crossing between Prime Ministers Jonathan and P. W. Botha.

In addition to a continued détente and a stay on LLA violence, the Peka meeting was notable because Botha, for the first time, formally offered to transfer South African territory to Lesotho. While it was long suspected to have happened at this meeting, new documents unearthed confirm this. When they discussed QwaQwa, Botha called Lesotho and QwaQwa “friends,” to which Jonathan replied that they were “not only friends. We are related.” This provided the opening for Botha to extend his offer: “I will not stand in the way of you and Qua-Qua [*sic*] united. That is entirely your decision, [an] exercise of your own determination.”<sup>72</sup> Jonathan did not respond directly to this surprise offer of Bantustan territory, but rather fell back on the Lesotho government’s

<sup>68</sup>All quotations in this paragraph from TNA FCO 105-359, Lesotho-South Africa Relations 1980, Telegram Leahy Embassy Cape Town to FCO, Maseru, NY, Washington, Bonn, 28 Feb. 1980.

<sup>69</sup>DIRCO 1/159/3, Memo P. R. Killen Second Inter-Governmental Talks with Lesotho on the Khoptjoane Border Dispute, 16 May 1980.

<sup>70</sup>DIRCO 1/159/3, Cabinet Memo Foreign Minister Botha, Feb. 1980.

<sup>71</sup>MTA, “Pik Wants Tribes to Unite,” *Rand Daily Mail*, 12 Aug. 1980.

<sup>72</sup>DIRCO 1/159/6/1, Meeting Minutes between P.W. Botha and Leabua Jonathan, Peka Bridge, 20 Aug. 1980, 8.

diplomatic line that QwaQwa could only be integrated if it was part of a larger discussion of the “Conquered Territory.”<sup>73</sup>

One could read Botha’s remarks as an off-handed quip about the general policy of South Africa using Lesotho, Botswana, and Swaziland as *de facto* Bantustans. We read it, however, as a concrete offer to transfer territory when put in the context of South Africa’s then-secret talks with Swaziland that had been ongoing since at least April 1979.<sup>74</sup> These talks led to the July 1982 announcement of a deal to transfer the KaNgwane Bantustan and part of KwaZulu’s Ingwavuma District to Swaziland’s control, in return for Swaziland taking on as citizens all South Africans of Swati descent.<sup>75</sup> With Swazi-South African talks already underway in 1980, Botha’s offer was an opening to Jonathan to get Lesotho to the table for a similar deal. Key to the Swaziland deal was a “Non-Aggression Pact” that bound the Swazi regime to evict the ANC and other liberation groups from the country. Thus, South African seurocrats would only stay their hands for the diplomats so long as the possibility of ANC eviction was still alive. While the LLA was restrained for months in 1980, it should be understood as the pursuit of security goals through diplomatic means. The apartheid regime wanted Lesotho to evict the liberation movements and cut ties with the Eastern Bloc. Jonathan’s unwillingness to take up this offer at Peka, thus, set the course for continued conflict.

The pause in fighting between the South African-backed LLA and the LPF broke down by May 1981, as South Africa became more convinced that Lesotho was now steadfast in its support for the liberation groups. In that month, three ANC members accused of bombing a power station in Durban fled up Sani Pass into Lesotho. After being arrested and detained, they were released on a technicality and allowed to fly to Mozambique.<sup>76</sup> By September 1981, the LLA again had a free hand and even more support from South Africa, as evidenced by its bombing of the American Cultural Center in downtown Maseru, the West German ambassador’s car, Maseru’s international airport, the Hilton Hotel, and a bar owned by the Minister of Agriculture.<sup>77</sup> That Lesotho’s diplomatic contacts with the Eastern Bloc were a focus was seen in that most of those bombings happened just before a Soviet delegation arrived in Maseru in late October 1981. At this visit, the Soviets finalized the details for their Maseru embassy.<sup>78</sup>

Unable to halt the South African-supported LLA bombing campaign, Jonathan instead intensified his rhetoric against South Africa. In June 1982 he increased the amount of South African land that Lesotho claimed was part of the “Conquered Territory,” claiming for the first time all of the Free State and including the diamond mines at Kimberley.<sup>79</sup> With the full-scale proxy war back on, another round of violence erupted around the Khoptjoane complex in September 1982. As with the February 1980 incident, there were again conflicting claims. The LLA announced they killed 35 members of the LPF and injured 100 more. Lesotho government officials denied this and insisted the army had killed two LLA members, publicly displaying one body in Maseru.<sup>80</sup> Again, the full details will likely remain unknown, but the claims and counterclaims played out just days after South Africa quietly announced the ski resort project would not be built. With construction stalled for six years now, this was not surprising, but the total investment in infrastructure

<sup>73</sup>*Ibid.*, 10–11.

<sup>74</sup>There was a secret meeting between Pik Botha, Minister of Economic Affairs Chris Heunis, and King Sobuza on 27 Apr. 1979 that was likely about the land deal. TNA FCO 105-199, South Africa and the Southern Pact 1979, Telegram Miles, HC Swaziland to FCO London, 10 May 1979.

<sup>75</sup>Development Studies Group, *The Land Dispute: Incorporating Swaziland?* (Johannesburg: Southern African Research Service, 1982); Richard Weisfelder, “‘Peace’ from the Barrel of a Gun: Nonaggression Pacts and State Terror in Southern Africa,” in *Terrible Beyond Endurance? The Foreign Policy of State Terrorism*, eds. Michael Stohl and George A. Lopez (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988).

<sup>76</sup>MTA, “Lesotho Police Arrest ANC Men Wanted in SA,” *Rand Daily Mail*, 8 May 1981.

<sup>77</sup>MTA, “South Africa Bomb Kills Man at Bus Stop,” *Associated Press*, 5 Sep. 1981; Southall, “Liberation Army,” 65.

<sup>78</sup>MTA, “Soviets in Lesotho,” *The Guardian* (Manchester), 3 Nov. 1981.

<sup>79</sup>MTA, “Lesotho Lays a Claim to Conquered OFS—Plus Kimberley,” *Argus* (Cape Town), 26 June 1982.

<sup>80</sup>MTA, “Rand Daily Mail Supports Policy of Destabilisation,” *Lesotho Weekly* (Maseru), 10 Sep. 1982.

at Khoptjoane had already topped two million rand. At its conclusion, the project left a “snow cannon, a ski lodge, and three dams” completed plus a “mountain cableway, said to be worth R5 million, lying unclaimed at Durban harbor.”<sup>81</sup>

Though the ski resort plan was finally dead, the armed conflict that broke out, in part because of the dispute, continued in and around Khoptjoane. Lesotho security forces had grown accustomed to entering South African territory in pursuit of LLA fighters by late 1982 and Jonathan was still strengthening ties with the Eastern Bloc, including a September visit to East Germany.<sup>82</sup> After the ski resort was abandoned, South African security forces increased their patrols in the area. A patrol in late 1982 found evidence that Lesotho “periodically made use of a temporary base on the first summit of a plateau on the QwaQwa side of the mountain...[that] affords a perfect view of a building complex...periodically used as a temporary base by the South African police.”<sup>83</sup> This discovery was reported by Foreign Affairs officials who had run out of patience with Lesotho and its border provocations around Khoptjoane. The unnamed officials argued for bringing back Heunis, to make a “speedy presentation [on Khoptjoane] to the working committee of the State Security Council [SSC].” The officials understood they were arguing for an end to diplomacy and an escalated military intervention as they noted that the South African government had “levers” to solve the dispute, even if they “won’t appeal to friendly countries.”<sup>84</sup> Peter Stiff claims that the planning for the Maseru operation had been underway for the better part of the year, and that the attack was suddenly ordered in early December after the attack team had stood down for over a month.<sup>85</sup> While we do not have records to corroborate that the decision was taken at this exact moment by the SSC, the memo is a clear sign that Foreign Affairs diplomats saw no further path for diplomatic solutions to the Khoptjoane dispute, and given Stiff’s claims, there is a strong suggestion that it was the Khoptjoane dispute which might have tipped the scales for ordering the raid.

Less than a month after the memo, the Maseru Massacre took place on the night of 8–9 December 1982, killing 42 people.<sup>86</sup> While Jonathan’s unwillingness to cut ties with the Eastern Bloc or evict the liberation movements from Lesotho, especially MK commander Martin Thembisile “Chris” Hani, played large roles in South Africa’s decision to invade Maseru, we argue that the inability of South African officials to resolve the dispute over Khoptjoane also played a hitherto-unknown role in the decision-making process. The fact that Lesotho soldiers had been crossing over, raiding into, and camping out in South Africa at Khoptjoane was clearly concerning and South African officials wanted an escalated response.

## Conclusion

While the first Matola raid in Mozambique took place in 1981, the Maseru Massacre marked a clear escalation in cross-border raids by the South African security forces. Causing large-scale casualties among the civilian population of Maseru as well as in the South African exile community, it also showed a change in strategy as apartheid forces were willing to ignore potential collateral damage to achieve security objectives. This would be seen in the uptick in international raids that South Africa carried out in the 1980s as well as in the increased willingness of the regime to deploy soldiers

<sup>81</sup>MTA, “Border Row Kills R20 Million Ski Resort,” *Sunday Express* (Johannesburg), 5 Sep. 1982.

<sup>82</sup>MTA, “Jonathan Visits E. Germany,” *The Citizen* (Johannesburg), 16 Sep. 1982.

<sup>83</sup>DIRCO 1/159/6, Memo Commissioner South African Police to Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Information and Cooperation and Development, 8 Dec. 1982.

<sup>84</sup>DIRCO 1/159/3/1, Memo C. A. Bastiaanse, Foreign Affairs to Director-General of Minister of Cooperation and Development, Nov. 1982.

<sup>85</sup>Peter Stiff, *The Silent War: South African Recce Operations 1969–1994* (Johannesburg: Galago, 1998), 412–17.

<sup>86</sup>Phyllis Naidoo, *Le Rona re Batho: An Account of the 1982 Maseru Massa[cr]e* (Verulam, KwaZulu Natal: P. Naidoo, 1992).

to its own townships. For Lesotho, the raid came as a shock as people always knew that a South African intervention was possible, but this large-scale, illegal cross-border raid was a massive escalation. Lesotho officials could not have known that their efforts to claim some sovereignty and dispute a relatively small economic development project in the oft-forgotten Bantustan of QwaQwa would lead to a sea change in Pretoria. The securocrats were now driving foreign and domestic policy, rather than the Foreign Affairs diplomats. The increasingly embattled apartheid regime, facing what it considered “Total Onslaught” and frustrated by the lengthy dispute over Khoptjoane, would no longer countenance protracted diplomatic disputes from its weaker direct neighbors and now demanded that regional states toe their line on security. This included, first and foremost, evicting the ANC and other liberation movements from their territory. The regime achieved this through “security pacts” in 1982 with Swaziland, 1984 with Mozambique, and 1986 with Lesotho when South Africa orchestrated a border slowdown that led to a successful military coup against Leabua Jonathan and the eviction of most ANC cadres from the country.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup>Robert Edgar, “The Lesotho Coup of 1986,” *South African Review* 4 (1988): 373–82.