

STUDIES | Feminisms n°5

# Josie Mpama



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Women of Struggle, Women in Struggle



Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research  
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Few photographs of Josie Mpama can be found either in the archives or online. The art in this study recovers Josie's largely unknown presence in important political spaces and processes within the anti-colonial, anti-apartheid struggles in which she played an important role. Her figure is silhouetted, an acknowledgement that, due to material and political conditions then and now, we have little visual evidence of her involvement in shaping South Africa's history. The art places Josie in key political moments, mirroring the study's attempt to recover a legacy that has been 'overlooked and largely excluded from the mainstream historical record', as we write in the study.

The twentieth century was marked by national liberation struggles that emerged in Africa and Asia, as well as in Latin America, where neocolonial structures had subordinated the formally independent countries. The achievements of the Russian Revolution in 1917 inspired the peasantry and the working class across the Global South. The fight for equality and liberation under the leadership of working people is ongoing in the anti-imperialist struggles of our time. Women, in a myriad of ways, have powerfully shaped and continue to shape all of these struggles.

In the *Women of Struggle, Women in Struggle* series of *Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research*, we present the stories of women in struggle who contributed not only to the wider arena of politics, but who also pioneered the establishment of women's organisations, opening up paths of feminist resistance and struggle throughout the twentieth century.

Praxis, as a knowledge of theory and organisational methods of struggle as they change and respond to history, gives sustenance to ongoing struggles against oppression. As militants, we study the diverse lives, contexts, and organisational methods of these women not only to better understand their political contributions, but also to inspire us as we build the organisations necessary to win the fight against oppression and exploitation today.

In the fourth study of this series, we discuss the life and political struggles of Josie Mpama (1903–1979), a leader in the resistance against colonial oppression and the apartheid system in South Africa. Josie was a key figure in the history of women organisers in South Africa and a leader in the Communist Party of South Africa. Her life teaches us about the importance of grassroots and mass organising, as well as the challenges that come with that work. Like so many women involved in radical politics, particularly in the Global South, Josie's extraordinary political contributions and theoretical acumen have been overlooked and largely excluded from the mainstream historical record.



Born Josephine Winifred Mpama on 21 March 1903, Josie – as she was known to family, friends, and comrades – came to have many names depending on the manoeuvres she needed to make in different contexts. Where the English language dominated and allowed for greater social and economic mobility, her surname was anglicised and she went by Josie Palmer. At other times, when she was with her common law partner, Edwin, and respectability politics came into play, she used his surname and became Mrs. Mofutsanyana. In more covert work, her known aliases included Winifred Palmer, Beatrice Henderson, and Red Scarf.

Josie was born a year after the end of the South African War (1899–1902), during which the British Empire and the Boers (the descendants of Dutch colonial settlers) wrestled for control over the region. She grew up and became politically active during one of the most tumultuous political periods in South Africa's history, when the white minority was attempting to cement its control of land, labour, and political power. At the same time, deep shifts and conflicts were also taking place in the international political and economic landscape: before she reached the age of forty, Josie would live through the First World War, the Russian Revolution, the Great Depression, the formation of the Communist International (Comintern), the rise of European fascism, and the outbreak of the Second World War.

Although the Treaty of Vereeniging, signed on 31 May 1902, brought the war between the British Empire and the Boers to an end, it brought no peace to South Africa. During the decades that followed, the foundation was laid for the systematic and structural ascendancy of white rule and the racial segregation, land dispossession, and enforcement of cheap migrant labour that came with it. The establishment of the Union of South Africa in 1910, which consolidated various British colonies and Boer settlements into a unitary state, initiated a phase that built the foundations for the emergence of the apartheid system of racially segregated governance. The most heightened application of this system would come following the 1948 electoral victory of the right-wing white Afrikaner National Party, whose leaders, such as John Vorster, had direct connections to German fascism.

Amidst these broader political convulsions, a young Josie experienced personal turmoil and poverty at home. At the age of seven, her parents divorced, setting off a protracted custody battle and a period in which she was continually passed between the care of different relatives, some of whom were highly abusive.<sup>1</sup> Her working-class family was also divided by the racial categories imposed by the colonial state: her father was Zulu and worked as a court interpreter, while her mother was designated as ‘Coloured’ and was employed as a domestic worker for several years,





though amongst the better paid.\* According to the state's designation, Josie was considered 'Coloured', which meant that she could have chosen to live apart from and 'above' the African majority by accepting the economic and political advantages, limited as they were, that came with conforming to the racial hierarchy imposed by the apartheid system. Instead, Josie rejected it and chose to identify with and work amongst African people all her life, living in predominantly African working-class communities or racially diverse areas, such as Sophiatown, that challenged state-sanctioned segregation.

Josie came to activism through community protests for better residential conditions and rights during the late 1920s and early 1930s in her home town of Potchefstroom, located roughly 120 kilometres south-west of Johannesburg. It was there, in the trenches of struggle, that she became one of the first Black women to join the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) in 1928 and, later, to hold a senior leadership position in

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\* Colonial and apartheid governments in South Africa developed a system of racial classification that segregated Africans from European settlers and designated mixed-race individuals as a separate, third, category, 'Coloureds'. This designation continues to be used today and has come to be associated with Africans in South Africa who either have 'mixed' racial ancestry or are the descendants of slaves brought to the Cape Colony from various parts of the world. However, it is important to remember that the term was a colonial imposition that was used to break apart families and communities. It also erased the unique and diverse identities of indigenous groups by categorising those who did not belong to Bantu-speaking ethnic clans as 'Coloured' as a method of the ruling elite to divide and conquer the African population. For further reading on this topic, see 'The Lie of 1652: Race and Class in South Africa, Interview with Patric Mellet', *Amandla!*, no. 73/74 (December 2020), <https://aidc.org.za/the-lie-of-1652-race-and-class-in-south-africa-interview-with-patric-mellet/>.

the party.\* The communist movement deeply influenced Josie's thought and action. At a commemoration of the Russian Revolution organised by the CPSA in November 1932, she affirmed the relevance of the revolution to 'every worker irrespective of colour' and continued to hold deep admiration for the Soviet project up until her death.<sup>2</sup>

In the 1930s, Josie became involved in the South African section of the Comintern's International Red Aid, known as *Ikaka la Basebenzi* ('Workers' Shield'), which was created in 1931 following the assassination of the communist organiser Johannes Nkosi by police at a protest in Durban.\*\* A few years later, Josie travelled to the Soviet Union and gained greater first-hand experience with the Comintern.

Though some of her most pivotal contributions were made to the national campaigns against the apartheid

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\* In South Africa, the term 'African' refers to people who descend from groups that migrated from west and central Africa between 2,000 BCE and 1,500 CE. They were first classified by the white settlers as 'Native' and 'Bantu' under colonialism and 'African' under apartheid. The term 'Black' refers to everyone not classified as 'White' under apartheid, including people who are classified as 'Indian' and 'Coloured'.

\*\* International Red Aid, also known by its Russian acronym MOPR, was founded by the Comintern in 1922 'to organise material and moral assistance to vanguard fighters for the cause of communism who are locked in prison, forced into exile, or for any reason excluded against their will from our fighting ranks'. See, John Riddell, 'International Red Aid 1922–1937: Uniting to Defend Class War Prisoners', *Monthly Review Online*, 5 August 2021, <https://mronline.org/2021/08/05/international-red-aid-1922-1937-uniting-to-defend-class-war-prisoners/>; Roth, 'Josie Mpama', 122; Hakim Adi, *Pan-Africanism and Communism: The Communist International, Africa, and the Diaspora, 1919–1939* (Africa World Press, 2013), 386.



pass law system, her focus on organising women, such as being a founder of the multiracial Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW) in 1954, is particularly significant. Josie was amongst few to publicly advocate for women's increased political participation and for the advancement of working-class women, and she was amongst the first Black women to publicly speak to the connections between gender, race, and class.<sup>3</sup>

Due to various biases – then and now – around who is considered to be an intellectual and what is considered to be intellectual work, Josie's roles as an organic intellectual, political thinker, and leader are often overlooked.<sup>4</sup> Although her education in Marxist theory was somewhat informal and irregular in nature, she had a clear appreciation for the necessity of organised class struggle. For Josie, theory and ideology served their purpose in so far as they took stock of the concrete realities and conditions to inform the course of action. Though guided by the party line, as her biographer Robert R. Edgar notes, 'she was not reticent about staking out independent positions and sharply criticising CPSA policies that she believed were not rooted in South African realities'.<sup>5</sup>

Like many organic intellectuals, Josie came to politics through her experiences – in her case, growing up under white rule in apartheid-era South Africa and participating in grassroots community protests. Finding Marxism and revolutionary theory in shards and fragments, she

– like many organic intellectuals and political organisers across the Global South during the era of national liberation – pieced together the concepts that she learned and applied them to her specific context in order to advance the people’s struggle.<sup>6</sup>

Outside of her public political life, she took on as many roles as she did names, including those of mother, grandmother, and, in her later years, church-based community organiser and folk medicinal healer. Ultimately, her enduring commitment to changing the social reality of her people was based on her genuine affection for her community and galvanised by a framework of social revolution.





Protests against lodger's permits in Potchefstroom in the late 1920s often confronted authorities at the town hall, pictured in the distance. These were formative political experiences for Josie.

Reference photograph by Gawie van der Walt, sourced from Lennie Gouws.

# Serving the Burgeoning White Economy

During the turn of the twentieth century, African men from rural areas in South Africa and neighbouring countries were drawn into the emerging industrial hub of Johannesburg as labour for the city's churning mines. Only men were permitted to undertake this type of work and, upon their arrival, lived in semi-carceral worker compounds, remunerated at a rate so low that they could not support their families back home. The making of modern South Africa was rooted in a segregated, segmented organisation of labour, relying not only on the ruthless exploitation of a racialised working-class majority, but also benefiting substantially from gendered divisions of labour within that workforce. As the leading journalist and South African communist Ruth First wrote in 1978:

It is a system of cheap labour, of migrant labour, which first drags the men out of the rural reserves to serve the white economy, then shovels them out of that economy when they are too old and sick to work; sends them out of the way, back to the reserves when they are unemployed. Thus, the white rulers simultaneously absolve themselves of any responsibility for the old, the sick, the unemployed and their families; and remove the source of rebellion of working-class revolt.



...

It is the women who carry the heaviest burdens of this migrant system. They are left behind with the burden of the family; and they are left behind as producers, to keep the agriculture going. So, they are responsible for both family and production.<sup>7</sup>

This labour consisted not only of caring for the young and old, the sick and unemployed, to ensure that families and communities survived in the rural African ‘reserves’ (a concept taken from Native American reservations in the United States), but, later, also included the domestic and social reproductive work that was essential to maintaining the white ruling class.

Although African women were initially excluded from the burgeoning industries, the harsh conditions on the rural reserves – along with the fact that they received little to no remittances from their urban-based male relatives – eventually pushed them to seek out work or livelihoods in cities. Most toiled as domestic servants, beer brewers, small traders, and washer women. Precarity and low wages characterised this new reserve army of casualised labour, which was pushed to the peripheries of cities and heavily controlled and policed.

In her early teens, Josie joined this informal workforce, taking on a variety of short-term, precarious domestic jobs such as washing clothes, cleaning homes, and

cooking, as well as two sewing apprenticeships. She earned extremely low wages, in part due to her young age.

After the South African War, the British and Boers (or Afrikaners) entered into an alliance to establish the Union of South Africa in 1910 and enact a system of oppressive laws and discriminatory processes to cement white rule. African families, homes, labour, and lands were targeted in a number of ways, notably through the pass law system, which placed various restrictions on the African majority and their ability to live in cities, move freely, and work. The system included measures that made strikes a criminal offence for African workers, barred them from certain types of employment, and provided them with less injury compensation than their white counterparts. These policies sought to control and limit their ability to work in urban areas, which had the highest earning potential, and limit their social and, ultimately, political existence. Yet, pass laws were also used to ensure a cheap supply of labour in cities designated almost exclusively for the burgeoning white economy. At various points, the apartheid system was enforced through systematic policing, such as through the use of pass books, which Africans had to carry at all times and which contained personal identification information, including biometric and employment details. Under this regime, Africans were subject to constant surveillance, harassment, and the threat of being fined or arrested.





Popular and organised resistance to pass laws emerged across the country in the early 1910s, one of the earliest being the historic women-led campaign of 1913 in Bloemfontein. Although these struggles were able to win concessions in some cases, the pass law system continued to expand. The Natives (Urban Areas) Act, passed in 1923, paved the way for the tightening of the influx control system that would unfold during the apartheid era, which further restricted the movements and conduct of African people in metropolitan areas. Under the 1923 act, African people were defined as ‘temporary sojourners’ who were only permitted in cities insofar as they served ‘the wants of the white population’, as the act states.<sup>8</sup> Though laws enacted in 1902 and 1913 had already established the grounds for racial segregation and land dispossession (allocating less than ten percent of arable land to Africans), the 1923 Natives Act gave local authorities greater powers to enforce controls within their municipalities.<sup>9</sup> It was within this context that Josie made her political debut.

## Potchefstroom Resistance

Potchefstroom was a political stronghold for the Afrikaner settler project and, later, the apartheid system. Unlike Bloemfontein, where anti-pass struggles developed within a context of labour shortages, the struggles in Potchefstroom unfolded within the context of a labour surplus.<sup>10</sup> In an attempt to control the growing African population in the area, the colonial government imposed a range of restrictions, including night curfews and fees for public services (such as the construction of water pipes), many of which deeply affected African women.

Fed up with an onslaught of restrictions and the increased costs to their daily lives, on 28 September 1927, an organised group of around 200 African women marched in opposition to the closing of water wells. The women, many of whom made their living by washing white families' clothes, marched to the local magistrate with a red, white, and blue banner inked with the words 'For Mercy' to show their discontent.<sup>11</sup>

The state enacted such measures in order to extract revenue from African households to cover public financial deficits that otherwise would have had to be paid by white households.<sup>12</sup> The most intense opposition emerged in response to the lodger's permit policy, which required anyone above the age of eighteen living in a home owned by another person to register and pay the municipal



authorities for a monthly permit. This meant that one's own children and relatives had to pay a monthly fee to live in their family homes. Those who did not pay faced prosecution, eviction, and expulsion, further undermining the social cohesion of the African family already unseamed by the migrant labour system.

Alongside other community leaders and communist cadre (including Edwin Thabo Mofutsanyana, who later became her husband), Josie led important protests against the local municipality and white residents over lodger's permits, including a passive resistance campaign that called for the refusal to pay the lodger's fee. Women were particularly creative and resilient during this period, using various tactics of collective resistance such as quickly returning evicted residents and their furniture back to their homes.<sup>13</sup> Though the protests began spontaneously, the CPSA provided organisational and legal support as well as political direction to the movement. By 1928, the growing local CPSA had roughly one thousand members, with Josie amongst the first recruited in this wave.<sup>14</sup>

In the lead up to a mass meeting of over five hundred people held on 16 December 1929 that aimed to agitate and recruit people to struggle against the racist regime, CPSA flyers declared:

Roll up in your thousands! African workers! You have no guns or bombs like your masters, but you have your numbers; you have your labour and the power

to organise and withhold it. These are your weapons; learn to use them, thereby bringing the tyrant to his knees.<sup>15</sup>

The struggle in Potchefstroom peaked in January 1930, when a general strike largely shut down the town. African women led the charge, organising pickets, blocking key roads, and preventing other Africans from going to work.

Though these struggles created obstacles for the local authorities, who finally capitulated and dropped the lodger's permit fees in May 1931, by May 1930 active resistance had died down, party organisation had almost ceased to exist, and Josie was forced to leave the town.<sup>16</sup> The white authorities used the struggle in Potchefstroom as an experiment in how to improve control mechanisms, which would find new, harsher expressions in later years.

The community struggles that unfolded in and around the resistance to the lodger's permits in Potchefstroom were formative experiences for Josie, both in terms of organising women and being introduced to communism. They cultivated in her a deep sense that, in order to advance, the political struggle had to be grounded in the bread-and-butter issues that most affected the majority. When members of the CPSA or officials in the Comintern downplayed the importance of these struggles, Josie continued to insist that the party needed to support them in order to be more relevant to the working masses.<sup>17</sup>





*Umsebenzi*, the Communist Party of South Africa's newspaper, was one of the party's tools to share its views and work. Josie wrote for the paper and advocated for more contributions from Black workers.

Reference photograph sourced from Corinne Sandwith/*Revolutionary Papers* via the Historical Papers Library, University of the Witwatersrand.

## Wearing the Red Scarf

Following months of discussion and debate between various left organisations about the possibility of forming a communist party, the CPSA began its founding conference on 30 July 1921. It was the first of its kind on the continent. The party's initial aim was, as stated in its founding manifesto, 'to establish the widest and closest possible contact with workers of all *ranks and races* and to propagate the Communist gospel amongst them', drawing inspiration and direction from the Comintern.<sup>18</sup> The party recognised the importance of supporting African struggles, particularly related to housing, land dispossession, labour influx controls, and political enfranchisement.

Moses Kotane, who became the second African general secretary of the party in 1939, recalled that, of the early Black cadre, Josie was amongst the first to join the party (Comintern records indicate that she was the 516th member to join in 1928).<sup>20</sup> The party organised Saturday night classes on communist ideology and organisation, which new recruits like Josie attended after moving to Johannesburg at the end of 1931. Later, she established a branch in Sophiatown and opened a night school for ideological training as well as basic mathematics and English.<sup>21</sup> By the mid-1930s, Josie had entered the party's senior leadership. She was in the Political Bureau at various points and in the Central Committee until at least 1946, perhaps the only Black woman to hold such



positions in any political party in South Africa at the time.<sup>22</sup>

Generally speaking, the party had a lack of active women members and leaders. This was largely due to material conditions, namely domestic burdens, racial divisions, patriarchal practices, social and geographical restrictions, and a lack of access to education. When it came to the perception of women's ability to effectively carry out political work, patriarchal attitudes prevailed both in society and the party, and party work was at times considered to reflect a culture of 'exclusive intellectualism' that marginalised those without a formal or political education.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, though small in numbers, women played an important role in the CPSA from the late 1920s through the 1940s. This remained the case after the party was banned in 1950 and forced underground, reconstituting itself as the South African Communist Party (SACP). Amongst these women were Ray Alexander, Molly Wolton, Hilda Bernstein, Dora Tamana, Fatima Seedat, Cecilia Rosier, Rebecca Bunting, Sonia Bunting, Rica Hodgson, Thoko Mngoma, Winifred Seqwana, Florence Mkhize, Letitia Sibeko, Violet Weinberg, and Ruth First.

To rise in the ranks of the party, one needed political education and experience. When the opportunity to train abroad arose, Josie jumped at the chance, accompanying Matilda First, the mother of South African journalist and communist icon Ruth First, to Moscow in 1935 to

study at the Communist University of the Toilers of the East.<sup>24</sup> Using the pseudonyms Red Scarf and Beatrice Henderson, Josie participated in various activities during her time in the Soviet Union, including the Seventh World Congress of the Comintern.

While in Moscow, she testified and provided reports before a commission on South Africa regarding the internal strife between opposing groups within the CPSA, which had reached such a point that many considered the party to be on the brink of collapse. Then General Secretary Moses Kotane raised the important criticism that the party was not sufficiently ‘Africanised’, referring to the fact that a significant section of the leadership, led by Lazarus Bach, knew little of the realities of the African masses and was instead preoccupied with European debates, disconnecting party ideals from party organisation and activity.\* Though she called for greater efforts to ‘Africanise’ the party and recognise the existing divisions that ran along racial lines, Josie, alongside Kotane, opposed positions to split the organisational structure of the party along racial lines, including Edwin’s proposal to form separate wings of the party based on race in 1938.<sup>25</sup>

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\* Around the same time, Josie was a signatory to a letter penned by twelve party members and sent to the Political Bureau, criticising a small ‘clique’ for pushing incorrect policies that isolated the party from the masses and for attempting to remove Kotane from his position. See, Bunting, *Moses Kotane, Lodge, Red Road*, 317.





Josie was careful not to take sides during the commission and prioritised holding the party together. She did not, however, shy away from sharing her concerns, such as the lack of initiatives to organise workers in factory cells as well as poor membership retention, insufficient training of African cadre for leadership positions, and the decision to prioritise uniting all races into one front at the expense of addressing the unique issues faced by African people.<sup>26</sup> Josie also pointed to the party's approach to writing and publishing articles, expressing her frustration with the leadership for failing to nurture workers' literary endeavours.<sup>27</sup> 'If anything was wrong with the article,' she asked, 'could it not have been corrected?'<sup>28</sup>

An important theme in Josie's criticisms of party was its lack of engagement with reality and its lack of political vitality. She expressed concerns over the mechanical nature of leadership meetings, saying, 'We only used to discuss the work of the group and never did we discuss political questions'.<sup>29</sup> This approach, she argued, led to a fundamental problem: the party's overall neglect of the issues raised by and affecting African people. For Josie, the party was not sufficiently rooted in the country's social reality, focusing instead on orthodox Marxist theoretical discussions and European political developments.<sup>30</sup>

Notably, Josie warned the party against dismissing African nationalist leaders, arguing that they constituted a 'native bourgeoisie' and that, within the broad front of

resistance, they would ‘help us unite and struggle against imperialism’.<sup>31</sup> She explained that ‘if we will underestimate the bourgeoisie as a class, it means we do not as yet understand the power of capitalism’ and that ‘we must not run away from the fact that though they are reformist, they have influence over the masses’.<sup>32</sup> In its early years, the CPSA explicitly discouraged alliances with African nationalist groups, despite the Comintern’s position that advocated for the tactical support of those leading national liberation and decolonisation movements.\* The Comintern’s conclusions from the commission on the party’s internal strife echoed many of Josie’s concerns regarding the CPSA’s failure to build a mass base and tactical alliances, which, they argued, arose from a failure to adequately grasp the South African context. Here, the efforts of Josie and others were successful: by the 1940s the CPSA had increased its cooperation with the African National Congress (ANC), a movement for national liberation that began as an African bourgeois project in 1912, in an attempt to build a broader, mass-based front of struggle.

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\* During the Second Congress of the Comintern, Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin put forward a thesis on the national and colonial question, describing how, at that specific moment in time, ‘The communist International must enter into a temporary alliance with bourgeois democracy in the colonial and backward countries, but should not merge with it, and should under all circumstances uphold the independence of the proletarian movement.’ See V. Lenin, ‘Draft Theses on the National and Colonial Questions’, 2 June 1920, Second Congress of the Communist International, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/jun/05.htm>; Lodge, *Red Road*, 69.



Though the process of participating in Comintern meetings was in itself a part of Josie's political education, her primary reason for travelling to the Soviet Union was to study at the Communist University of the Toilers of the East. One of the university's mandates was to provide Marxist-Leninist political education and training to anti-colonial leaders and communists from the Global South, with alumni including Jomo Kenyatta, Ho Chi Minh, Deng Xiaoping, and Harry Haywood. In the 1930s, the university offered a fourteen-month-long course for international students that focused largely on theory but also included two months of practical work (including three days on a collective farm and fifteen days on party organisation).<sup>33</sup> Subjects included political economy, history, Leninism, historical materialism, party-building, military science, contemporary politics, and English-language education.<sup>34</sup>

Though Josie's studies were disrupted by several bouts of poor health and hospitalisation, this international experience nonetheless had a profound impact on her, deepening her internationalist perspective and class consciousness and further solidifying her belief in the centrality of organisation to advance the struggle. During the Seventh Congress of the Comintern, while discussing the mobilisations of Black dock workers in Cape Town who were refusing to load or crew Italian shipments during Italy's 1935–1936 invasion of Abyssinia (Ethiopia), Josie highlighted the importance of working-class internationalism:

‘although protests took place, we did not do enough. If all the Africans were organised like the dock workers, no boats would have been loaded with supplies for Italian troops... African workers must help the workers in Europe to fight for their liberty. Peace is only possible by action of the workers’.<sup>35</sup> In the same speech, she also spoke of the ‘necessity of organisation’, contending that the CPSA’s ‘composition is bad’ as it had no Afrikaners and too few Africans and arguing that its core mandate had to be to create an organisation that ‘will attract all the poor people and become a mighty mass party’.<sup>36</sup>

Upon returning to South Africa in late 1936, Josie focused on building the mass character of the party, fuelled by an urgency to build a broad and organised opposition to the burgeoning apartheid system. She was a member of the CPSA’s coordinating committee, which was formed in 1937 to work on ‘the question of organisation on a national scale’.<sup>37</sup> This shift towards organising a mass movement across the country marked a new phase for the CPSA, the labour movement, and the liberation struggle as a whole. This was in part furthered by the political and economic consequences of the Second World War, such as the influx of African people to urban areas that resulted from the labour requirements of increased industrialisation within a context of harsh economic conditions (inflation, food shortages, overcrowding, etc.).



For Josie, the priority was clear: as she said in a party debate, 'Comrades must come among the masses'.<sup>38</sup> At a meeting of the Non-European Unity Front in 1939, she encouraged the audience to 'Go into the factories, go on the lands, and wherever the non-European is working for the benefit of the employers, tell them that they have a right to a share and that we have a right to a share of the profits of the wealth of South Africa'.<sup>39</sup>

The CPSA became a leading force at this time and after the war. One key role it played was amongst political groups that gathered for the Anti-Pass Conference in November 1943, where they agreed to pursue all possible means to mount pressure for the abolition of passes, including working more closely with groups that were less ideologically aligned but shared overlapping interests. Josie was at the fore of various women's efforts in this struggle, including organising a conference on pass laws in March 1944 in the lead up to the launch of an official campaign that May.<sup>40</sup> These efforts would lay the groundwork for later campaigns to fight the apartheid system after it was formally inaugurated with the 1948 election of the National Party.

Throughout the 1940s, the CPSA built a broad front against colonial domination by forming new tactical alliances and national campaigns, such as the anti-pass movement. As the author Tom Lodge describes, this resulted in the 'broadening of public support for the

organisation, [greater] militancy of communist activities, and the development of mutual perception and understanding between it and the African National Congress'.<sup>41</sup> Josie could often be found alongside a broad array of political leaders at meetings of the ANC and other groups that organised multiracial gatherings advocating for non-racialism and the participation of Black women as well as offering perspectives of resistance rooted in a class analysis.\*

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\* Non-racialism is a prominent ideology and political tradition in South Africa that was borne out of opposition to the racialised system of apartheid. The term is enshrined as a founding value in chapter one of the Constitution of South Africa, although its precise meaning is contested by different political forces. The CPSA was a leading organisation of non-racial politics, whilst, for example, the ANC reserved its membership exclusively for Africans up until 1969. See Imraan Buccus, 'The Dangerous Collapse of Non-Racialism', *New Frame*, 30 July 2021, <https://www.newframe.com/the-dangerous-collapse-of-non-racialism/>.





Many anti-colonial leaders, including Josie, received political education at the Communist University of the Toilers of the East in Moscow. Its main building (to the left), no longer in existence, was located facing Pushkin Square.

Reference photograph by I. N. Pano, sourced from Rossen Djagalov.

## Make Way for Women Who Will Lead

As the CPSA grappled with the challenge of organising a national mass movement, it also faced the need to pay heed to the unique issues facing women and make a more concerted effort to organise them. By the 1930s, organised labour and the CPSA had started to turn their attention towards women workers and their role in the manufacturing and processing industries. However, African women were mostly restricted to domestic service and made up a fraction of the formal workforce (less than 1% according to available data in the 1950s).<sup>42</sup> Here, Josie would play an indispensable role, building connections between the party, other political groups, the labour movement, and women. Since her political debut in women-led community struggles, Josie had consistently advocated for women's rights, with a particular focus on the struggles of African women. As one historian put it, 'through her, the CPSA was able to disseminate more radical ideas on the part women should be playing in black opposition politics, amongst black women'.<sup>43</sup>

For Josie, it followed that women's participation was a strategic necessity for the working class to succeed in overthrowing the racist colonial rule. As a result, she fiercely advocated for women's political participation at a time when few women were participating in such radical public discourse. Along these lines, she made the following appeal in the party's newspaper against the 1937





Natives Laws Amendment Bill, which would further limit the size of African populations in urban areas in accordance with the minimum number of labourers required, in addition to other restrictions:

We, women, should come on to the field as strugglers, for only with our help can our men fight successfully against this new bill. Only by joint struggle can we compel [the withdrawal of] this new slave law.

Women, we can no longer remain in the background or concern ourselves only with domestic and sports affairs. The time has arrived to enter the political field and stand shoulder to shoulder with men in the struggle.<sup>44</sup>

At the same time, she did not refrain from pointing out and criticising how patriarchal relations were infused not only in society but also within the party, limiting women's political participation:

Amongst all our leaders it is very seldom that one will see their wives or women friends accompanying them to meetings, and in all their struggles only few women take active part, except in locations when such struggles for lodger's permits are fought, then some who cannot afford to pay such fees, and because it affects the family as a whole [when] then they find that there is no other way out than to unite with the

others and attend meetings. Then as soon as they find that they have either won or lost they go back home and take to their domestic spheres.<sup>45</sup>

Along with combating patriarchal influences, Josie also grappled with how to encourage women to take part in struggles that seemed distant from their immediate realities. In the case of a proposal to give African men limited voting rights and representation, she reflected that ‘very few women took part in the struggle against the Native Bills, probably because not having had the vote they did not think it important to assist their men to maintain the vote’.<sup>46</sup>

Though African women resisted the colonial control of their labour, lands, and daily lives throughout the early twentieth century (and well before), their early organising in South Africa nonetheless reinforced conservative gender roles, demanding a say as mothers, home makers, etc., or was limited to supportive roles in the struggle against racism. In certain limited frameworks, women did consciously and tactically leverage concepts such as motherhood, which were held in high esteem, to advance their emancipation more broadly, intentionally using them to manoeuvre within limited political spaces and bring in women who were not politically active (despite the essentialist undertones such concepts retained).



Following the political enfranchisement of white women in 1930 and the ensuing swell of women's participation in political activity, the CPSA created a women's department in 1931 that Josie would lead. Initially, women were seen merely as supporters of the men in the struggle. However, this began to change as the party placed a greater emphasis on women being able to work shoulder to shoulder with their male counterparts, encouraged more radical conceptions of gender roles, and provided greater flexibility for women to organise on their own terms.

Though women remained a minority in party membership and leadership, as the historian C. J. Walker notes, 'in the area of women's emancipation, the CPSA brought new perspectives to the incipient national liberation movement of this time'.<sup>47</sup> The progressive evolution of the CPSA's approach towards the gender question grew out of its understanding that the principal contradiction in society was that between the owners of property and capital and those who sold and relied on their labour to survive. As a result, although their words often spoke louder than their deeds, this analysis, as well as its advocacy for non-racialism, positioned the party to best understand the issues facing working women compared to other organisations of the era. For instance, in a statement released in February 1932, the party declared:

Toiling native women, white working women, realise your interests, wake up to fight for better conditions side by side with your husbands, fathers, and brothers: only by a united front can you get rid of all the exploitation which you suffer under capitalism and where you as women are the greatest sufferers.<sup>48</sup>

In the early 1930s, the party planned to hold a national conference of working women, which, it stated, aimed ‘to unify and consolidate the sectional struggle of women... [and] to bring into existence a permanent organisation of struggle for the working women of South Africa’. Though this conference would not come to fruition due to the political upheaval within the party, between 1935–1937, Josie, along with other party members such as Ray Alexander, continued to call for militant women’s organising and activity.<sup>49</sup> As Josie stated while criticising a conservative women’s social welfare organisation for failing to successfully organise campaigns around issues that affected women, ‘they must make way [for] women who will lead and make a move to carry out the work’.<sup>50</sup>

As the anti-pass law campaign began to grow in the late 1940s, the need for more broad-based women’s organising increased. In 1947, women of the CPSA gathered in Johannesburg to establish a non-racial women’s organisation, the Transvaal All-Women’s Union, electing Josie as its president. Though small and localised, it was in some ways the prototype for a larger, national women’s



organisation that formed in later years.<sup>51</sup> Shortly thereafter, the repressive legal system shifted into high gear with the passing of the 1950 Suppression of Communism Act, which effectively banned the CPSA, and a renewed proposal to issue pass books for African women, amongst many other measures, was once again put on the table.



Police officers check pass books, which Black people were required to carry under the apartheid system to restrict and control their socioeconomic and political mobility.

Reference photograph sourced from South African History Online, photographer unknown.

## Women on the March

The increasing repression of the apartheid state only spurred the women's movement to deepen their efforts to organise. In 1954, 146 delegates representing around 230,000 women across the country from a variety of political backgrounds gathered in Johannesburg for the founding conference of the Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW). At the conference, the delegates pledged their support for the emerging Congress Alliance, a multiracial coalition that was formally established the following year and would launch a national anti-apartheid campaign that generated the largest mass participation yet seen. Josie attended the conference on behalf of the Transvaal All-Women's Union and became the president of FEDSAW's Transvaal branch.

Although public historiography propagated by the ANC after the formal end of apartheid in 1994 has portrayed the federation as being led almost exclusively by ANC-affiliated liberal women, it is important to note that FEDSAW was, in fact, the brainchild of CPSA member Ray Alexander and had considerable participation from left-wing working women, from trade unionists such as Francis Baard to communists such as Josie. Though generally putting forward broad liberal demands and aims, such as the right to vote, its founding document, the Women's Charter, also included a number of more radical elements that were likely added due to the participation

and efforts of left-wing women. These included provisions that called for 'equal pay and possibilities of promotion in all spheres of work', 'equal rights with men in relation to property, marriage and children', and 'the organisation of women in trade unions'.<sup>52</sup> While the charter outlined the particularities of women's social reproductive burdens and called for women to self-organise to achieve equitable political rights and economic conditions, it also called for women to struggle alongside men in 'a common struggle against poverty, race and class discrimination, and the evils of the colour bar'. The Women's Charter would eventually become the basis for certain constitutional rights in post-apartheid South Africa.

Though FEDSAW worked within the Congress Alliance, it also had an independent mandate. In the year following its establishment, FEDSAW and its branches organised women around gender issues as well as broader Congress Alliance campaigns. Josie could be heard speaking at events such as the commemoration of International Women's Day in Johannesburg in March 1955 addressing women from various backgrounds on the plight of African women.

FEDSAW's first large-scale national protest took place on 27 October 1955, when two thousand women of all races marched against pass laws and the apartheid system. However, one month before the march, Josie was served banning orders, which made it a criminal offence for her to engage in public political meetings and participate





in various political organisations, including FEDSAW. At the age of fifty-two, these repressive measures forced Josie to withdraw from publicly participating in demonstrations and the leading organs of struggle. In her last official FEDSAW communication, Josie declared to her comrades:

Never were the minds of human beings controlled.  
Never were the eyes of human beings closed... It is  
therefore natural that every living soul will ultimately  
see and follow the road to FREEDOM.

Josie or no Josie, the struggle will go on and ours will  
be the day of victory.<sup>53</sup>

A year later, on 9 August 1956, in the culmination of decades of the work, 20,000 women descended on the Union Buildings in Pretoria, the official seat of the colonial government, carrying with them bundles of signed petitions demanding the abolition of all apartheid pass laws. The march, showing the success of efforts to organise women of all races on a mass scale within a relatively short period of time, inaugurated a new phase that brimmed with hope. The Congress Alliance would later decide that 9 August would be celebrated as Women's Day in South Africa. Today, the anniversary of the historic multiracial Women's March to Pretoria is an official public holiday.

## Always Uplifting the People

Beginning in the late 1940s, Josie became more active in the Anglican Church and women's church groups, such as the Mzimhlophe Church Women's Society and the Ekurhuleni Church Committee, both of which played a role in securing bursaries for children, food parcels for poor families, and other forms of assistance.<sup>54</sup> A number of factors led Josie to make this shift, including a desire to reconnect with her family and community after decades of prioritising political work, as well as a desire to improve her physical health and spiritual wellbeing. Perhaps most importantly, for many women who, like Josie, had been connected to FEDSAW and were banned from public political life, women's church groups served as a refuge and alternative form of social organisation within a hostile political climate shaped by the repression of anti-apartheid political activity.<sup>55</sup>

Josie saw no contradiction between communism and Christianity.<sup>56</sup> Rather, as Edgar notes, she saw both as 'expressions of her commitment to social justice'.<sup>57</sup> Much like the traditions of liberation theology that took root in various national liberation struggles across the world, Josie's involvement in church-based communities in the last decades of her life can be better understood as being embedded in a similar liberatory understanding of theology and recognition of the social functions that religion can fulfil.<sup>58</sup>



Despite her retreat from public political life, Josie continued to be targeted by the state. She was detained and imprisoned for several weeks during the state of emergency that was declared after the Sharpeville Massacre in 1960 (the police killing of sixty nine people during a public protest against pass laws) and remained on the radar of the apartheid police in the years that followed.<sup>59</sup> This did not deter her from, in her own words, continuing to ‘uplift my people’.<sup>60</sup> She supported her grandchildren as they came of age in the political struggles of the late 1970s, particularly during the 1976 student uprisings, and continued to encourage women to ‘get up and get moving’.<sup>61</sup>

After her death in 1979, Josie was laid to rest at Avalon Cemetery in Soweto alongside many known and unknown stalwarts of the struggle.



The Federation of South African Women held its inaugural conference on 17 April 1954 at the Trades Hall in Johannesburg, where Josie chaired the session 'Women's Struggle for Peace'.

Reference photograph by Eli Weinberg, sourced from the Historical Papers Research Archive, University of the Witwatersrand, via the University of the Western Cape Mayibuye Archive.

# Josie or No Josie, the Struggle Will Go On

From high rates of violence to chronic unemployment, low wages, and precarious work, African people, and African women in particular, live in a state of profound crisis nested within a wider social context of the crisis of capitalism. In modern-day South Africa, feminism is routinely understood as a profession, a mode of academic and NGO work rather than a popular political project. Grassroots feminists are systemically ignored and undermined by elite discourse. Today, there is no organised popular national feminist movement that is advancing Josie's legacy.

The stranglehold of elite feminism can only be challenged and undone by developing a genuinely popular feminism, a feminism that understands anti-capitalist political agency and organisation as essential to transforming our social reality. As Josie put it, 'it is only when [the oppressed] are politically advanced that they can and will have advanced education[ally], socially, economically, and commercially.'<sup>62</sup> Unlike many women of her time, for Josie, being a member and leader in a communist organisation played a large part in enabling that political advance.

Throughout her life, Josie never wavered from her commitment to changing the social reality of the majority. In a letter to the apartheid government's minister of justice protesting Josie's banning from public political life, Congress Alliance activist and FEDSAW national secretary Helen Joseph described her as someone who 'has always worked for the good of the people as whole'.<sup>63</sup> For the good of the people as a whole: that is the legacy of Josie Mpama.





This photograph of members of the CPSA Johannesburg District Committee in 1945 is one of the only images available in the public domain that captures Josie engaging in party work.

Reference photograph sourced from South African History Online, photographer unknown.

# Notes

<sup>1</sup> Josie Mpama, 'Autobiography of J. Mpama', in *South Africa and the Communist International: A Documentary History*. Vol. 2 *Bolshevik Footsoldiers to Victims of Bolshevisation 1931–1939*, eds. Apollon B. Davidson, Irina Filatova, Valentin P. Gorodnov, and Sheridan Johns, (London: Frank Cass, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Robert R. Edgar, *Josie Mpama/Palmer: Get Up and Get Moving* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2020), 113, 221.

<sup>3</sup> Edgar, *Josie Mpama/Palmer*, 113, 128; Tom Lodge, *Red Road to Freedom: A History of the South African Communist Party, 1921–2021* (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2021), 313; Mia Roth, 'Josie Mpama: The Contribution of a Largely Forgotten Figure in the South African Liberation Struggle', *Kleio* 28, no. 1 (1996): 122.

<sup>4</sup> For more on organic intellectuals, see Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, *The New Intellectual*, dossier no. 12, 11 February 2019, <https://thetricontinental.org/the-new-intellectual/>.

<sup>5</sup> Edgar, *Josie Mpama/Palmer*, 131.

<sup>6</sup> For further reading on this topic, see Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, *Dawn: Marxism and National Liberation*, dossier no. 37, 8 February 2021, <https://thetricontinental.org/dossier-37-marxism-and-national-liberation/>.

<sup>7</sup> Ruth First, 'Appendix: Transcription of Ruth First's Speech on South African Women's Day, August 9th, 1978', In *Negotiating Femininity, Ethnicity, and History: Representations of Ruth First in South African Struggle Narratives* by Deborah Rochelle Klein (PhD diss., University of Cape Town, 2006), 300.

<sup>8</sup> 'Natives (Urban Areas) Act, Act No 21 of 1923', *Digital Innovation South Africa*, <https://disa.ukzn.ac.za/leg19230614028020021>.

<sup>9</sup> '1913 Natives Land Act Centenary', South African Government, accessed 13 February 2023, <https://www.gov.za/1913-natives-land-act-centenary>.

<sup>10</sup> Julia C. Wells, *We Now Demand!: The History of Women's Resistance to Pass Laws in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1994), 66.

<sup>11</sup> Edgar, *Josie Mpama/Palmer*, 65.





- <sup>12</sup> Edgar, *Josie Mpama/Palmer*, 68–69.
- <sup>13</sup> Wells, *We Now Demand!*, 84.
- <sup>14</sup> Edgar, *Josie Mpama/Palmer* 54; Lodge, *Red Road*, 222.
- <sup>15</sup> Edgar, *Josie Mpama/Palmer*, 82–83.
- <sup>16</sup> Wells, *We Now Demand!*, 84, 85.
- <sup>17</sup> Roth, 'Josie Mpama', 122; Edgar, *Josie Mpama/Palmer*, 124–126.
- <sup>18</sup> Brian Bunting, *Moses Kotane: South African Revolutionary* (Western Cape: Mayibuye Books, 1975), 26–27.
- <sup>19</sup> Lodge, *Red Road*, 69.
- <sup>20</sup> Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, 53; Mpama, 'Autobiography of J. Mpama', 160.
- <sup>21</sup> Edgar, *Josie Mpama/Palmer*, 161.
- <sup>22</sup> Mpama, 'Autobiography of J. Mpama', 160; Roth, 'Josie Mpama', 123.
- <sup>23</sup> Klein, *Negotiating Femininity, Ethnicity, and History*, 19.
- <sup>24</sup> Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, 79; Edgar, *Josie Mpama/Palmer*.
- <sup>25</sup> Roth, 'Josie Mpama', 122; Edgar, *Josie Mpama/Palmer*, 131, 155.
- <sup>26</sup> Mpama, 'J. Mpama's Statement to South African Commission, 13 March 1936', In *South Africa and the Communist International*, 182–185.
- <sup>27</sup> Edgar, *Josie Mpama/Palmer*, 149.
- <sup>28</sup> Mpama, 'Statement of J. Mpama to South African Commission, 19 March 1936', In *South Africa and the Communist International*, 193.
- <sup>29</sup> Mpama, 'J. Mpama's Statement to South African Commission, 13 March 1936', 182.
- <sup>30</sup> Edgar, *Josie Mpama/Palmer*, 120.
- <sup>31</sup> Mpama, 'Statement of J. Mpama to South African Commission, 19 March 1936', 195.
- <sup>32</sup> Mpama, 'Statement of J. Mpama to South African Commission, 19 March 1936', 195; Lodge, *Red Road*, 189–190, 216.
- <sup>33</sup> Woodford McClellan, 'Africans and Black Americans in the Comintern Schools, 1925–1934', *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 26, no. 2 (1993): 375.
- <sup>34</sup> McClellan, 'Africans and Black Americans in the Comintern Schools', 375.

<sup>35</sup> Mpama, 'J. Mpama to Sixth National Conference, CPSA, September 1936 (Extract from Conference Minutes)', In *South Africa and the Communist International*, 215–216.

<sup>36</sup> Mpama, 'J. Mpama to Sixth National Conference', 216.

<sup>37</sup> Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, 87.

<sup>38</sup> Edgar, *Josie Mpama/Palmer*, 156.

<sup>39</sup> Edgar, *Josie Mpama/Palmer*, 164.

<sup>40</sup> Lodge, *Red Road*, 242, 245.

<sup>41</sup> Lodge, *Red Road*, 280–283.

<sup>42</sup> Elizabeth S. Schmidt, 'Now You Have Touched the Women: African Women's Resistance to the Pass Laws in South Africa, 1950–1960', in *The Struggle for Liberation in South Africa and International Solidarity: A Selection of Papers Published by the United Nations Centre Against Apartheid*, ed. E.S. Reddy (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1992).

<sup>43</sup> C. J. Walker, *Women in Twentieth Century South African Politics: The Federation of South African Women, Its Roots, Growth and Decline* (Master's thesis, University of Cape Town, 1978), 83–84.

<sup>44</sup> Mpama, 'An Appeal to African Women', 248.

<sup>45</sup> Edgar, *Josie Mpama/Palmer*, 245–46.

<sup>46</sup> Josie Mpama, 'An Appeal to African Women Join the Struggle against Oppressive Laws', *South African Worker*, 30 January 1937, In Edgar, *Josie Mpama/Palmer*, 249.

<sup>47</sup> Walker, *Women in Twentieth Century South African Politics*, 76.

<sup>48</sup> Walker, *Women in Twentieth Century South African Politics*, 90.

<sup>49</sup> Walker, *Women in Twentieth Century South African Politics*, 85.

<sup>50</sup> Josie Mpama, 'African Women Must Be Organised We Are Prepared to Move', *South African Worker*, 26 June 1937, In Edgar, *Josie Mpama/Palmer*, 252.

<sup>51</sup> Kathryn Sturman, *The Federation of South African Women and the Black Sash: Constraining and Contestatory Discourses About Women in Politics, 1954–1958* (PhD diss., University of Cape Town, 1996), 65–66.

<sup>52</sup> Federation of South African Women, *Women's Charter*, (Johannesburg, 17 April 1954).

<sup>53</sup> Josie Mpama to the Federation of South African Women, 26 October 1955, Federation



of South African Women 1954–1963, Historical Papers Research Archive at the University of Witwatersrand, collection no. AD1137, <http://researcharchives.wits.ac.za/uploads/r/historical-papers-research-archive-library-university-of-witwatersrand/6/7/c/67ce8c3ac-5dc7d816f675fdcf489cae89d3e8a9255d3d0247ee782958ad00537/AD1137-Ad1-2-002-jpeg.pdf>; Edgar, *Josie Mpama/Palmer*, 210.

<sup>54</sup> Miriam Jeanette Zwane, *The Federation of South African Women and Aspects of Urban Women's Resistance to the Policies of Racial Segregation, 1950–1970* (MA thesis., University of Johannesburg, 2012), 81–82.

<sup>55</sup> Zwane, *Federation of South African Women*, 81–82; Edgar, *Josie Mpama/Palmer*, 215.

<sup>56</sup> Davidson, et al., eds., *South Africa and the Communist International*, xxvii.

<sup>57</sup> Edgar, *Josie Mpama/Palmer*, 214.

<sup>58</sup> For more on the relationship between religion and politics, see Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, dossier no. 59, *Religious Fundamentalism and Imperialism in Latin America: Action and Resistance*, 19 December 2022, <https://thetricontinental.org/dossier-59-religious-fundamentalism-and-imperialism-in-latin-america/>.

<sup>59</sup> Edgar, *Josie Mpama/Palmer*, 211–213.

<sup>60</sup> Edgar, *Josie Mpama/Palmer*, 240.

<sup>61</sup> Edgar, *Josie Mpama/Palmer*, 240.

<sup>62</sup> Mpama, 'Educating our Bantu Women', *Mochochonono*, 22 November 1933, In Edgar, *Josie Mpama/Palmer*, 247–48.

<sup>63</sup> Helen Joseph to Josie Mpama, 19 November 1955, Historical Papers Research Archive at the University of Witwatersrand, collection no. AD1137, <http://researcharchives.wits.ac.za/uploads/r/historical-papers-research-archive-library-university-of-witwatersrand/6/7/c/67ce8c3ac5dc7d816f675fdcf489cae89d3e8a9255d3d0247ee782958ad00537/AD1137-Ad1-2-002-jpeg.pdf>.



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