Oliver Tambo was teacher, political leader, diplomat and revolutionary. As Deputy President and later President, he led the African National Congress in exile for 30 years, while Nelson Mandela and many others were gaoled in South Africa.

Under Tambo’s leadership, the ANC’s external mission grew from a few exiles into an movement with offices in all the world’s major capitals. From the mid-1970s it inspired, and built links with, the mass movement against apartheid inside South Africa. Tambo held the ANC together, seeking consensus, but never afraid to take difficult decisions. He was a strategic thinker, who endorsed the decision to pursue armed struggle in 1961, and in the 1980s seized the chance for negotiations with the apartheid regime.

Tambo was respected by world leaders and inspired hundreds of thousands of people to join the anti-apartheid struggle. This exhibition tells how he crossed ideological and geographical boundaries, building a truly global movement.

Comrades and friends - TOP RIGHT: Tambo with Trevor Huddleston in 1968. They met as young men when Huddleston was a priest in Sophiatown. Huddleston was later President of the British Anti-Apartheid Movement. CENTRE RIGHT: Tambo with Olof Palme, former Prime Minister of Sweden, in 1986. Tambo first met Palme in 1962 and remained a friend until Palme’s assassination in 1986. BOTTOM RIGHT: Tambo with E S Reddy, Secretary of the UN Special Committee Against Apartheid. Reddy later said: ‘He always treated me as a partner in the struggle rather than as a mere friend or supporter’. Another close friend was Canon John Collins. Collins headed the International Defence and Aid Fund, which supported political prisoners and their families. IDAF played an indispensable part in the liberation struggle.
Oliver Tambo left South Africa at the end of March 1960 after the Sharpeville massacre. He was sent by the ANC to set up a mission in exile. The following week the ANC was banned. Tambo escaped to Botswana and went on to Dar es Salaam. Via meetings in Tunisia, Ghana and Denmark he reached London, where he was followed by his wife Adelaide and their children. He joined with Yusuf Dadoo from the South African Indian Congress and representatives of the Pan-Africanist Congress and the South West Africa National Union to form the South African United Front. The SAUF’s first success was to help force South Africa out of the Commonwealth in March 1961.
Africa was the first and most important source of support for the South African liberation movements. As the newly independent African countries joined the UN in the early 1960s, they pressed for mandatory sanctions against South Africa. After the formation of the Organisation of African Unity in 1963, its Liberation Committee provided material support.

Oliver Tambo made firm friendships with African leaders, especially Julius Nyerere in Tanzania, Kenneth Kaunda in Zambia and Samora Machel in Mozambique. In 1964 he moved from Dar es Salaam to Lusaka, where the ANC set up its head office. After the liberation of Portugal’s colonies in 1975, South Africa fomented civil war and launched armed attacks on the frontline states - Angola, Mozambique, Botswana, Zambia and Lesotho, and Zimbabwe after its independence in 1980. Tambo understood the extreme pressure these countries were under and was sensitive to their constraints.

In January 1981 South African commandos attacked houses in Matola, southern Mozambique, killing ANC exiles and Mozambican citizens. Tambo spoke at the funeral of the victims on 8 February 1981. The raid on Matola was one of many South African attacks on civilians in the frontline states.
‘There is no longer any possibility of liberating South Africa from apartheid with peaceful means’

‘There is no longer any possibility of liberating South Africa from apartheid with peaceful means’

OLIVER TAMBO, 1964

In 1961 the ANC’s armed wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), launched a sabotage campaign against the apartheid government. In the following years, Oliver Tambo explained to the world why the ANC decided to embark on armed struggle, and sought equipment and training for MK. The main supplier was the Soviet Union, together with its Warsaw Pact allies, especially East Germany.
‘I am hoping to get out of here and go round the world begging for moral and material support for our struggle’

OLIVER TAMBO TO E S REDDY, 31 AUGUST 1967

The ANC depended on international support to pay for its administration and the living and educational costs of an ever-growing number of young South African exiles. The governments of the Nordic countries and the Netherlands were major donors. Voluntary groups all over the world collected cash and material goods. Oliver Tambo inspired trust in all who met him and travelled widely to receive donations and practical support.
‘This is the mass base on which the success of our common struggle depends’

OLIVER TAMBO AT THE ‘PEOPLES OF THE WORLD FOR A DEMOCRATIC SOUTH AFRICA’, CONFERENCE, TANZANIA, DECEMBER 1987

Oliver Tambo travelled the world meeting people from all walks of life - local government, trade unions, churches, political parties, universities, community groups and individuals opposed to the idea of racial segregation. He inspired them to campaign against apartheid within their own organisations and to set up groups which drew more activists into anti-apartheid campaigns.

He addressed mass rallies and conferences, and spoke at small meetings of interested individuals. He impressed all who met him with his warmth, dedication and vision of a non-racial democratic South Africa.
The ANC called for economic sanctions, an end to arms sales and a boycott of South African goods. Britain, the USA and West Germany were the biggest investors and traders in South Africa, and in the late 1960s France took over from Britain as South Africa’s main arms supplier. Oliver Tambo asked governments and individuals to isolate the apartheid government. He also appealed for a cultural, academic and sporting boycott. Speaking at rallies and conferences, he inspired hundreds of thousands to join the sanctions campaign.
‘Oliver Tambo is more than a brother to me. He is my greatest friend and comrade for more than 50 years. If there is anyone among you who cherishes my freedom, Oliver Tambo cherishes it more, and I know that he would give his life to set me free.’

MESSAGE FROM NELSON MANDELA SMUGGLED FROM ROBBEN ISLAND, READ BY HIS DAUGHTER ZINDZI AT A RALLY IN SOWETO, 10 FEBRUARY 1985
‘We are asking the world not to solve our problems ... but to assist us to solve those problems’

OLIVER TAMBO AT THE UN SPECIAL COMMITTEE AGAINST APARTHEID, 1968

OLIVER TAMBO – BUILDING THE GLOBAL ANTI-APARTHEID MOVEMENT

Intergovernmental organisations played a big part in the global anti-apartheid campaign. The ANC worked with the Africa group at the UN to impose mandatory economic sanctions against South Africa. The UN General Assembly called for a ban on trade in 1962, but the US, UK and France repeatedly vetoed sanctions in the Security Council. Oliver Tambo first spoke at the UN in October 1960 and for the next 30 years lobbied, and worked closely with the UN Special Committee Against Apartheid. The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) was an influential grouping of countries that were neutral in the Cold War. Led by Tambo, the ANC won support from NAM leaders and from the Commonwealth for action to isolate apartheid South Africa.
‘We shall attack the apartheid enemy of all humankind on all fronts and from all corners of the globe’

OLIVER TAMBO AT THE ‘PEOPLES OF THE WORLD FOR A DEMOCRATIC SOUTH AFRICA’ CONFERENCE, TANZANIA, DECEMBER 1987

The ANC initiated and took part in international conferences and liaison groups to co-ordinate global action against apartheid. From the ‘Sanctions against South Africa’ conference held in London in 1964 to the ‘Peoples of the World for a Democratic South Africa’ conference in Arusha, Tanzania in 1987, Oliver Tambo was a key participant. At a ground-breaking meeting in Harare, Zimbabwe on ‘Children, Repression and the Law in South Africa’ in September 1987, he met children and young people who had been detained and tortured by the apartheid regime.

above: Tambo was the key speaker at a conference on ‘Children, Repression and the Law in South Africa’ held in Harare, Zimbabwe, in September 1987. Children and young people from inside South Africa crossed the border into Zimbabwe to tell lawyers, teachers and social workers from 45 countries about their experiences.

above: Poster for the International Committee against Apartheid, Racism and Colonialism in Southern Africa (ICSA), set up by Southern African liberation movements after the Lisbon World Conference in 1977. right: Tambo with Ruth Mompati, British MEP Barbara Castle, Ernest Giline, Leader of the Socialist Group in the European Parliament, and Mike Terry, Executive Secretary of the AAM, in the early 1980s. With the encouragement of the ANC, the Liaison Group of the Anti-Apartheid Movements of the European Community was later set up to lobby the EEC to impose sanctions against South Africa.
‘When the moment for negotiations arrives, it must find us ready’
OLIVER TAMBO

As resistance intensified inside South Africa in the mid-1980s, opposition to apartheid spread in the outside world. Even Western governments saw that apartheid was not viable, but they feared revolution and a government led by the ANC. Oliver Tambo welcomed all opportunities for talks, but considered that the key question was how to establish conditions for negotiations which avoided a sell-out and would lead to majority rule. He initiated the process which produced the Harare Declaration, setting out preconditions for talks, and travelled round Africa and the world to ensure that the Declaration was adopted by the OAU and UN.

Tambo suffered a severe stroke on 8 August 1989, but he had laid the foundations for the agreement that led to South African’s first democratic election and the inauguration of Nelson Mandela as President in 1994.
Soon after Oliver Tambo arrived in London in 1960 he was joined by his wife Adelaide and his two children, Thembi and Dali. A third child, Tselane, was born in 1962. They set up home in north London, first in Highgate and later in Muswell Hill in the London Borough of Haringey. Over the next 30 years, Tambo enjoyed very little family life. While Adelaide worked as a nurse in London, he was based first in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and then in Lusaka, Zambia, travelling the world for the ANC. In 1990, after over 30 years of exile, he went home with his family to South Africa.