The first calls for an international boycott of apartheid South Africa were made as early as 1958; in Britain, the Anti-Apartheid Movement launched in 1959 saw it as a major strategy. At the intergovernmental level, South Africa's system of apartheid was widely condemned, especially after the 1960 Sharpeville massacre. In 1961 South Africa was thrown out of the Commonwealth (then called the British Commonwealth), and in 1962 the UN set up a Special Committee Against Apartheid, the next year agreeing to a 'voluntary' arms embargo. Yet apartheid did not finally end until the 1990s.

There were three main areas for international sanctions against South Africa: economic sanctions, including trade and investment; a cultural boycott; and a sports boycott. The cultural and sports boycotts had primarily a psychological impact on South Africa. A sports-mad country, South Africa's exclusion from the Olympics from 1964 onwards, and most importantly from international rugby and cricket from 1970 onwards, was brought about by a combination of pressure from other African states and demonstrations, including disrupting tennis and rugby matches.

The impact of economic sanctions remains a matter of debate, especially because two powerful states (UK and the USA) repeatedly circumvented the declarations of intergovernmental organisations such as the UN or the Commonwealth. However, there were waves of movements for 'people's sanctions'—beginning probably with the revulsion at the Sharpeville massacre—when even the British Labour Party leadership supported the moral gesture of refusing to buy South African fruit.

My own involvement began later. As a student in 1969, I was one of those who wanted to transfer the momentum gained from the sporting boycott into an economic boycott. Our students' union had already passed resolutions against the university buying apartheid fruit. Then we took up a campaign against Barclays Bank, the most popular bank for British students at that time and, as it happened, the bank used by my university. Our first success was in dissuading new students from opening their first-ever bank accounts with Barclays and persuading others to change banks. Our second was in holding a rent strike, refusing to pay rent for student rooms into an account with Barclays Bank. Eventually the university authorities conceded, triggering the resignation of prominent members of the University's ruling council. Throughout the country, trade union branches, clubs, associations, and churches debated changing banks. I got into trouble with both the Quakers and the Peace Pledge Union for writing in Peace News in 1972 that they had no legitimacy in talking about nonviolence in South Africa unless they took the small step of moving their bank accounts. Local authorities decided to do so too. In 1986—16 years after the Boycott Barclays campaign began—the bank sold its South African subsidiaries. Finally, too, the Cooperative supermarket chain decided not to stock South African products.

This type of boycott was very much influenced by waves of concern about apartheid. One such wave was after the Soweto killings of 1976 and the murder in custody of Steve Biko in 1977; another was in the 1980s with the emergence inside South Africa of the United Democratic Front and spokespeople such as Desmond Tutu. All the while, in the background, were local anti-apartheid activists, putting resolutions to their trade union branches and their churches, recognising that both trade unions and churches were large corporate investors capable of exerting pressure on companies.

In Britain, the anti-apartheid boycott was a 'long march', usually rather unspectacular. Having succeeded in persuading municipal councils to do something, we then had to witness Margaret Thatcher's government take away their power to make decisions on such political grounds. Nevertheless, we kept the issue of Britain's connections with apartheid in people's minds.

The story was different in other countries. In the 1970s we Brits looked enviously at the success of the Dutch boycott of coffee from Angola, a Portuguese colony in close alliance with South Africa. In the 1980s, workers at one of Ireland's main supermarket chains—Dunne's—were locked out in a four-year dispute over selling apartheid goods, a conflict only resolved when the Irish government made South African products illegal.

The USA was a particularly important terrain of struggle. The people's sanctions' movement had three main foci: colleges and campuses; banks; and municipal and state corporations. Their achievements were considerable. In 1985, after a 19-year campaign, the main bank involved with South Africa—Chase Manhattan—announced that it would not renew its loans to South African projects. By 1991, 28 states, 24 counties, 92 cities, and the Virgin Islands had adopted legislation or policies imposing some form of sanctions on South Africa. By the end of 1987 more than 200 U.S. companies had formally withdrawn from South Africa, though many of them found other ways to carry on their business. (For instance, General Motors licensed local production, while IBM computers had a South African distributor.) What was most important about these campaigns, however, was the public education carried out through them and the sense of solidarity engendered with the anti-apartheid movement inside South Africa.

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