

# ANC and its alliance with the SACP

## EYE-OPENING INSIGHTS INTO WHAT HAPPENED IN EXILE

Comrades against apartheid. The ANC and the Communist Party in exile, by Stephen Ellis and Tsepo and Sechaba (London. James Currey, 1992).

**I**N THE years after Rivonia, a new study of the ANC and the Communist Party in exile tell us,\* few opponents of the apartheid system in South Africa 'at first had the heart to pick up the pieces and start building again. All that was left of the national organization, it seemed, was a few sad exiles out of touch with home.'

This study of the years between then and now, of interaction between the ANC, SACP and their joint fiefdom, Umkhonto we Sizwe, will make eye-opening reading for CP watchers everywhere.

Here at last begins the 'return of history' which *perestroika* brought to the mother-ship, the then Soviet Union, in the late 1980s. Or almost as in Gorbachev's Soviet Union: for though one of the authors writes from inside, as an active ANC and CP member (the other is an academic who for six years edited *Africa Confidential*), he writes pseudonymously. And almost 'begins', since in 1989 delegates to the 7th South African Communist Party Congress in Cuba were told of the deaths of two long-missing early members, the Richter brothers by Stalin's firing squad in 1938 and of Lazar Bach in a labour camp in 1941.

This study is the first to come from one of their own, who 'remains faithful to the ideals of the African National Congress (and) is motivated by a sincere belief that it is important that the South African public should know the broad outlines of what happened in exile, for



**CHRIS HANI:** 'fearless fighter with a mighty reputation'



**RUTH FIRST;** at odds with the party

the sake of their country's political future.'

Here are the factions, rivalries, manoeuvrings and schemings of the men and women who picked up the pieces, and the outline of the edifice they built in exile — bearing in mind that CP history is only beginning to return and that those men and women may become 'more inclined to speak of the past as times goes by.'

And what men and women they were. Slovo 'a model of what a South African communist is expected to be. Brave and possessed of the rigorous intellect of a lawyer, he has been utterly dedicated to Party work since his youth'. Hani 'fearless fighter and rising star of the CP (with a mighty reputation within the army and the Party'. Thabo Mbeki 'a brilliant theoretician, charming and highly articulate... his loyalty unquestionable.' Even those of the past 'Uncle J.B.' Marks and the far-sighted Kotane. Of women, though, we meet only Ruth First, already at odds with the Party when a South African bomb ended her fruitful life, and Jenny Schreiner, whose effective Western Cape unit is applauded but their capture rather cryptically described.

They soldiered on, past Nkomati, Hwange, the 'Gang of Eight', the 1984 mutiny, and the December 1988 New York accords ('a bitter pill indeed') until, to everyone's surprise, they all came home.

But what was that about 'a few sad exiles'? By the early 1960s, not content with its home from home in eastern Europe and the then Soviet Union, the SACP had taken over, with breathtaking skill and speed, the two main British

institutions concerned with the struggle in South Africa, the AntiApartheid Movement and the International Defence and Aid Fund.

They even had their own publisher in Ronald Segal, who had flown out of South Africa with Tambo in 1960 and later made over almost all his Penguin African Library series to CP authors and their friends.

Liberal exiles, including those who had followed the same logic as the founders of Umkhonto, albeit a little earlier, found small welcome, and even smaller room to manoeuvre in the European exile world.

And not Liberals alone. When Dennis Brutus, from Robben Island, arrived at London airport he was met by a carload of Coloured People's Congress members and others, to be greeted (one said later) with: 'Dennis, the Stalinists are in power!' The reference was not, of course, to Messrs Wilson, Callaghan et al.

The authors are remiss in passing over the success of the CP in selling the ANC



**THABO MBEKI:** 'brilliant theoretician, charming and highly articulate'

abroad, and trading in the myth of its mass membership a decade before the events of 1976 and 1984-5 made it a reality, despite its own failure to organize inside South Africa (as is recorded by the authors).

What we do learn from them is a story of three decades of activity round the central, military pillar of their campaign in exile, the CP two-stage takeover of the ANC, conducted, in total secrecy and with all the ruthlessness and duplicity demanded by the task of taking control of a nationalist organization whose ethos, and even ethnic composition, was repugnant, in part to its own.



The ANC rank-and-file seem to have been little affected by the years before exile when, through the popular-frontism of the Congress Alliance, the communist tail had wagged the ANC dog. Nor do the authors seem aware of this, and even endorse the validity of Kliptown.

The hardest fight was, indeed, to get their white, coloured and Indian members, first, at Morogoro in 1978, into the ANC itself, and secondly, at Kabwe in 1985, into the National Executive Committee. It is one of the ironies of politics that among those who voted against the latter were Johnny Makatini and M.B. Yengwa, both sadly no longer alive, and both, in pre-exile days, close to the Liberals, then the pioneers of non-racialism when the Congress Alliance both practised and preached multi-racialism. The authors seem to suggest that it was as Zulus that they opposed the elimination of racial barriers to NEC membership.

Models some may have been of what South African communists were expected to be, yet it was always in those parts of the ANC/Umkhonto of which they had control that the greatest wrongs were done, such as in Mbokodo (the Security set-up), and Military Intelligence.

In the command structure of Umkhonto, crucial to its effectiveness, Party membership could count for more than ability: a case study is that of Steve Tshwete's appointment, over the heads of well-qualified veterans, as army Political Commissar (third in the Umkhonto hierarchy). Hani, Chief of Staff under the army commander Joe Modise, a non-communist, 'was able to pull off this coup only because of the influence of the Party inside the ANC.'

As model South African communists they believed (as they doubtless still do) in 'democratic centralism' which gagged criticism and dissent, fossilizing the movement in policies that were often obsolete and unworkable.

The military struggle, the authors demonstrate convincingly, should long since have given way to political action. The ANC's strongest suit, its political appeal, was sacrificed to its weakest, its military power, whereas P.W. Botha was weaker politically and stronger militarily.

Similarly the rural peasantry might have provided a far better habitat for ANC guerrillas (using Mao's well-worn analogy of the fish and the sea) than the urban proletariat. CP dogma based on ancient decisions dictated otherwise and could not be changed, only justified by



JENNY SCHREINER; her effective unit applauded

theory and analysis.

So the Communists took over the leadership of the ANC.

All the dead theories and counter-productive practices of their creed came with them.

The authors do not spare us the squalor and futility of the Umkhonto camps in Angola, the mutiny and its aftermath (though the popular rehabilitation of seven of the Committee of Ten who led the mutineers is a bright spot in a somewhat dismal chronicle), the series of terrible failures of nearly all the cross-border regional councils which were the ANC's response to the township risings

of 1984-5, the 'modest achievement', as the authors euphemistically call it, of Umkhonto, for all those lives lost or blighted.

They point to the new post-Cold War and post-*perestroika* world, where the very bases of communism and socialism are held in doubt and leave us wondering what path South Africa's communists will follow if they are to put to their country's use their talents and residual idealism.

Perhaps, as an epigraph, an anecdote from Sheverdnadze's memoirs may be appropriate (quoted in *The New York Review of Books*, 19 December 1991). He and Gorbachev, on a Black Sea holiday in the early 1980s, 'confided in each other their disgust for the state of the Kremlin leadership and the country as a whole.'

"Everything's rotten," Sheverdnadze said to Gorbachev as they walked along the beach at Pitsunda. "It has to be changed."

"We cannot live this way any longer," Gorbachev replied." Nor do they, in what was once the mothership. And nor should those dedicated ideologues of the South African Communist Party, as they are revealed to us in this illuminating book. ●

— RANDOLPH VIGNE

## How the violence affects the youth in the townships

**Faces in the Revolution: The Psychological Effects of Violence on Township Youth in South Africa** by Gill Straker with Fatima Moosa, Rise Becker and Madiyoyo Nkwale. Published by David Philip, Capetown.

**A**T LAST we have a book that looks past the statistics and sensation of township violence and attempts to make sense of the material conditions that have caused it and still maintain it.

Although Professor Straker uses a small group of subjects from Leandra, the information and experiences can be extrapolated to hold true for any area in South Africa wracked by civil war. It is a book that should be read by anyone interested in solving the human problems assailing the country today.

The work is scholarly and professional, but entirely accessible to the lay person. It is an absorbing look at the

"individual and psychological" aspects of the violence, and its effect on the people who are suffering through it. She contextualises the lives of victims and perpetrators so that the reader can come to an understanding of the complex forces which have caused the present situation and work through the changes that these high levels of violence have wrought in the psyches of the youth.

Straker was one of a group of psychologists called in to counsel refugees from the violence and the police who had fled from Leandra and sought safety at a church community centre. Finding that she and her colleagues were often handicapped by their "middle-class" techniques which were inappropriate for this situation she set out to analyse and

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