

BENEATH THE BOULDER

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Stephen Ellis and Tsepo Sechaba, *Comrades Against Apartheid: The ANC and the South African Communist Party in Exile*, James Currey, 1992.

A Culture of Secrecy

The 'new South Africa' emerging from the reforms of President FW de Klerk and the constitutional negotiations – suspended in mid-year in favour of a renewal of contestation – continues to be shaped on both sides by a culture of secrecy.

The banning of the Communist Party in 1950, then of the African National Congress and the Pan Africanist Congress in 1960, followed by attempts to overthrow the regime by violence beginning in 1961, set in motion this cultivation of secrecy both by the state and its major antagonists. At the time of the release of Nelson Mandela in February 1990, the state and the ANC in exile were governed in the last resort by security organisations accountable to no public representative body. On neither side was there any deeply grounded process of democratic accountability.

The hidden reefs of the real government of South Africa during the 1980s have come to light over the past two years. In press reports in journals such as the *Weekly Mail* and the *New Nation* in South Africa, and the *Independent* and the *Guardian* in Britain, the outline has taken shape of a monstrous military camarilla regulating the whole society. Its means have ranged from indiscriminate massacres of train passengers to selective assassination of individuals; manipulation of the mass media; training, funding and arming of hit-squads; the running of political parties; and promotion (against its opponents) of revelations of human rights abuses.

At the apex of this secret state, whose thinking embraced a 'total strategy' of political, social and military objectives, was the Directorate of Military Intelligence, the real government of South Africa during the 1980s and a vast sado-bureaucratic complex of many parts. At the height of its influence, the DMI ran the State Security Council whose decisions determined subsequent sessions of the Cabinet; entered into secret arrangements with US and British intelligence under the Reagan and Thatcher administrations; controlled the state's official death squad, the Civil Cooperation Bureau; laid waste to neighbouring Mozambique through the terror organisation Renamo, which it inherited from the former Rhodesian Central Intelligence Organisation; directed paramilitary formations serving to destabilise other neighbouring states such as Zambia, Zimbabwe, Lesotho and even the Seychelle islands; supervised war in Angola (one of the main theatres in the cold war globally) on behalf of the US, against Cuban troops and

Soviet advisers; controlled hit-squads from the Zulu nationalist organisation, Inkatha; and comprehensively infiltrated the ANC in exile.

The scope of its infiltration of the ANC emerges from a new book written by Stephen Ellis, director of the African Studies Centre at the University of Leiden, and Tsepo Sechaba, the pseudonym of a current member of the ANC and the SACP. Their book, *Comrades Against Apartheid: The ANC and the South African Communist Party in Exile*, for the first time makes available the beginnings of a reliable history of the ANC in exile.

After acquiring a doctorate at Oxford, Ellis (who is British) was editor of the London-based newsheet *Africa Confidential* from 1986 to 1991. During this time he became acquainted with Sechaba, who provided him with first-hand information about the real life of the ANC in exile. It was the kind of information that otherwise became available only to the world's intelligence agencies. During Ellis's tenure *Africa Confidential* became the most informed and unprejudiced source of public information about major developments within the ANC, especially involving human rights abuses.

By far the most important of the events concerning South Africa reported in *Africa Confidential* — some years after it had taken place — was the mutiny in Angola in 1984 of as many as 90 per cent of the ANC's trained troops, most of them from the generation of the 1976 school students' revolt. Angola was at this time the only country in which the ANC was involved in combat in any strength, and the main base of its army, Umkhonto we Sizwe. Acquiring information was exceptionally difficult. The ANC, the SACP and the PAC had been smashed within South Africa in the early 1960s by means of torture, indefinite detention and police infiltration. Out of this experience of defeat, and of the ruthlessness of the state, there developed a cult of secrecy in the ANC, supervised by a security department modelled largely on the KGB and the Stasi. Within the ANC this secret police force acquired the grim nickname Mbokodo, 'the boulder that crushes'. Members of the ANC who felt the harsh breath of the security department estimate that about 75 per cent of what was published in *Africa Confidential* about such matters was accurate: a very high rate, given the difficulties of reportage.

The main impetus in the formation and activity of the security department is located by Ellis and Sechaba in the need to secure the ANC's guerrilla forays into South Africa and to combat infiltration and assassination abroad. A further element, however, was the central role inside the ANC abroad of its ally, the SACP, which had a substantial secret membership within the ANC, especially in Umkhonto and still more so in the security department. Ellis and Sechaba provide detailed information on how the SACP through its secret membership was able to control important military committees, as well as the most important general conference of the ANC before its unbanning (at Kabwe, in Zambia, in 1985). The ANC in exile was subject to a strenuous attempt to enforce a very narrow ideological orthodoxy. In this, Mbokodo played a sinister part. Through its manipulation of secrecy, the hard work and dedication of its members, and its role as conduit for

Soviet arms, funds and training, the SACP became the backbone of the ANC in exile. Along with this came its role in supervising a string of prisons across the sub-continent, in Mozambique, Zambia, Tanzania, Angola and Uganda: a parallel network to the prison system of the South African state.

Fear prevented any mention of the repressions of Mbokodo to outsiders, as well as a natural reluctance to reveal anything that could aid the South African state. A central demand of the mutiny in 1984, as related by Ellis and Sechaba, was for the suspension and investigation of the security department, and in particular for an inquiry into the operation of its most dreaded prison, Quatro, in northern Angola. The mutineers also demanded convening of a democratic conference of the whole ANC (the last such conference had been held 15 years previously) and their transfer to fight in South Africa instead of in Angola.

The Insecurity of Security

Ellis and Sechaba argue that having adopted the methods and mentality of their opponents, the Securocrats of the ANC in their own way helped to undermine the military campaign. Loyal and able members who could think for themselves were branded as 'enemy agents', and imprisoned, killed or barred from responsible posts. There was another result too. The climate of rigid orthodoxy, in which separation of public and private thoughts became the rule, was an ideal culture for the rise to senior positions of real South African government agents, especially in Mbokodo itself. So too was the presence within Mbokodo structures during the 1980s of a sub-continental criminal network, engaged in the smuggling of drugs and gems from Angola through Zambia into southern Africa and the reverse flow of traffic in stolen cars 'liberated' in South Africa itself. (Expensive German models were especially favoured, the so-called 'German take-aways').

Sechaba and Ellis give details of the careers of several individuals believed to have been real South African state moles within the ANC. They do not, however, draw together a number of threads in their book to show that this is a legacy which has now returned to South Africa, with the end of exile. They report the violent death of Zakithi Dlamini (a member of the security department) in Zambia in 1989, and say that this was suspected to have been an 'inside job to silence him'. They state that Dlamini's own investigations at the time of his death were believed to have pointed 'towards the higher echelons'. (p 192)

The death of Dlamini, however, was one of a number of violent deaths in Zambia on the eve of Mandela's release, frequently involving members of the security department. These followed the arrest and debriefing of a former senior Umkhonto commander known as 'Comrade Cyril', who was discovered by ANC security to have been a career South African policeman. As well as this supposed real 'enemy agent', a number of Mbokodo interrogators responsible for Cyril's debriefing were then murdered in Zambia, one after the other, frequently by use of a poison

employed previously by the former Rhodesian security forces and the DMI. Oliver Tambo, the ANC president in exile, is believed to have ordered a halt to the investigation into Cyril's allegations, as the only way to stop the killings. In the minds of ANC members in exile, the purpose of the killings was to prevent leakage of information about highly placed state agents, probably senior figures in Mbokodo itself.¹

This chain of deaths, on the eve of the unbanning of the ANC, raises the possibility that among the returned heroes of the exile might be at least one senior official who served as a real agent for South African military intelligence. The spectre of the DMI sits over the shoulders of both sides at the conference table.

The authors of *Comrades Against Apartheid* make plain that theirs is a provisional account, given the paucity of accessible sources for their subject. The book provides a wealth of detail on the inner life of the ANC and the SACP in exile, greatly more than was previously available. Chapters on the early history of both organisations do not purport to give anything but a general historical overview, and there is scope for disagreement of interpretation. The section dealing with the mutiny in Umkhonto and the character of the ANC prison system rests heavily on the article by participants in the mutiny appearing in *Searchlight South Africa* No 5.

The many factual errors in the earlier section of the book indicate that the authors have not been rigorous in their investigations of the earlier period of the Communist Party's existence. How far this applies to the more recent period is uncertain. Without having party documents this cannot yet be ascertained. Nonetheless there is more than sufficient material in the book to keep the reader's attention, and to allow for an appraisal of what South Africa might look like if it ever fell into the hands of an unrestrained ANC, or ANC-SACP alliance.

As such the book helps erode an enduring myth, and permits access to important real knowledge. For those interested in the history of the ANC and SACP in exile, it makes essential reading.

Note

1. A more detailed account of the climate of tension in Lusaka, the ANC headquarters in exile on the eve of the unbanning of the ANC, can be found in this issue of *Searchlight South Africa* in 'A Can of Worms in Lusaka: The Imprisonment of Hubert Siphso Mbeje'.