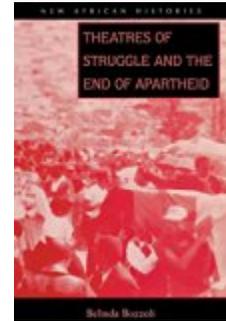


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Belinda Bozzoli. *Theatres of Struggle and the End of Apartheid*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004. 208 pp. \$28.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8214-1599-3; (paper), ISBN 978-0-7486-1941-2.

Reviewed by Gary Baines (Department of History, Rhodes University)
Published on H-SAfrica (September, 2005)



An Emblematic Urban Struggle

Belinda Bozzoli's new book (under the imprint of the University of the Witwatersrand Press) was launched at the "Townships Now" colloquium hosted by WISER in June 2004. On that occasion the work was hailed as a major contribution to South African historiography. Since then it has won some recognition amongst the country's publishing fraternity for its literary qualities. It was nominated for the Alan Paton award for nonfiction in the competition sponsored by the *Sunday Times*. This is a well-deserved accolade for a work that is not only well written and readable, it is also in many ways at the cutting edge of interdisciplinary scholarship in South Africa. It cements Bozzoli's reputation as one of the country's leading exponents of historical sociology (or should that be historical "sociography"?), for it is the mature work of an accomplished scholar.

The title of Bozzoli's book offers few clues as to its content. The site of the "theatre of struggle" of the book's title was the freehold township of Alexandra, which is situated in close proximity to some of Johannesburg's wealthy northeastern suburbs. That Alex (as it is usually called) survived the fate of Sophiatown, the more celebrated township that was destroyed in the mid-1950s, is remarkable in itself. That it became a space in which one of the most violent confrontations between (certain) residents and the security forces of the apartheid regime during the mid-1980s is no less remarkable. The so-called Six Day War of 1986 occurred at the height of repression during which the government of P. W. Botha declared a state of emergency: this accorded members of the security forces license to deal with "unrest" without having

to account for their actions whatsoever.

Alexandra was turned into a war zone. While the security forces occupied the local stadium, which became the nerve center of its public and clandestine operations to clamp down on "insurrection," the terrain of the township was temporarily rendered "ungovernable." A power vacuum was created when the police abdicated their responsibility for the maintenance of law and order. Indeed, they inflamed the situation further when vigilantes were let loose to wreak havoc in the township and attacked activists—destroying their homes and other symbolic structures such as the people's courts. The regime eventually restored control over the contested space of the township through military occupation and a reassertion of the police presence. Bozzoli contends that "it is at the interface between its typicality and its exceptionalism" that her case study "is at its most revealing of general patterns" (p. 2). Later she states that the "story of this particular uprising stands on its own as emblematic of the challenges to authority which the apartheid state experienced in the 1980s" (p. 251). Whether typical or not, the Alexandra rebellion proved to be a significant and symbolic urban struggle which presaged the end of apartheid.

The "Six-Day War" is contextualized in terms of the changing role of the state in township administration rather than in the memories of traditions of resistance held by Alexandran residents. Bozzoli holds that the "rupturing of space and time" amounted to a break with the past and the emergence of new styles of collective ac-

tion in 1986. These included the eruption of a new kind of violence; the concomitant emergence of the crowd; the articulation of new visions of organization; and the emergence of public space as a crucial part of mobilization and communication. Consequently, new forms of collective action and violence were added to the repertoire of resistance (p. 67). In short, Bozzoli emphasizes discontinuity and asserts that the mobilization of residents in 1986 was unprecedented and without precursors (p. 88). The body of this study certainly makes a strong case in support of this argument. But I was struck by the fact that the “ANC sanctioned memory” presented before the Truth and Reconciliation (TRC) by certain select residents articulated a rather different understanding of the Alexandra rebellion. This version is dubbed “the nationalist myth of Alexandra” and is adroitly summarized by Bozzoli (p. 257). As with all such myths, it does not amount to a falsification of reality but is an imagined version that articulates certain cherished beliefs and values about the past. And it stresses continuities between that perceived past and the present. So, unlike Bozzoli’s historically informed account of the rebellion, the myth stresses that as with the bus boycotts and the squatter movements of the 1940s and 1950s, the rebellion of the 1980s was guided by the ANC. The ANC, for its part, represents the nation and appropriates the Alexandra rebellion as its own. In this fashion, the story of oppression and resistance in the township is embedded in the narrative of African nationalism.

In relating the (hi)story, Bozzoli emphasizes the spectacular theatricality of the uprising as compared to the harsh and mundane reality of everyday life for Alexandra residents under apartheid. She employs theories of “dramaturgy” which “suggest that [social] movements” present their claims to power, inspire their followers to believe and to act “through scripting, staging, performing and interpreting their definitions of power as a counter to the dominant ones” (p. 11). Treating the theater as both an extended metaphor and heuristic device, Bozzoli proceeds to explore how the actors performed, whose scripts were followed, and who the audiences were. She is able to demonstrate that the rebels used the spaces available to them as social and political theaters to act out their claims to power and advance their cause. She deftly sketches the involvement of other Alexandra residents (as “extras”?) in the drama. She holds that the township public was captivated by the theatrical imagery (p. 177). And she details the roles of the authorities and security forces (in “supporting roles”?) in the historical drama. All in all, the author manages to articulate

and sustain a coherent analysis of the Alexandra rebellion in terms of an unfolding historical drama. However, Bozzoli’s metaphor is rather stretched and almost breaks down at the point of reception. A wider audience was obviously not able to gain direct access to the performance (in the same way that the historian does not have unmediated access to the past). So how was it represented? Reports of the “Six Day War” in the local media were screened, since the apartheid regime was able to censor and control the dissemination of news. And, the mainstream media and the public broadcaster succeeded in demonizing the rebels and portraying the rebellion as being hijacked by criminal elements. Even the international media did not have unimpeded access to the players involved in the drama and so their reporting was rather incomplete and one-sided. Without saturation media coverage of the events, the spectacle of theatricality could not be conveyed sympathetically to the outside world. So, for the rebels, Alexandra did not actually become a stage on which their script was writ large.

Who were these rebels? Bozzoli identifies them as the “comrades,” who were mainly poorly educated and unemployed youths, who had become alienated from adults whom they regarded as “sell-outs” for tolerating a repressive system of control which deprived them of citizenship in their own country. The author is well aware that they were not a homogeneous group despite the propensity of commentators to employ the collective noun “the youth” to define them. The cohort that made up the ranks of the “comrades” acted independently of the civic organizations and refused to submit themselves to the discipline of the structures of the liberation movement and its surrogates and allies. It was their actions, including the mob mentality induced by the necklacing of “collaborators” and the imposition of street justice in the people’s courts, that won them notoriety. When their ranks were infiltrated by *tsotsis* (gangsters) and their attempts to assert social control became a cover for criminal activities, they came to be called “*comtsotsis*.” Bozzoli concedes that gang influence upon the rebellion has not been explored (p. 287 n. 7). While this might be a lacuna in her otherwise multilayered treatment of the tensions within the community, Bozzoli still provides a nuanced analysis of the political allegiances of the main groupings in Alexandra. The “comrades” belonged to organizations such as the Alexandra Youth Congress (AYCO). She terms their ideology idealist, for it posited a utopian vision of the future where “the people” would be able to govern themselves. She juxtaposes this with the realist approach of the adult-based organizations, such as the Alexandra

Civic Association (ACA), which articulated a belief in incremental change. Whereas the adult organizations established people's courts to mediate disputes in the community, the "comrades" meted out arbitrary street justice or allowed their *sjambok* (literally "whip") courts to become a platform for personal retribution. From my summation, it might be supposed that Bozzoli overstates the generational cleavages at the expense of class and other differences. But she dismisses any stark binarism with this qualification:

"Each of the two generations had experienced different kinds of identity formation; each had recourse to distinct sets of intellectuals, ideas, popular support and resources; and each was to attempt to implement its own plans for the revolutionary metamorphosis of Alexandra, sometimes in opposition to the other and sometimes alongside or even in co-operation with it" (p. 123).

In other words, there was considerable fluidity in the situation at the time. And while certain community leaders sought to distance themselves from the "excesses" of the "comrades," their denunciations were never too forthright for fear of offending the very people who were driving the struggle against the forces of oppression. This only became the case retrospectively.

In explaining how the "comrades" were sequestered from the story of the Alexandra rebellion, Bozzoli traces the impact of the events upon popular consciousness and memory. The rebellion remained in the spotlight for some time after 1986 on account of the highly publicized Mayekiso treason trial, at which Bozzoli herself gave evidence as an "expert" witness (and from which the author obtained extensive documentation which enabled her to reconstruct the narrative that provides the framework for her book). Along with other sociologists, she portrayed

the rebellion as a form of collective action. The so-called sociological defence (p. 256) convinced the court that the uprising was spontaneous and that responsible community leaders had not conspired with the "comrades" in order to overthrow the state. The "comrades" were effectively prosecuted in a separate but concurrent low-profile case and so became scapegoats for the violence perpetrated in the name of the liberation struggle. Subsequently, during the Truth and Reconciliation (TRC) hearings devoted to the events in Alexandra in the 1980s, the witnesses told their stories in the framework provided by former community and current ANC leaders. This framework was predicated upon the elision of the community and the nation. The "comrades" were conspicuous by their absence at the TRC. They were marginalized and their counter-memories and dissenting voices were sidelined.

Although Bozzoli no doubt wishes to prevent her book from perpetuating and reifying the narrative constructed by the defense team at the Mayekiso treason trial and the TRC myth of Alexandra, she is unlikely to be able to do so. This was brought home to me at the launch of her book in what proved to be a telling irony. Bozzoli shared the platform with some of those she had helped defend in the treason trial and who have since come to be regarded as heroes of the Alexandra rebellion precisely because their version of the past prevails in collective memory. However, the erstwhile "comrades" were once again conspicuous by their absence. Thus, notwithstanding Bozzoli's commendable attempt at self-reflexive narration, the story of the Alexandra rebellion constructed by political and cultural brokers in post-apartheid South Africa has come to conform to the master nationalist narrative of the liberation struggle. The past has been mythologized while history's claim to certainty hemorrhages.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-safrica>

Citation: Gary Baines. Review of Bozzoli, Belinda, *Theatres of Struggle and the End of Apartheid*. H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews. September, 2005.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10899>

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.