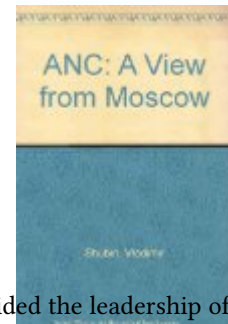


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Vladimir Shubin. *ANC: A View from Moscow*. Bellville, South Africa: Mayibuye Books, 1999. 434 pp. R120.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-86808-439-5.

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South Africa has just emerged from a protracted bitter conflict against racist tyranny. In that struggle to establish a democratic society, the oppressor attempted, with all means, to deny the oppressed voice by the marginalisation of the history of the resistance movement. The liberated country now has imposed its challenges on historians on how the complex, bitter conflict of the past is to be understood and represented in contemporary South Africa. Vladimir Shubin, a Russian historian, Deputy Director of the African Institute, Russian Academy of Sciences, has contributed greatly to the ongoing debates about South African history and in particular the history of the African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Communist Party (SACP) in exile. What follows is an analysis of his refreshing account of their years in exile.

At the end of 1995, I took part in a conference organised by the University of the Western Cape-based Mayibuye ('Let it return') Centre on the beginning of armed struggle in South Africa. Shubin also presented a paper but then it did not occur to me that the conference was part of a larger project of book writing.

The book is divided into three periods of resistance in South Africa and exile: part one, 1960-1974, 'Hard times'; part two, 1974-1985, 'The changing balance of power'; and part three, 1985-1991, 'The road to power'. Part one shows how the struggle for the decolonisation of Africa in the early 1960s evaded the 'deep' South where the state machinery became increasingly repressive. During the same period the Sharpeville massacre, the banning of organisations and the imprisonment and exiling of scores of people took place. Years of peaceful resistance were overtaken by events and this led to the consideration of new tactics such as underground activities and armed

struggle, which appear to have divided the leadership of the liberation movement. The formation of Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) as a separate organisation but politically under the ANC created a number of logistical problems for many activists. These tensions are conspicuous in the text. As many of the activities were taking place in the 'underground', sources are difficult to find. Hence the author resorts to oral interviews, though one has to be aware of the contradictory representations as shown in the text. The periodisation and the category 'hard times' in the first part of the book are good. The text is written in blood, bannings, imprisonment, arrest of senior ANC and SACP followers at Rivonia, all signalling the smashing of resistance structures by the state.

The leadership of the liberation movement shifted to Oliver Tambo and Yusuf Dadoo, who left South Africa in the early 1960s. Their decision to leave was due to fear and the need to promote the sanctions campaign. They hoped to soon see a liberated country, but ended up living in exile for almost three decades. Exiles were scattered in different parts of Europe and rebuilding the liberation movement appears to have been very difficult because of what Shubin calls the 'disease of exile'. By the end of the decade, a number of MK cadres who left South Africa in the early 1960s for military training were keen to return home after having been confined to their bases. As the region was still in the hands of colonial forces hostile to the liberation movements, an alliance was created with the Zimbabwean People's Union (ZAPU), with the intention to liberate first Zimbabwe and then South Africa. Their first action was the Wankie campaign which, whilst it did not achieve its objective, nevertheless allowed cadres from both groups to gain experience of military combat. Casualties were reported in the campaign and some of those who survived were arrested in Zimbabwe and

Botswana.

Debates that took place at the 1969 ANC Morogoro conference emerged from the failure of military incursions into South Africa and the challenges facing the rank and file in exile about the direction of the liberation struggle. The conference dealt with a number of issues and in particular the inclusion of revolutionaries from other racial groups into the ANC. It was also at this conference that MK cadres articulated their critique of the ANC leadership. This was represented in the "Chris" Hani Memorandum. The leadership also came under fire because of the frustrations of exile – the previous conference held in exile had been in Lobatse in 1962 and it is clear that grievances had accumulated.

The collapse of Portuguese rule in the colonies of Mozambique and Angola brought the liberation movement closer to South African borders. Exiles on their own found it difficult to penetrate South Africa until the internal atmosphere changed as a result of the 1970s Durban workers' strikes. This was the beginning of larger things to happen and by 1976 another major historical landmark happened when students from Soweto high schools resisted the imposition of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction. The state met peaceful demonstrations with brute force, killing hundreds of students. Although the ANC and the SACP were not directly involved in the Soweto uprisings, the angry militant youth, when they subsequently left South Africa, found these organisations better organised than the PAC, hence the flooding of MK ranks by the Soweto 'generation'. In 1983, another political landmark took place with the formation of the United Democratic Front. This accelerated the changing balance of power in South Africa in favour of the liberation movement. The Front shared the same ideology with the ANC and used the same symbols such as flags, colours, songs, etc. Despite all these advances, Joe Slovo critically noted that MK had not fired a shot on South African soil since the sabotage campaign of 1961.

The dynamics within Southern African states had some impact on the liberation struggle in South Africa. In 1984, the Mozambican government signed the Nkomati Accord with the South African government in which the two countries attempted to promote good 'neighbourliness'. However, central to the accord was the fact that the South African government was using the Mozambicans to expel the ANC from the region. Even if the Mozambican government expected financial aid from South Africa, they were being used in South Africa's destabilisation efforts. This strategy was resorted to be-

cause of the 'changing balance of power' in the region as compared to a decade earlier, in the sense that the liberation movement was not in a position to infiltrate the deep South.

A second setback that confronted the liberation movement was the issue of morale in the camps, particularly in Angola, whereby the security department of the ANC used heavy-handed tactics in dealing with expressions of dissent. Grievances centred on food, democratic practices in the army, and involvement in operations against the apartheid-American sponsored rebel group UNITA in Angola. The latter was an issue because some cadres preferred to be fighting on home soil. Stephen Ellis and Tsepo 'Sechaba', in *Comrades Against Apartheid: The ANC and the South African Communist Party in Exile* (London: James Currey, 1992), have projected an anti-Communist position by claiming KGB influence in the way the mutineers were dealt with. Shubin has corrected that proposition by arguing that the training of ANC security personnel was done in the German Democratic Republic rather than in the Soviet Union as claimed by Ellis and Sechaba. For that matter, Ronnie Kasrils, a senior SACP and MK cadre noted that in their training the East Germans, "emphasised brain work and not beating to arrive at the truth" (p.313). It appears from the author that should the Soviet Union have responded positively to Oliver Tambo's request for security training then perhaps the "camp chapter" would not have tainted the ANC's human rights record.

Towards the end of the 1980s, the balance of power tilted in favour of the 'road to power.' The apartheid state was in deep crisis because of factors such as: (i) financial sanctions; (ii) international isolation; (iii) internal mass mobilisation; and (iv) intensified Umkhonto we Sizwe propaganda. All this led to the unbanning of the ANC, PAC, SACP and other groupings and the release of Rivonia trialists which culminated in the 1994 elections in which the world famous political prisoner, Nelson Mandela became the first Black president of a liberated South Africa.

As these events were taking place in South Africa, international politics brought to bear its own dynamics. The Soviet Union, one of the key supporters of the liberation movement, was going through a crisis never seen in its own history. The collapse of the Soviet Union saw different voices expressed in that country towards the changes in South Africa. It appears that amongst the Soviets, there were those who were supporting the minority regime of Mr F.W de Klerk as well as the ANC and

its allies. The failed plans for Nelson Mandela's visit to the Soviet Union reveal changing dynamics between the ANC and the Soviet Union. (This part also shows Shubin's personal frustration that Nelson Mandela was not able to visit the Soviet Union during his term of office as president of the Republic of South Africa).

What is the significance of *ANC: A View from Moscow*? Firstly, the strength of the book lies in its extensive use of primary sources never used before. This is unlike Ellis and Sechaba's *Comrades against apartheid*, which covered almost the same area but with no sources. Secondly, this is a valuable contribution to the tiny, but growing historiography of the South African diaspora. Thirdly, through the text we can see the assistance given by the Soviet Union to the liberation struggle from 1963-1991, aid given with no conditions attached, as compared to many powers in the West. This took the form of military training, education, holidays, health, transport, etc.

Criticism can also be levelled at the text. Although Shubin has used oral sources, the dominant voices coming through are those of "Chris" Hani and Oliver Tambo. It appears that had he shifted his focus to the 'foot-soldiers' from the 'commanders', perhaps a different perspective would have emerged.

The other critical issue that emerges in the text can be covered by what Elaine Unterhalter calls "heroic masculinity" in the sense that emphasis has been placed on male national figures and the marginalisation of gender dynamics within the nationalist discourse. For example, in 1986 after the death of Moses Mabhida we are told that, "initially the SACP and ANC leadership intended to take Mabhida's body to Lusaka, but Samora Machel insisted that the funeral take place in Maputo. The Mozambicans organised the funeral extremely well. Mabhida's widow, a blind Zulu woman, together with his daughter and other relatives, came from inside South Africa" (p.259). The last part of this statement, "a blind Zulu woman, together with his daughter", is the most problematic one. The husband's name has been mentioned in twenty-eight pages while the identity of the wife is just a blind Zulu woman!

Continual dialogue, exchange of sources and debates will contribute to the rewriting of South Africa's recent history and Vladimir Shubin has paved the way in his otherwise engaging scholarship.

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