The South African Communist Party (SACP) is the second-oldest political party in South Africa (this book was published for its centenary) and the only communist party in sub-Saharan Africa. It has always been small and does not even contest elections, but its inextricable connection with the African National Congress (ANC), the oldest, and now ruling, party in South Africa, as well as its active involvement in the country’s trade union movement, has turned it into a key player in the South African political arena of the twentieth (and perhaps twenty-first) century. Its ideological and organizational influence on the ANC and on the South African trade union movement is indisputable. Indeed, the SACP has molded both into what they are today. In some ways, the history of the party is the history of the country, and in his six-hundred-plus-page tome Tom Lodge gives it its due.

The book covers the party’s history in full, from its roots in the early twentieth century to its inglorious course in ANC-governed South Africa since 1994. This is a major achievement, for the history of the SACP is more complex than that of many of its peers, particularly in the developed world. With its origins as a “white” party in a black-majority country with a racially and socially divided working class, the party struggled to balance its policy between race, class, and ethnicity even before its official inauguration. As a national party, it also had to grapple with significant differences and dynamics in the various regions of the country exacerbated by the fact that South Africa was born as a united entity only in 1910, merely eleven years before the party’s birth. The SACP, born as the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), went through several stages of development: from full (though suppressed) legality in the 1920s and 1930s to almost celebrity status in the 1940s, to self-dissolution and then rebirth into illegality in the 1950s, to the start of the armed struggle, leading to incarcerations, banning orders, and exile for its members in the 1960s, to its newly acquired leadership in the ANC’s struggle against apartheid in the 1970s and 1980s, to victory and glory in the early 1990s and then the loss of its moral high ground in the 2000s.

At each of these stages Lodge’s narrative of the party’s internal developments is preceded by an analysis of social and political shifts in the country. The story of South Africa’s trade unions, particularly the African trade unions, runs parallel to that of the party. Another thread running through the book is the party’s relations with the Soviet Union and other socialist countries. But the main issue throughout the book is the dynamics of
the party’s relations with South Africa’s national movements, particularly the African national movement.

1. Just like Russia: Revolutionary Socialists in the Cape and the Transvaal, 1890-21

Lodge’s prehistory of the party is an impressive survey of the party’s roots in the white labor movement and various strains of socialist thought, from anarcho-syndicalism to Marxism to Jewish Bundism. Several key party leaders, such as Bill Andrews, David Ivon Jones, and Sidney Bunting, came from the ranks of the Labour Party. When the International Socialist League (ISL), the party’s direct predecessor, split from the Labour Party in 2016, it too consisted of people with very different views both on socialism and on the “native question.” Its newspaper, the International, did not have any strict party line. Syndicalist, socialist, and even clearly expressed racist views were all represented in it, as they were in the ISL.

Lodge stresses “the debt” of the future party to the syndicalist element in the labor movement. Indeed, syndicalist tendencies in the socialist movement were overcome only after the Russian Revolution, when more information appeared on Russia, Lenin, and his works. A key role in this process was played by Russian Jewish immigrants, who joined the socialist movement in numbers (p. 44) and who, unlike South African socialists, knew the differences between syndicalism, Marxism, and Bolshevism. The Jewish community influenced the socialist movement in other ways, too. Its poorer sections who lived side by side with Africans were ready to work with them and thus moved some in the labor movement to the left and away from racism. But Jewish influence was also responsible for the party’s “disinclination” (p. 66) to mobilize peasant support, thus strengthening the party’s doctrinaire approach to its “proletarian” nature.

These diverse roots contributed to the policy squabbles, factionalism, and splits that bedeviled the party in its first decades. Debates on the “racial issue” had started long before the creation of the ISL, and the league’s policy on questions of race and “cross-communal” solidarity remained fluid throughout its existence, a difficult inheritance for the party.

The ISL’s three main preoccupations were opposing the Great War (one of the main reasons for its split from the Labour Party), radicalizing the white trade union movement, and drawing Africans and other subordinate communities into working-class politics. The league’s influence on white labor was minimal but in 1917 it started the Industrial Workers of Africa (IWA), an African organization which was supposed to be a trade union but in fact consisted of missionary schools’ graduates and other middle-class blacks with “disappointed expectations” (p. 46). The IWA’s membership partially overlapped with that of the Transvaal Native Congress (TNC), a regional branch of the African National Congress, founded in 1912. Some IWA leaders ultimately joined the ISL and, later, the party.

Throughout the book, in each period of the party’s history, Lodge painstakingly lists and describes all major and many smaller labor actions—he obviously sees the party’s engagements with trade unionism as its major preoccupation.

In Lodge’s view, one of the most important, if not the most important, feature of the ISL period was the degree to which it was shaped by black agency. Men like William Thibedi and Hamilton Kraai (both started in IWA) “began adapting and domesticating these exotic [socialist and trade union] visions and applying this foreign lexicon to their own circumstances and needs, and, in doing so, they assertively established their role as active agents in indigenising a South African socialist lineage” (p. 66).

While the lexicon was indeed new, the social and political basis for adopting it by Africans already existed. In his seminal work, South Africa: The Emergence of the Forces of Protest, Apollon Davidson, a Russian historian, started his investig-
ation of the CPSA’s early years with the “birth of political consciousness” in the African community in the nineteenth century, thus taking the roots of the party even deeper than Lodge does.[1]

2. CPSA: Early History, 1921-26

In January 1921 the ISL invited a range of socialist and kindred organizations, including the IWA and the Indian Workers’ Industrial Union, to discuss the formation of a communist party and its program. The party was finally formed at the league’s conference on July 31–August 1. Its three-strong South African delegation was already in Moscow, at the Third Congress of the Communist International (Comintern). One of the delegates, David Ivon Jones, was appointed to the Comintern’s executive as a “consultative member.”

The new party was almost entirely male and white. Despite the specifically stressed need to attract Africans, some members objected to the idea of communist support for “African nationalism.” The party’s equivocal attitude to African membership at this time, Lodge suggests, reflected a conflict of interests between white and black labor. The CPSA delegates told the Comintern of the “very primitive character” of the “negro race” in their country (p. 71). Ideological battles over the nature of the African struggle dogged the party from its birth though attitudes in different regions varied. The Cape Town branch sought the support of the coloured community, but the Johannesburg leadership centered on white labor.

Almost immediately the party faced a huge crisis, the famous Rand Revolt of white miners who fought under the slogan “Workers of the World unite and fight for a White South Africa.” Twenty-four thousand white workers went on the most violent strike in South African history against the dismissal of two thousand of their colleagues, replaced by cheaper black labor. The party, caught between its two constituencies, did not organize or lead the strike but had to choose sides: its white members were dying on the barricades while its black followers continued to work.

The party tried, in vain, to dissuade strikers from attacking black scabs, but had to support the strikers. The CPSA’s Johannesburg branch lauded the strike as a heroic struggle against capital. In Cape Town communists heckled black speakers at their meetings.

Party members were in disarray. Some, like Bunting, thought that as the defeated white workers became poorer, they would become more sympathetic to the plight of their black compatriots. Others, like Ivon Jones, considered that the dismissal of thousands of white workers meant that the only revolutionary force left in the country was black labor. Jones thought that the right tactic was to draw black workers into class struggle and establish “control” over their unions.

At its third congress (1922) the Comintern ordered its member parties, including the CPSA, to create national fronts in their countries. The CPSA sought (fruitlessly) closer cooperation with the Labour Party but simultaneously the party campaigned to recruit more Africans and to engage with African mass organizations, such as the ANC and the Industrial and Commercial Workers’ Union (ICU), an umbrella trade union. The Johannesburg ICU proved fertile soil for recruitment. Apart from Thibedi, now an ICU shop steward, this first crop of black recruits included such future party luminaries as Thomas Mbeki, Eddie Khaile, James La Guma, and John Gomas. By the mid-1920s the party had five of its members in the ICU’s executive and more in important positions elsewhere. Clements Kadalie, the ICU’s leader, had communists as his close friends but remained impervious to communist ideology. The ICU used radical anti-capitalist language, but, according to Lodge, “refrained from matching their angry rhetoric with any intentional change of tactics” (p. 100). When communists pushed for more radical tactics, Kadalie had them expelled.

Lodge stresses the initiatives of the party’s black members, such as the decision of the ICU’s Vereeniging branch to reconstitute itself as a CPSA
branch in protest against the expulsion of communists. But how many black members the party had at this point, is not clear. In 1926 the CPSA had four hundred members, a quarter of whom were members of the ICU (pp. 104-105), suggesting that already at least a quarter of party members were nonwhite, a surprising jump from its previous lily-white state.

3. Native Republic, 1927-32

The Comintern paid little attention to South Africa until 1927, when James La Guma visited Moscow—the first nonwhite South African communist to do so. The first of his two visits, in March, proved momentous, resulting in a resolution that the party was to work toward an “Independent Native Republic” in South Africa. This was to define the party’s life until the late 1930s.

This consequential development provoked three major points of contention among academics. The first was on the authorship of this slogan, that is, whether it come from the Comintern or from the party itself in the guise of La Guma. The second was the question of whether the new line was imposed on the CPSA or found a receptive audience. The last was the debate on whether this new line was helpful for the party’s cause.

Lodge’s analysis leaves no doubt that the “Native Republic” slogan was formulated by Nikolai Bukharin, then the Comintern’s general secretary. Bukharin coined it by analogy with the similar line offered earlier to the Communist Party of the USA. La Guma’s contribution to it was presenting material on the position of South Africa’s black population, which caused Bukharin to draw parallels with the American case (p. 168).

The answers to the other two questions have always been muddied by the confusion between two different interpretations of the slogan. Those who cheered the slogan and the result of its implementation usually interpreted it as a call for the party to embrace the cause of national liberation. For them, the Comintern intervention had the positive result of the CPSA’s increased attention to work among the black population. Their opponents took the slogan at face value, that is, as a call to work toward a nonproletarian, nonsocialist state tilted to the interests of black peasants and petty bourgeoisie. In their view, the slogan was to blame for the almost complete destruction of the party by the end of the 1930s.

Lodge tries to find a middle ground between these two approaches. The Comintern’s idea that South Africa was a typical colony with most Africans being “peasants,” he writes, was “misguided.” Yet in his view, without the Comintern’s instruction the CPSA might not have paid enough attention to the peasants’ revolutionary potential. Bunting, Lodge stresses, only started his election campaign in the Transkei after the Comintern’s intervention. He concedes, however, that whatever positive results the party may have achieved were overturned by the late 1930s (pp. 168-170). The problem with this compromise is that Lodge’s own material shows that the near collapse of the party started long before the late 1930s and was the direct result of the Comintern’s policy.

Apart from the slogan of “an independent black South African republic as a stage towards a Workers and Peasants Republic with full autonomy for all minorities,” the Comintern’s resolution demanded that the CPSA concentrate on work among African “peasants and workers.” The party had started doing this, however, long before this resolution reached it, with African members organizing labor tenants’ protests and setting up the Federation of Native Trade Unions. Communists were already working with and in the ANC when the Comintern ordered them to do so. The Young Communist League (Eddie Roux, Bernard Sachs, and Willi Kalk) organized a party school for Africans. Bunting, who believed that “non-Europeans were the real proletariat,” was the main champion of recruiting the Africans to the party, assisted by Ghana Makabeni (pp. 120-121).
When the resolution finally arrived (in August 1927) it was rejected by the party's Executive Committee. The creation of a “separate black state” was seen as a repudiation of the principles of Marxist theory, as was the call to work primarily with black peasants. The objections stood even after a clarification was sent by the Comintern calling black peasants “the basic moving force” of the national revolution “in alliance with and under the leadership of the working class” (pp. 125–126).

The problem for the party was not the work with Africans, but the idea of a separate racial state, which most saw as alien to the letter and spirit of communist doctrine. This set the stage for endless ideological clashes, accusations, and fights. The slogan's opponents thought that African workers were ready to fight for socialist ideals, not national ones. Bunting made this point in his presentation at the Sixth Comintern Congress in July-August 1928. He was severely criticized, and the congress passed a resolution stressing the need for a Native Republic.

The CPSA finally had to adopt the slogan and attempt to implement it. Thus, in 1929, Bunting organized a remarkable election campaign in the rural Transkei; the party formed the League of African Rights (LAR); and communists continued to work both with and within the ANC and the ICU, despite bans on their membership. But Comintern policy changed again, and the party was now told to get rid of such “auxiliary” formations as the LAR and to create a “united front from below,” that is, to recruit nationalist organizations straight to the party (p. 144).

In 1930 the Comintern demanded the “Bolshevization” of the CPSA. The next year Bunting was expelled from the party, and Douglas Wolton, the Comintern's faithful servant, became the new leader. Some of Bunting's supporters fell into line; those who did not, notably the first African party members, were also expelled. Opposing party groups accused one another of deviations, complained to the Comintern, and “expelled” each other. Almost all meaningful work stopped, but the Wolton group regularly sent to the Comintern glowing reports of its achievements in recruiting hundreds of new members.

It is obvious from Lodge's own account that the slogan of the “Independent Native Republic” met fierce opposition in the party and would never have been adopted had it not been for the Comintern's extreme pressure. The idea that the Comintern had “moral authority but no real power” (as Lodge suggests, citing the Simonesse's book) is simply wrong.[2] The party was merely a branch of the Comintern. If it did not accept the center's line it could be expelled or its leadership changed—as, indeed, occurred.

The Comintern line on an Independent Native Republic resulted in an upsurge of racial nationalism and political divisions in the party. Even decades later dissident party “Africanists” referred to the Comintern resolutions on the Native Republic as their point of departure. Valid national organizations were destroyed at the whim of the fast-changing views of Comintern officials and the Soviet leadership.

4. Factions and Fronts, 1932-39

Despite these factional struggles, some practical work continued, often not along the lines ordered by the Comintern. One of the party's most successful campaigns, brilliantly researched by Lodge, was the “demonstrative” election of J. B. Marks in Germiston. The party was most successful where it tapped into local grievances. In some cases, despite infighting and the Comintern's ban on cooperation with “auxiliary” organizations, the rump party was able to cooperate both with recent expellees and noncommunists for a particular strike or political action.

1933 saw another change in the party's leadership. Wolton departed for Britain and Moses Kotane, the party's rising star, returned from Moscow after a course at the Comintern's Lenin
School. Kotane crisscrossed the country before informing the Comintern that much of Wolton’s reporting on the condition of the party had been untrue. The party needed a new black leadership, he wrote, as the one formed by Wolton were just “boys” (p. 182). Yet the Comintern stuck with Wolton’s associates—Lazar Bach, J. B. Marks and Edwin Mofutsanyana. Kotane’s reports were ignored, and the infighting continued.

Debate centered on the question of whether or not there was an African bourgeoisie in South Africa. If it did not exist, as Kotane and his supporters thought, cooperation with national organizations, such as the ANC, was possible. If it did, as Marks and his allies argued, the ANC was the organization of the “comprador feudal bourgeoisie,” which excluded any possibility of cooperation with it (pp. 180-183).

The Seventh Comintern Congress in July-August 1935 (not 1936, as in the text: p. 186) brought another U-turn. Soviet concern at the rise of fascism led the Comintern to decree that communist parties must now build popular fronts with socialist, liberal, and even bourgeois parties. To put an end to the infighting in the CPSA, the Comintern’s executive appointed a commission to deal with this issue. For two years the commission studied hundreds of CPSA documents and invited prominent communists for interviews in Moscow.

The commission’s report ordered the CPSA to drop the “Native Republic” slogan and build a popular front instead. It was told to work with all the “oppressed people’s nations” (not classes), with trade unions and the Labour Party, but not with “Trotskyite fascists.” The British Communist Party (CPGB), seen as a more ideologically and politically mature organization, was charged with overseeing the CPSA (pp. 187-191).

Such resolutions led to the CPSA walking back its 1920s achievements in nonracial policies and thinking. The 1936 party conference stressed the need to work with “organized” (i.e., white) trade unions in order to win over the rank-and-file Afrikaner, to support “white toilers,” and defend the position of “highly skilled and well-paid” workers. Only “black activists” were to work with black nationalist bodies. In 1937 the Comintern went even further: the demand for universal suffrage was dropped and peasants were called to fight only for the cancellation of their debts and against high taxation. Resolutions were passed on a racially differentiated minimum wage and different platforms for white and nonwhite speakers for May Day (pp. 195-197).

Several CPSA members ordered to present themselves to the commission in Moscow thought it safer to disobey. Their fears were well justified. Lazar Bach and the Richter brothers, Maurice and Paul, were among the South African communists who perished in Stalin’s purges.

But the CPSA itself was the greatest victim. Squabbles continued; comrades refused to work with one another. In 1937 Kotane moved to Cape Town and stopped participating in party work. By 1939 the party’s headquarters practically stopped functioning. At the 1939 Central Committee meeting its members could agree only that the party was paralyzed. After much arguing they decided to move the headquarters to Cape Town, where some work continued. The newly elected Politburo consisted of Kotane, Andrews, and Jack and Ray Simons with Willie Kalk and Issy Wolfson as Johannesburg representatives. This opened a new chapter in the party’s history.

The CPSA had few successes in the prewar period. Its efforts to establish closer relations with the white and Indian trade unions and the Labour Party met little response, although some prominent Indians did join the party. Black unions were more responsive, but the party failed to turn such liaisons into permanent relationships. This was the result of the “directives from Moscow” which “inhibited South African party activists from responding to opportunities resulting from changing conditions,” writes Lodge. This does not mean, however, that he blames the “Native Republic” slo-
gan for it. In his view the slogan itself was still correct; the problems arose from the Comintern's "doctrinaire shifts" in its interpretation (p. 217).

5. Patriotic Unity: The Communist Party of South Africa during the 1940s

The 1940s were the party's easiest decade in all its pre-1994 history. It operated legally, and enjoyed cordial relations with the government and popularity among the broader public. Its membership grew with recruits from all races. It even won some electoral victories. It earned support from some white trade unions, and set up many new ones among the African, Indian, and coloured communities. There was still a lot of internal disagreement about the party's direction, but it was gradually overcoming its internal squabbling. The main reason was, of course, the war. The general public saw the party as a local proxy for the USSR, and from 1941 "the Soviet Union was a glorious and respected ally" (p. 224).

At the war's outset the CPSA declared that it was an "imperialist" war, and that communists' main task was to fight for peace internationally and against the danger of fascism at home. It organized antiwar rallies and justified the Nazi-Soviet Pact, despite the qualms of many of its members. Michael Harmel, who emerged as a prominent theoretician and spokesperson of the party in the 1940s, came up with the line that the "national struggle of non-Europeans" was the essential element in "a mass movement to resist fascism" (p. 226).

Hitler's invasion of the USSR changed everything: the party became a passionate supporter of the war effort. Many of its members joined the forces, and at home communists championed campaigns in support of the war. The communist-edited Guardian enjoyed a circulation of twenty-two thousand in 1941, and forty-two thousand in 1942. In 1942 the party launched its massive Defend South Africa campaign. The campaign pamphlet, Arm the People, thousands of copies of which were distributed, called on the government to provide arms and military training for Africans. The government, it said, should recognize African trade unions and allow African workers to acquire adequate skills. The pass laws and segregation should be cancelled, and the black population should be given a vote (pp. 231-232).

This campaign saw the CPSA's membership quadruple with over thirteen hundred new members. Funding flowed in. The party dropped its selective criteria for membership, with application forms simply distributed at public meetings. The new recruits often had only the vaguest understanding of the party's principles and practice. Having become more African, the party certainly remained "white-led through the decade" (p. 234).

During the war the CPSA worked separately on black and white audiences, the former addressed at meetings in their locations and the latter, in city centers. CPSA election manifestos in whites-only elections were intentionally vague on African rights. Communists trimmed their message for white audiences, stressing, for example, the need to improve sanitary conditions in the "non-white slums" on account of the health danger they constituted for the white population. The party discouraged strikes that might hinder the war effort (pp. 236-239, 254). This paid off electorally: indeed, Sam Khan, a communist lawyer, managed to hold a Cape Town City Council seat in four successive elections between 1943 and 1951.

Throughout his book Lodge excels in dealing with the CPSA's engagements with the black population, treating in detail different regions, cities, and communities. In Cape Town, for example, the party failed to establish a stable following among the nonwhite (mainly coloured) population but in Durban the party "neglected African worker organisations ... concentrating rather on Indian workers" (p. 272). Or again, Lodge deals with the African townships of Alexandra and Orlando, going into every detail of CPSA operations in both,
describing local issues, personalities, and events, and showing why the party was successful in the first, but not in the second.

Lodge’s general conclusion is that, despite setbacks, the party of the 1940s managed to entrench itself as an important player in the political arena generally and in the trade union movement in particular. In his view—and here he differs from official party historians—the party’s lack of militancy in this period, which he seems to disapprove of, prevented its greater success with African trade unionism.

Lodge concentrates entirely on the party’s domestic engagements. His book gives no clue of what the leadership and activists thought about international events. Browderism is the only external movement whose influence on the party he discusses.[3] We do not know what the party’s relationship was with the CPGB comrades appointed to oversee their activities, what the leadership thought of the dissolution of the Comintern, of Stalin or Mao. Lodge does not even mention the relations of the party leadership with the Soviet consulates in South Africa or the party’s huge efforts to popularize the Soviet Union and to coordinate South Africa’s aid to it, mentioning only —en passant—the wartime Medical Aid for Russia. This, of course, limits his picture of the party’s perceptions of the world and of its realities, and these are important, particularly for this period and for the future.


The 1950s were, perhaps, the most challenging and dramatic period in the party’s life, largely defining its ultimate role in South Africa’s history. The 1948 elections brought to power the National Party, and its apartheid policy and intense anticommunism left no room for the CPSA’s legal existence. At its Central Committee meeting the party decided to dissolve itself just before the government banned it. Unfortunately, Lodge leaves his reader in the dark about the details of this meeting, so the logic behind this fundamental decision remains unknown, although further in the text Lodge mentions how this or that member of the Central Committee voted.

Lodge concentrates on the revival of the party—how and where it happened, who the participants of this process were, and what problems they had to overcome. In different places former members began to invite others to join. Some agreed, but the majority did not. The new party, the SACP, created in 1953 at a secret meeting of twenty-five delegates in Johannesburg, was built on entirely different principles to suit its new underground conditions. Members could only join through invitation or recruitment. Organized into groups of three or four, they were linked to regional committees through one person only. The groups were not connected with one another and did not know of one another’s existence or membership. Nor did they know the identities of the party’s regional or central leadership (p. 293). There were also communists of category “D,” who did not belong to any groups. These were people whose previous membership was unknown to the police and who were tasked with keeping safe houses for assisting leaders or cadres in danger.

The SACP was more African than its predecessor, and the leadership placed particular stress on recruiting black intellectuals. As usual, Lodge follows the different evolution paths of the party in different locations. The SACP in Cape Town, for example, was more “sectarian” than in other regions (p. 295) and did not align itself with the national movement. Lodge attributes this to the existence of a Trotskyist movement in Cape Town.

Both in Cape Town and Durban the grassroots groups were racially mixed, although in Durban the party had fewer nonwhite members than in the two other centers. African members’ strongest connection there was with the ANC–aligned South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU), and this tradition was there to stay. In Johannesburg the “cross-pollination between the Communist
Party and the national movement” was “most developed,” but, Lodge stresses, Kotane made sure that the party was not seen as a rival to the ANC (p. 296). Despite such “cross-pollination,” the grassroots party groups there remained mostly uni-racial.

Communists were supposed to engage in both legal mass activities and covert operations, and by the early 1960s the party had managed to create a nationwide underground network. Between 1953 and 1962 it held six national congresses, which discussed local and national issues as well as international events, some of which were contentious and divisive. The suppression of the Hungarian uprising and Khrushchev’s speech at the CPSU’s twentieth congress were among these. The party also published the *African Communist*. Its participation in mass legal activities, however, was its chief field of action in that period, particularly in relation to African trade unions and the ANC.

This new attention to the national movement again led to much debate about its nature. By the 1950s the SACP had concluded that South Africa was a colony, but of a special type. In it the colonizer and the colonized shared the same territory, which, according to the party’s theorists, meant that the emergence of an African bourgeoisie was prevented by the existing socio-racial order. Consequently, its national movement was not bourgeois, and, on coming to power, it would not create a capitalist order but rather “push forward to people’s democracy” (p. 300).

At this point Lodge picks up an argument with the present reviewer, who stressed the influence on the SACP of the Soviet theory of the national democratic revolution, as presented at the 1960 International Meeting of Communist and Workers’ Parties in Moscow. The fact of this influence was clearly spelled in the SACP’s 1962 program, the first one after its reconstitution underground. This program, *The Road to South African Freedom*, described the party’s immediate goal as the struggle, together with the ANC, for the national liberation of the African people and the creation of the “state of national democracy,” which, in turn, would create conditions for building socialism. Lodge argues that, despite direct references to the Moscow meeting and the verbatim repetition of the wording of its resolutions in the text of the program, the ideas coming from Moscow did not have much influence, as, for South African communists, there was not much new in them. This was because they had visited “people’s democracies” in Eastern Europe in the 1950s and imagined them as a model for the future democratic South Africa.

Basically, Lodge uses the terms “people’s democracy” and “national democracy” interchangeably. But any theoretically literate communist (and the authors of the SACP’s program certainly belonged to this category) knew that in the Socialist Bloc’s vocabulary, “people’s democracies” were socialist countries under communist party rule. Their socialism might differ from the Soviet standard, but they were socialist. “National democracies,” on the other hand, were “states of transitional character which emerged during the national–democratic revolutions” and created conditions for further advance to socialism—in whichever form, either Soviet or a “people’s democracy.”[4]

The SACP program itself is clear proof that its authors understood the difference between these two concepts perfectly well. The term “national-democratic revolution” introduced a whole additional stage on the road to socialism—totally unnecessary for South Africa with its massive proletariat and robust revolutionary movement, as SACP leaders were to argue in the 1970s. So, when Lionel Forman dreamed of “pushing” South Africa “forward to people’s democracy” (p. 303), he dreamed of socialism, as in Czechoslovakia, not of national democracy, as, for example, in Guinea or Tanzania. The party was certainly not content for South Africa to be lumped in with less-developed former colonies, but it had to accept Soviet termin-
ology. Putting South Africa into the “colonial world” category turned “colonialism of a special type” from a discussion thesis into an integral and indispensable element of the party’s theory and program.

Such considerations also brought the party closer to the national movement and made it think of creative new ways of engaging with it. Lodge’s impressive list of the ways in which the party dramatically changed the ANC is proof of the crucial importance of this historical period for both organizations. Shaping the ANC’s ideological “dispositions” was one of the most important of these. When the ANC decided to collect a list of popular wishes for its program, both the call for inputs and the final document were written by communists. Thus, the Freedom Charter was born.

The SACP cadres’ work within ANC ranks strengthened its structures, organizational skills, and dedication. In Port Elizabeth, for example, they helped the young Nelson Mandela to develop and implement the M-Plan—a cell-based party-modeled organizational plan for the ANC. They also provided a reading curriculum for ANC study groups. The party newspaper, New Age, proved a useful organizational tool for the ANC. In 1961 Kotane told the Soviets that, in effect, the party led the national liberation movement (p. 308). Communists were able to exert a similar influence on the African trade unions.

In 1960 the ANC was banned. It was at this crucial point that the SACP, earlier than the ANC, made the fateful decision to start the armed struggle. Lodge thoroughly investigates this decision. Although the party “made a collective decision to take up arms” (p. 316), the conference participants who took this decision thought that they had passed just an interim, nonconsequential resolution to prepare for the “forcible forms of struggle when these become necessary or desirable,” leaving the details to the Central Committee (p. 321). In late 1962 the party claimed that the “strategy and direction of Umkhonto we Sizwe” was “at all times” in SACP hands (p. 325).

Lodge accepts the now multiply proven fact of Mandela’s membership of the SACP Central Committee but suggests that this was the tactical step of a person for whom “the first emotional and moral affiliation may have remained with the ANC” (p. 324). He does not, however, resolve the important question of the timing of Mandela’s recruitment, arbitrarily dating it to 1960, although some evidence of a much longer membership exists. And the longer it was, the less likely it is that his membership was of the “tactical” nature that Lodge suggests.

Lodge’s knowledge of Czech sources allows him to uncover the SACP’s communications with the Czech consulate in Johannesburg and Czech diplomats in London. In 1963 they requested an enormous quantity of arms from the Czechs—testimony to the very large-scale guerrilla war envisaged by the SACP. But Lodge’s scanty information about Soviet involvement in these early stages is surprising. He barely mentions the famous 1961 Moscow visit of Kotane and Yusuf Dadoo, at which the Soviets approved the armed struggle. The only Soviet funding that he mentions is $30,000 in 1960. But this was followed by much larger sums in 1961, 1962, and particularly in 1963, the data now available.

Lodge concludes by saying that, contrary to contentions in previous research, the party “played a central role in the unfolding of popular opposition to apartheid between 1950 and 1965” (p. 338). Indeed, until quite recently this statement would have been seen as highly controversial. Lodge then softens his own conclusion by saying that SACP influence was not equally strong in all ANC structures and that the ANC might have arrived at the same policies even without it. But Lodge’s story itself contradicts this addition.

7. Out of Africa, 1965-77
Lodge is much concerned with the degree of the SACP's influence on the ANC in exile, which for him seems to equal the question of its relevance. There is a large variety of views on this issue among researchers, and Lodge states his right away: “Hostile perceptions of the party's history in exile have suggested that it retained and even increased its dominant presence within the ANC leadership” (p. 340). Why Lodge calls such perceptions “hostile” to the party is not at all clear since, according to his own text, SACP cadres themselves shared such perceptions both at the time and later.

In Lodge's view, in the early phase of exile “the key source” of “fraternal assistance” to the SACP was the Czech Communist Party (p. 343). Lodge's Czech sources, hitherto unknown, are his important discovery. Yet his conclusion seems a bit overstretched. South African communists established a direct line of communication with the CPSU earlier than with the Czech party, and Umkhonto cadres came for military training in the USSR the same year as they did to Czechoslovakia. Simultaneously, the first group of South African communists came to the Lenin School in Moscow, and the first ANC students arrived in the USSR to study at Soviet tertiary institutions, none of which Lodge mentions.

Soviet financial assistance to the SACP also came earlier and remained larger than that of the Czechs. This aid was distributed through the International Trade Union Foundation for Assistance to Left Workers' Organizations, which received donations from all socialist countries, including Czechoslovakia. But even at the start Soviet contributions were more than fifteen times bigger than those of the Czechs, or of any other Eastern Bloc country, and the lists of recipients and sums allocated were compiled by the CPSU Central Committee.[5]

In my view it is wrong to separate funding allocated to the ANC and the SACP, as Lodge does. Such strict separation would have been difficult to implement as the two organizations shared many of their leaders, including the people who received and spent the money. From 1963, when the ANC first appeared on the CPSU's Central Committee list, its funding greatly exceeded that of the SACP. For the Soviets recognized that at its 1962 Lobatse conference the ANC took over Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) and thus was entitled to receive the funding designated for the armed struggle. But communists were, of course, a very important part of Umkhonto, so there was no way to distinguish between the channels through which MK got its funding—and the Soviets never asked for any reports on how the funds were distributed or spent. To the funding directed to the SACP one should add the funds allocated to the “Communist Party of Lesotho,” as that was created and maintained by South African communists specifically to receive more funding for the SACP.

Lodge refers to Davidson's and my own book, quoting the yearly SACP funding, but regrettably the dates in his quotation are mixed up.[6] These dates are important for they show the direct connection between the scale of funding and the armed struggle. It is also not clear on what grounds Lodge estimates the party's funding at $30,000 a year throughout the 1960s. For the years for which the data is available, the sums are usually higher, sometimes significantly higher, than this. For other years the data is simply unavailable.

Two main preoccupations of the SACP in London, Lodge writes, were achieving a recognized organizational status vis-à-vis and within the ANC and reestablishing their presence within South Africa. The first was deemed important since liquidationist tendencies—that is, the view that the party no longer needed an autonomous organizational structure—resurfaced among London communists in the first years of exile. At least partially, in Lodge's view, this could be explained by Soviet policy, for in the situation of the Cold War the
USSR had to support even those Third World allied regimes that suppressed communists.

In exile there was no Congress Alliance, and reproducing it was impossible, particularly as communists themselves, both in Africa and in London, were the first to object to making any connection between the SACP and the ANC public, as this could, in their view, detract from the “image of the ANC as the leading organ of the liberation movement” (p. 347). So much so that a consultative committee, formed to deliberate the creation of an umbrella body representing former alliance partners, did not even invite the SACP to participate. The irony of the fact that all three members of this committee were high-ranking communists seems to escape Lodge.

The SACP’s position in exile was complicated by the fact that Tanzania, where most of the ANC leadership began their exile, did not welcome communists in general, nor white communists in particular. It simply did not allow the representation of the SACP as an organization. Until 1975 non-African communists could not stay anywhere in sub-Saharan Africa on a long-term basis, and they felt that they were kept at a distance even by their African comrades. Lodge shows that even African communists were no more open to the idea of their white comrades working in Africa than were African governments. Even Kotane, who always had good relations with his white comrades, was not well disposed to this idea. Zambia, where the ANC in exile was finally headquartered, did not welcome white communists either. So, the party’s headquarters had to stay in London, which made communications between the SACP and ANC as organizations more difficult.

But Lodge’s description of “wider developments within the exile movement” in the 1960s (p. 349), such as the ANC’s military training and campaigns and other forms of armed struggle, leaves no doubt that individual communists played a key role in all these activities. Practically every name he mentions in this connection, apart from Tambo and Joe Modise, is that of a communist. And there were few other ANC activities at that time.

Lodge gives much space to Ronnie Kasrils’s efforts to recruit British and South African whites to work as “illegals” in South Africa, although far from all of them were communists. At this point it looks as though Lodge’s story of the party has become indivisible from that of MK. Indeed, some of the “illegals” supplemented their main task of recruitment for MK and propaganda for the ANC and MK, with establishing party structures inside the country.

The Morogoro 1969 conference, which partially opened the ANC to non-African members, played a major role in defining the format of relations between the SACP and ANC. Non-Africans, the majority of them communists, were allowed to join the ANC, though not its National Executive Committee. In fact, five out of nine members of the newly elected committee were communists, and the newly created Revolutionary Council, which was to supply MK with “strategic leadership,” consisted of six members, four of whom were communists. In addition, a designated member of the SACP Central Committee was allowed to meet MK cadres (presumably communists) in Dar-es-Salaam and Lusaka.

Lodge writes: “The Morogoro decisions appeared to confirm the restoration of the party’s influence within the ANC. This was evidently the case with respect to programmatic issues” (pp. 355–356). He also believes that the expulsion from the ANC of the “Gang of Eight,” a group in the leadership who held Africanist views, strengthened the SACP’s position within the liberation movement even further. Yet, surprisingly, in the end Lodge concludes that the party’s influence on the ANC in that period was “negligible.” “Black South African communists who were active within the ANC in East Africa,” he writes, “often held senior positions, but they did not act collectively as communists.... Individual communists contributed to key decision-making if they held ANC of-
fice; otherwise, they were excluded through most of the 1960s” (p. 385). Lodge even rejects the argument that the party was important in establishing and maintaining the ANC's relations with the outside world. Having established its own relations with the Soviet Union in 1963, he writes, the ANC did not need the SACP's intermediation: its alliance with the party was not the condition of obtaining assistance.

These arguments are bewildering. Even when the party's internal organization was more tightly knit—for example, in the 1950s—its relations with the ANC were always the business of individual communists. Nothing changed in that respect in the 1960s, apart from the fact that now the most important channel of such connection was MK, and not the ANC structures—and these ties were very strong indeed. As far as relations with the USSR were concerned, the ANC was among a tiny group of sub-Saharan liberation movements that had direct relations with the CPSU's Central Committee—the rest were catered to by the Afro–Asian Solidarity Committee. This honor, very important from a practical point of view, was bestowed on it for the simple reason that, with a rare exception, every ANC leader whom the Soviets met was a communist. The officials of the CPSU's Central Committee who were dealing with the ANC had no doubt about the party's ideological, political, and practical influence on it, and this defined their attitude to it.

The weakness or strength of the party's influence on the ANC in these early years of exile, in my view, cannot be assessed on the basis of the fact that the relations between the two organizations were unstructured and that there was no general Party line, defined by the center and adhered to by the cadres scattered in different countries on three continents. This was the period when relations simply could not be formal, particularly with the willingness of both parties to keep “the image of the ANC as the leading organ of the liberation movement” intact (p. 347). But individual, informal influence at the level of top and middle leadership was there, and Lodge's text shows it beyond any doubt.


The independence of Angola and Mozambique opened a new era in the history of the ANC and, of course, of the SACP, in exile. These two countries, which were fighting against South African aggression, were ready to accommodate other liberation movements—particularly those supported by socialist countries. From 1977 until 1990 Angola became home to Umkhonto camps as well as to guerrilla fighters from the Namibian and Rhodesian liberation movements. They were also more open to the presence of non-Africans and communists in their territory.

This meant that more communists, both black and white, were now in Africa, and that when, after the 1976 Soweto uprising, thousands of South African youths left the country in order to get military training, there was a close and nearby destination for them to go to.

Lodge starts this chapter with stories of individual communists, black and white, in this new situation, and in just a few pages arrives at the conclusion that “quite evidently communists functioned as a key leadership group within the camps.” By the time the ANC's armed struggle gained momentum, they were “well represented” within the Umkhonto command, “predominated” among the Angolan camps' commissariat, and “took the lead” in setting MK communication lines across southern Africa (p. 393).

In 1978 a delegation of MK command visited Vietnam to study the National Liberation Front's successful tactics. The main lesson the South Africans took back was that mass armed struggle and revolution could only come out of mass political work in the community, not vice versa. These ideas were spelled out in the so-called Green Book, a set of recommendations for further action, most
probably written by Joe Slovo and officially adopted by the ANC as its strategy in 1979.

“With the acceptance of the Green Book’s strategic recommendations,” writes Lodge, “the ANC adopted the party’s insurrectionary conception of a seizure of power that would be followed by the installation of a socialist-oriented national democracy.” He adds that “this project was made all the more plausible by the kind and scale of material support and training that the ANC and the SACP received from its principal East European allies, the Soviet Union and the German Democratic Republic” (pp. 424-425).

During discussions of the Green Book at the Politico-Military Strategy Commission, Joe Slovo even mooted the possibility of the ANC declaring itself a Marxist-Leninist party. Amazingly, none of the noncommunist members of the commission objected, not even Oliver Tambo, the ANC’s leader. Only Thabo Mbeki’s remark that in such a case the SACP would have to be dissolved led to a discussion, after which the matter was dropped. The commission’s resolution, however, stated that “it should be emphasized that no member of the commission had any doubts about the ultimate need to continue our revolution to a socialist order” (p. 395). One hardly needs clearer evidence of the SACP’s influence inside the top echelons of the ANC and MK.

But, having arrived at such unequivocal conclusions, Lodge moves to qualify them in several ways. One is to draw the reader’s attention to “traditional” and Christian beliefs and organizational arrangements which were widely spread in the camps and were, in Lodge’s view, incompatible with the party’s Marxist dogma. This, to him, is proof that communist influence on the young trainees did not go deep (p. 392). Another is to define the extent to which the party “owned” the ANC’s war effort—for example, whether even its own members supported the Green Book’s strategy. According to Lodge’s analysis, party cadres struggled to separate political and military work and ended up sabotaging the political mobilization inside the country, envisaged by the Green Book. A different kind of subversion of the goals of the Green Book, in Lodge’s view, was the emergence of “signals of ostensible willingness among ANC leaders to consider a negotiated political settlement” (p. 411). It should be noted that such signals came from the party leadership, too.

Having briefly touched upon the Kabwe conference, Lodge proceeds to the early 1980s revolt in the Umkhonto camps in Angola. His main goal here is to show that, contrary to the view of SACP detractors (of whom Stephen Ellis is a favorite example), the suppression of the uprising, the harsh treatment of MK cadres who had revolted, and particularly their torture by the ANC security department (“NAT”) were not the doing of the party, as “NAT” was “in the hands of separately organised security officials; party members were present in NAT but exercised no corporate influence and often took actions that put them at odds with other communists” (p. 445). The ANC commission which investigated NAT’s excesses, Lodge writes, was also manned by party cadres who denounced NAT.

Basically, what Lodge does here is separate the party from “party personalities.” This distinction provides a very dubious support for Lodge’s conclusion about the party’s influence on the ANC. One example of this logic is Lodge’s assessment of “Operation Vula,” which established ANC and SACP connections with the UDF, smuggled weapons inside South Africa (forty tons between 1987 and 1994), and connected Mandela, still in prison, with Tambo. “Vula” was organized and run by communists, entirely outside the ANC or MK structures. Tambo knew about it but was in no way involved. Even the funding for it was found outside official ANC channels. Lodge recognizes the role of communists in this operation, but refuses to label it as a “party affair” (as Ellis did) mostly because it was run by “party personalities,”
not the party, and because the ANC, not just the party, benefited from it.

Yet another sphere where “party personalities” were active, was in reestablishing connections with trade unions inside the country. The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) was formed by unions associated with the Black Consciousness movement and independent of any structures outside the country. Communists, however, were able to recruit some of its membership, even at the very top, possibly including Cyril Ramaphosa. Lodge thinks that this connection may even have influenced the party’s thinking. In his view, the new program adopted at the party’s seventh congress, held in 1989, shifted the main role in initiating the forecast national insurrection from guerrilla units to organized labor (p. 440).

In Lodge’s view, this stress on the class struggle dimension of the liberation struggle was new. This was not really so. Indeed, the 1962 Party program, *The Road to South African Freedom*, stated that “the class of African workers alone ... is capable, in alliance with the masses of rural people, of leading a victorious struggle to end white domination and exploitation.”[7] In effect, the discussion of the leading role of the working class in the national revolution started from the time of the Independent Native Republic in the 1920s. The only novelty in the 1989 program is that it discusses the role of “organized” labor, not the working class as a whole.

Lodge’s stress on “party personalities,” as opposed to the “party” as an organization, is crucial for Lodge’s interpretation of the dilemma of the SACP’s relations with the ANC in exile. Lodge quotes several party members who expressed concern about the invisibility of the party as an organization separate from the ANC or Umkhonto. “It was impossible to tell much difference in the content of discussions between a party committee meeting and that of the ANC’s regional politico-military committee or any other ANC collective,” a prominent communist remembered (p. 440). Communists felt that party members were “too busy” with other tasks to make time for “party work.” The main question, however, is whether there was any party work other than ANC and Umkhonto work. Lodge’s text leaves the impression that in the late 1970s and 1980s, there wasn’t any.

Lodge thus argues that from the late 1970s on the SACP exercised its influence on the ANC not as a disciplined, centralized, and well-structured organization, but as a collection of influential individuals with an identical worldview, a particular ideological and strategic agenda, and some changing but commonly accepted tactical approaches. In that period the party as an organization was distinguishable from the ANC only through its program documents and its publications, but not through any special activities. “Party personalities” however, played a very important role in all ANC activities, dominating the most important ones.

Lodge outlines three aspects of the influence of the CPSA/SACP on the ANC. First, he writes, “the party’s strategic understandings served as a source of hope and moral certainty not just for party ideologues but among the ANC’s own rank and file, helping to sustain the movement and ensure its survival.” More important, “the party’s own textual analysis of the political economy of liberation would accumulate canonical authority during the 1980s within South Africa.” Second, the party gave the ANC “a range of helpful resources,” such as “technical and professional skills, organizational habits, a diversity of social contacts in host societies, and skilful managers—‘cadres,’ as the party liked to call them.” Third, the party managed to resurrect and create from scratch the networks inside the country which connected the ANC with the massive resistance movement of the 1980s, helping to sustain it and ensure ANC influence upon it (p. 446).

Lodge underestimates the continued importance of the communist presence in the ANC for its relations with socialist countries in the 1970s and
particularly 1980s. By then, Lodge writes, the ANC acquired allies outside of the Soviet bloc, and, he thinks, the result of this was that the party became just one of its allies. But he judges by appearances. The fact is that for various domestic and international reasons in the late 1980s the USSR itself began to lose interest in both the ANC and the SACP. This meant that the USSR, though not the SACP, became just one of the ANC’s allies. Of course, the ANC’s new and important allies did not favor its symbiotic relationship with the party. So, the “Party personalities” had to choose whether they wanted to present themselves to these new allies wearing their ANC or their Party hat—something they’d never had to do before. For obvious reasons the majority preferred the ANC hat. This did not mean that their influence in whichever hat stopped at this point. Nor did it mean that they stopped to be communists, with their particular “strategic understandings,” “textual analysis of the political economy of liberation,” “a range of helpful resources,” and networks, irrespective of their hats.

9. Postcommunism and the South African Communist Party

Lodge is generally unwilling to reveal his attitude to the party. This seems to be particularly true in his last chapter. He describes the details of the party’s reemergence to legality as thoroughly as he presents its activities throughout the book, and assesses its “efficiency” in reaching its goals, but leaves the reader in the dark about his appreciation of these goals and of the party’s achievements.

Lodge starts this chapter with the description of the party’s condition on the eve of its unbanning and in the first years of its legality. In 1989, at its seventh congress, the party estimated its membership at two thousand. It was extremely well represented in the top echelons of the ANC. Twenty-one of the thirty-five members of the ANC’s National Executive were communists. Party members dominated MK command structures and were well represented among the COSATU leadership. Some of the ANC’s most important documents, such as the 1988 Constitutional Guidelines, were drafted mostly by communists (pp. 453-454). By the end of 1991, the party’s membership had grown to 25,000 and it continued to expand exponentially, reaching 319,000 in 2019 (pp. 455, 462).

The SACP, Lodge writes, was in a uniquely advantageous position compared to other communist parties in the early 1990s, when they had to reinvent themselves after the collapse of the USSR and other communist regimes. The South African party, popular in its own right, attached itself to a much stronger and bigger body that enjoyed mass popularity at home and moral authority abroad. This gave its membership access to multiple government and other official positions and levers of power—without the need to contest elections. In all postapartheid governments, communists occupied key ministerial positions and were “deployed” to various government institutions, state-owned enterprises, Parliament, the judiciary, et cetera. Indeed, so advantageous was this situation for the party that it repeatedly rejected suggestions that it contest elections independently.

Ideologically, the party seems to continue to hold sway over the ANC today. The national democratic revolution (NDR) is still the core of both the ANC’s and SACP’s programs. The only difference between the definitions of this notion by the ANC and the party is that the latter openly states that the NDR is “the South African Road to Socialism,” while the former uses more equivocal formulas. The party’s position has been very strong in COSATU, and particularly in the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), which reinforces the party’s influence on government policies.

The SACP does not act as a caucus within the ANC but it can still exercise strong political influence on its internal affairs and course. Lodge quotes the party’s decisive role in the election of Jacob Zuma to the ANC presidency in 2007 and its successful campaign to stifle Mbeki’s signature
GEAR program (“the 1996 class project”) as examples of such influence. And, of course, “party personalities” in the government and Parliament influence the adoption, implementation, and outcomes of government policies by working in ways that, in Jeremy Cronin’s words, are “informed by the party’s ‘culture’ and its ‘perspectives,’ functioning as the ANC’s conscience” (p. 473). Lodge cites Cronin’s “engaging,” in his capacity as member of the parliamentary Transport Committee, on the issue of Transnet privatization in 2001—and successfully stopping it.

With all these important roles and significant influence the party itself is a strange formation. Whether in government, Parliament and any other official institution, or within the ANC, “party personalities” could fight one another, sometimes bitterly, and, in many cases, contradict the party’s policy decisions. The SACP as an organization has been dead against liberalization of the economy, passing direct resolutions and program clauses against “neoliberalism.” But some party members in government supported privatization projects, particularly under the Mbeki administration. The party as an organization supported Zuma in his bid to defeat and then unseat Mbeki, but some members, even at the very top, worked against this decision and some even ultimately left the party in protest against its position. Whatever issue was important for the party’s “conscience,” there were always communists in government who were for or against its official line. The roots of such behavior can be traced to the 1980s, but disunity has certainly worsened since 1994.

The SACP now is not what it was in the early 1990s. Lodge’s analysis of its changing composition is revealing. He found that compared with the early 1990s, today’s party is much younger. The Central Committee elected in 2017 had members whose politicization only happened in the postapartheid era. Only four out of forty were white. Fourteen held senior position in the trade unions, particularly in the NUM. Just a few had struggle credentials from exile. About half of the general membership were over forty, and only 10 percent over sixty. About half of the membership were women. The majority were “working class,” but unemployed. Nearly a quarter lived in just one province—KwaZulu–Natal. The party is now “based largely on the support of unemployed school leavers,” while “the labour movement which used to supply the main source of leverage for political influence, has become factionalised and increasingly oligarchical” (pp. 461–463, 484).

The SACP Youth League fared even worse. According to a 2006 report, the league’s huge membership of ninety thousand was “mainly impoverished, excluded from socio-economic activities and mainly unemployed. Not surprisingly, the party youth are looking for money and social mobility and view the organization as an ‘access point to government.’” This was particularly true during the Zuma era (p. 463). Lodge describes the ANC as the focal point of patronage, but the party, too, has turned itself into an institution through which patronage is distributed, and it is seen as an upward mobility channel by its members. The same applies to COSATU, particularly the NUM.

Ideologically, the party is grossly conflicted. This is evident not only from the varying policy positions of its individual members, even in the cabinet, but from its political acts as an organization. According to Lodge, it has moved to the left and was getting more authoritarian after rejecting Slovo’s attempts, in the early 1990s, to “de-Stalinize” it and turn it into a somewhat more social-democratic organization. Slovo’s idea that the market was not “necessarily a purely capitalist institution” was firmly rejected by his more dogmatic comrades, such as Harry Gwala.[8] At the SACP’s eighth congress, in 1992, all references to “democratic socialism” were excised from the proposed draft of the new party constitution, and “Marxism–Leninism” reinstated as one of its guiding principles. “How can socialism be not democratic?” Gwala then asked (pp. 458-459). But simultan-
eously the party approved police actions against
the miners in Marikana, where scores of workers
were killed, and failed to support the 2015-16 ultra-left student movement.

The SACP is most certainly not a party of the
proletariat, although some of the poorest strata of
the population are represented in it. But so are
well-salaried workers and middle-class students
and officials. In government and outside it the
party, or “party personalities,” works as a lobby
for a particular interest group. Which one de-
pends on the concrete situation. It does, of course,
have its own interests, but from Lodge’s account it
is not clear what these are, apart from gaining
more influence within the ANC—either for patron-
age or for achieving its ideological goals by win-
ning the arguments within the ANC. The strangest
thing about this party (as a party, not as “party
personalities”) is that it does not want to come to
power. Lodge thinks that the party still holds the
“vanguardist conceptions of its purpose” (p. 456),
by which he probably means that it does not want
to subject its policies to the scrutiny of the voters,
as it assumes that it knows their interests better
than they do themselves.

In this chapter, as in the previous ones, Lodge
offers a valid analysis of the economic develop-
ments in the country and, to a lesser degree, of the
social scene. One would expect an equally valid
assessment of the party’s contribution to the
present deplorable economic situation to follow.
But there is none. Lodge indeed notes that “indi-
vidual SACP members’ participation in the ANC’s
and the government’s leading positions ... allowed
the party to shape important areas of public
policy. This was the case especially with respect to
state support for local industrialisation and
through licensing and other kinds of regulation to
‘roll back’ the influence of the dominant ‘mineral-
energy-finance’ complex” (p. 480). He also notes
the party’s influence on such initiatives of the ANC
government as the National Development Plan,
land reform, the National Health Insurance pro-
ject, and South Africa’s participation in BRICS.

Obviously, it is not easy to separate the SACP’s
role from that of the ANC, but in the previous
chapter Lodge does it through following individu-
al contributions of different “party personalities”
to the common course. Here, however, no names
follow. Thus, Lodge mentions the energy crisis in
the country and, separately, Gwede Mantashe, the
mining and energy minister, the ANC’s chairman,
and a member of the SACP’s Central Committee
(formerly the party’s chairman). Mantashe is an
obvious example of a one-person impact on the
economic situation of the whole country; his per-
sonal contribution to this crisis has been enorm-
ous. Yet Lodge does not offer his views on this, nor
on any other results of the influence of “party per-
sonalities” on ANC policies.

Lodge seems pleased with the fact that eight-
een million South Africans receive welfare grants
now compared to three million in 1994 (p. 471)—
though without reflecting on the fact that this sig-
nals a prodigious economic failure. He also says
nothing about the party’s role in formulating
South Africa’s foreign policy, although this is par-
ticularly important in view of the party’s determ-
ination to resolve South Africa’s “persisting struc-
tural problems” by “de-linking” it “from the im-
perialist north” (p. 480).

Such vagueness is regrettable, as, since 1994,
the party’s ability to influence the ANC’s and the
government’s policy has been its most important
and consequential activity. It will probably remain
its main legacy.

Even the highest-quality study may contain
accidental mistakes and outright errors. Perhaps
the most regrettable one in this book is the photo-
graph at the very beginning, on the first page. It is
a group photo of party members taken during its
fifth annual congress, held in January 1927. Lodge
wrongly dates it to 1930 and misidentifies Sidney
Bunting, Douglas Wolton, and Johnny Gomas, and
misses several other known personalities men-
tioned in the text, such as Molly Wolton.[9] There are other, less important but upsetting mistakes. Two examples: the dates of Jack Simons’s “visits,” as Lodge calls them (in fact, several months-long teaching stints), to Novo Catengue are mixed up (p. 390); and Joe Slovo’s “preferred pseudonym” (Sol Dubula) is repeatedly misspelled as “Dubala.”

Lodge has created a definitive history of the SACP that will not be superseded, either in detail or in the scope and quality of research, for many years to come. The detail is, indeed, amazing, taking the reader through the diversity of the party’s roots, policies, and methods; different regions; and even different branches in the same area. The reader is introduced to multiple party individuals with diverse and evolving views. Lodge presents the party in all its complexity and different incarnations. Such lack of generalization is one of the book’s main strengths. Yet, after a certain point, the reader deserves to be treated with a comprehensive survey of the author’s own views and attitudes to his subject.

Notes
[1]. A. Davidson, *Yuzhnaia Afrika: stanovlenie sil protesta. 1870-1924* (Moscow: “Nauka” Publishers, 1972). It is a pity that Lodge did not use this earliest published history of the birth and first years of South Africa’s Communist Party, as, judging by his sources, he can read Russian.


[3]. Earl Browder was the general secretary of the Communist Party of the USA, under whose leadership the party dissolved itself in favor of wartime support for the government and in the hope that its cooperation with the Soviet Union would continue after the war.


[9]. I am grateful to Allison Drew for identifying Johnny Gomas. Bunting is actually on the far right of the first row, Wolton is fourth from the left, not from the right in the top row, Molly Wolton is on the far right in the second row from the top.
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
https://networks.h-net.org/h-africa


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=57078

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.