USSR Influence on the Antiapartheid Movements of South Africa

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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/thetean/vol51/iss1/4

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ON 21 MARCH 1960, THE PAN AFRICANIST CONGRESS URGED people to join together to protest passes—identifying documents required to be carried at all times by black Africans—by surrendering themselves without the passes for arrest in defiance of the discriminatory law.¹ Thousands of protesters gathered in front of the Sharpeville police station. After hours of singing and peaceful protest, a policeman was accidentally knocked down and the crowd rushed forward to investigate. Terror ensued when the policemen opened fire on the crowd. Humphrey Tyler, the assistant editor of Drum magazine, witnessed the chaos firsthand. He recounts that after a cheerful and peaceful day, suddenly men, women, and children were being mowed down by the guns of the officers. Tyler wrote, “Hundreds of kids were running, too. One little boy had on an old blanket coat, which he held up behind his head, thinking, perhaps, that it might save him from the bullets.”² At the end

of the carnage, 69 people were dead and over a hundred wounded.\(^3\) The Sharp­eville Massacre, as it came to be called, was a turning point in South African his­tory and the antiapartheid efforts. In the wake of this tragic event, the USSR, a global power on the world stage and a proponent of equality, and antiapartheid organizations in South Africa developed more formal ties. Throughout the fol­lowing years, the Soviet Union played a significant, if not always obvious, role in the antiapartheid movements in South Africa. While historians have been largely interested in Soviet motives for assisting the antiapartheid movements, the oral histories of the South Africans involved in the movement, many of whom differed in race, background, and political views, each emphasize their appreciation of the Soviet Union's ideological example, financial support, and active military support.

Though at first glance one may be skeptical of the reality of a connection between South Africa and the Soviet Union, there were many things going on in Southern Africa that drew the USSR into the volatile environment of South Africa. At a time when the United States and other Western countries' biggest priority was the containment of communism, those oppressed by their systems of government saw communism as an attractive alternative. In the countries surrounding South Africa, there were conflicts between communist and cap­i­talist leaning groups. The Portuguese fought socialist-leaning groups in their colonies of Angola and Mozambique in the 1960s. Upon their independence, a civil war broke out between the sovereign government of Angola, backed largely by the Soviet Union, and the opposition which joined forces with the United States. Eventually, Angola won the civil war with assistance from the USSR and other communist nations and retained its sovereignty, conveying the willingness of the Soviets to intervene.\(^4\) Meanwhile apartheid laws controlled many aspects of black South Africans' lives and pre­vented them from enjoying equality and freedom at home. South Africans who opposed this regime had already been traveling to the Soviet Union to find a degree of support, but after the Sharpeville massacre, the USSR was more will­ing to get involved in another Southern African country to offer their help.

For many years the focus of scholars was on the USSR's political gains in South Africa. Scholars argued that the Soviet Union only saw South Africa and

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its peoples’ struggles as a pawn in the much larger game of chess between the East and West during the Cold War. People saw what the USSR was doing and assumed it was to bolster their own position on the world stage. It is now more widely acknowledged, however, that the Soviet Union also played an important role in the antiapartheid movement there. Still, most scholars agree South Africa was not a priority to the USSR. This change in perspective is due to the fact that more and more historians have moved away from a Eurocentric view of this period and studied how it affected black Africans, not just the government. For example, an early history by Kurt Campbell explores the Soviet relationship to the African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Communist Party (SACP), concluding that the Soviet Union was involved for a wide variety of reasons, but South Africa was ultimately “peripheral” rather than the focus of the USSR. In contrast, a later work by Vladimir Shubin claims the USSR supported liberation movements in Southern Africa in part because of the Cold War, but mainly because their own ideology, quoted in the 1977 Soviet Constitution, supported “the struggle of people for national liberation and social progress.” More recently, historians seem to agree that the USSR ideology to help oppressed people was their true motive. There have been some holes in the research, however. Since most of these histories were written, the South Africans who played a role, front and center, in antiapartheid movements published their oral histories. These interviews have confirmed that the Soviet Union’s involvement made a lasting impact and accelerated the rate at which the antiapartheid movement progressed in South Africa. Those interviewed recounted the ideological influence as well as financial and military support the USSR provided.

The interviews make it clear that those directly involved agree with Shubin that the USSR either had good motives or their motives did not matter. These oral histories are important because they provide a clear window into the minds of the people who experienced the antiapartheid movements firsthand. Even if the USSR entertained ulterior motives for their support of the antiapartheid movements, their goals were the same, and they both benefited from the end of oppression. For example, if South Africa was eliminated as the Soviet Union’s largest competitor in the gold market by “inefficient management by a black


majority government,” then the USSR could then control the price of gold.\(^7\) Still, many who worked directly with the USSR in the fight against apartheid never felt that manipulation was the goal of the Soviets. Brian Bunting, a member of the SACP and deeply involved in the antiapartheid movements, said,

> People say that we were being manipulated by the Russians for their own purposes. I think this is a misreading of the reality of the situation . . . the national interests of the Soviet Union and the interests of the liberation movement in this country were the same. We wanted to put an end to oppression. We wanted to put an end to capitalism and colonialist control of South Africa and all colonial countries. And from that point of view I think that our interests and the interests of the Soviet Union ran together. We never felt that we were manipulated.\(^8\)

Instead, the people engaged in the struggle for equality in South Africa recognized the benefits of working with the USSR as well as their benevolence.

The ideologies of the Soviet Union, namely communism and socialism, were the first things the Soviet Union offered to those engaged in the antiapartheid movements, and their influence cannot be overstated. The deadly Sharpeville massacre was just one example of abuse that the black South Africans had to face from their white supremacist government even after the country gained independence from Great Britain. They knew what it meant to be oppressed. The liberation movements in South Africa looked to the communist and socialist ideals of the USSR to gain inspiration for what they wanted to see in the future of their own country. Communism as an ideology was an obviously attractive alternative to the oppressive apartheid government that existed. To a communist, race was irrelevant: they saw the world by class. They wanted people to exist on equal terms and to prevent people from taking advantage of the capitalist system to become obscenely rich at the expense of the poor. Unfortunately, that was exactly what people in South Africa had experienced for years. First, black South Africans were forced to labor for a colonial regime while their natural resources were only making the rich richer and benefiting the majority of black South Africans nothing. Then, after the country gained its independence, the same black South Africans were oppressed under a different


\(^8\) Brian Bunting interview in *The Road to Democracy: South Africans Telling Their Stories* (Hollywood: Tsehai Publishers, 2008), 72.
system that divided the country based on race and denied them progress. In that context, there is little wonder then that the communist ideology took hold and played an important role in the liberation movements. A 1962 program of the South African Communist Party reads, “As its immediate and foremost task, the South African Communist Party works for a united front of national liberation. It strives to unite all sections and classes of oppressed and democratic people for a national democratic revolution to destroy White domination.”

Communism gave the people a clear ideology to follow and a future to strive for. In 1962 when this program was written, communism was not new to South Africa, yet the ideology gained traction amongst those involved in liberation movements as time went on. In fact, the SACP, then named the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), was created in 1921, just 4 years after the Russian Revolution took place in Europe. Radical white members of the working class who were inspired by the Bolsheviks made up the majority of the party in the beginning, but by 1925, black Africans claimed the majority. In 1950, the apartheid government put forth the Suppression of Communism bill, partly in response to the amount of communists cropping up in the non-white political movements. The CPSA changed its name to the SACP soon after and went underground to continue its work. The ANC, though they rejected communism at first, later formed a very strong relationship with both the SACP and the Soviet Union. Both the ANC and SACP were important to the people in the antiapartheid movements. They not only provided the funnel through which the USSR gave money and other means of support, but also an organized front that was built on ideas of equity and justice for the people being oppressed.

Brian and Sonia Bunting, Ruth Mompati, and Joe Gaobakwe Matthews were all involved in the antiapartheid movements, and their interviews attest to the ideological effects the USSR had on both individuals and the movements as a whole. Before any money was given by the Soviet Union, or before the MK, the militant branch of the ANC, was invited to be trained in Moscow, members of the South African Communist Party took informal visits to the Soviet Union to see other like-minded individuals committed to fight against the current systems of government. The Buntings were some of those people. Brian


Bunting, quoted earlier, was the son of two founding members of the SACP and an active member himself. He was a writer for the Guardian newspaper, where his wife Sonia also worked, and later became the chief editor. Brian and Sonia Bunting were no strangers to the oppression that black South Africans faced, and they used their positions at the newspaper and as members of the SACP to help the cause.\(^\text{11}\) Brian said, “Well, we eventually came to the conclusion that the pluses of the Soviet Union outweighed the minuses . . . we felt that what the Soviet Union and the other socialist countries had done was to greatly reduce the gap between the rich and poor.”\(^\text{12}\) Despite acknowledging that there were, in fact, minuses to working with the Soviet Union, Bunting was no doubt drawn to the hope of equality expressed in the ways the USSR implemented socialism. This ideological influence from the Soviet Union was invaluable to those fighting for the rights of the oppressed in South Africa.

Other people in South Africa came into contact with Soviet ideology another way. Many were able to be educated in the Soviet Union, further embracing socialist/communist ideas. In 1961, the USSR reestablished the International Lenin School for the purpose of providing education and training to those from other countries. The SACP sent several people to go learn there, including Ruth Mompati.\(^\text{13}\) Mompati was a teacher before she joined the ANC in 1952. She was forced to work underground after the SACP and ANC were banned, and she later went into exile. She said of her experience in the Soviet Union, “This was one of the most interesting parts in my life. . . . We started classes immediately, learning about the history of the working class, political economy, socialist philosophy, surveillance, topography, sabotage, etc.”\(^\text{14}\) Ruth Mompati was only one of many South African students that experienced this kind of education. Not only did she learn about the history of the working class, but also how to apply Soviet philosophy to her own situation in South Africa. The USSR was one of the places where she learned more about the ideology that she believed in so much that she was willing to go into exile for it.

\(^\text{12}\) Brian Bunting interview in The Road to Democracy: South Africans Telling Their Stories (Hollywood: Tsehai Publishers, 2008), 74.
However, not everyone was initially attracted to working with the Soviet Union because of their ideologies. For other South Africans involved in the struggle for equality, Soviet ties were more about practicality than personal beliefs in communism or socialism. Joe Gaobakwe Matthews, a member of the SACP early in his life who later switched to the Inkatha Freedom Party, recalls that he looked at past global conflicts and realized all winners had something in common: allies. He said, “We knew that African states, generally speaking, were too weak. They didn’t have the military resources to support such a plan... we took a decision... that, as trading partners of our country, the West was not going to support our armed struggle. But we had the Soviet Union as the other power. So we had to go with the Russians.”

Despite any political differences and his belief that communism would not work in South Africa, he recognized the importance of Soviet involvement in the struggle. To a degree, this was still a matter of ideology since the broader Cold War conflict between East and West was at play. Antiapartheid activists knew that the American-led West would not support their cause because of its Cold War dedication to suppressing communism, which aligned the West with South Africa’s own apartheid government. Any support would have to come from the East, which was led by the communist USSR. In the case of Matthews and others, their own individual ideologies were swallowed up in the bigger picture and the practicality of having the help of the Soviet Union.

One practical way in which the Soviet Union aided the antiapartheid movements was through financial support. Immediately following the Sharpeville Massacre, the Soviet Union showed its support of the antiapartheid movement—and its sympathy—by giving the South African Communist Party $30,000 to support the families of those affected by that tragedy. The USSR continued to fund the liberation movements indirectly through the SACP for a time. This was the beginning of more formal ties between the Soviet government and the liberation front in South Africa. Following that donation, came many others, and the USSR even promised to put sanctions against the apartheid South African government. The Soviet Union was selective of the liberation movements it supported, however. Joe Gaobakwe Matthews said of the

USSR's financial support in Southern Africa, "it's a scandal that you can give $10,000 to FRELIMO and then give $900,000 to the ANC." Matthews says that the USSR was hesitant to give help to the liberation movements that did not support their communist ideologies. FRELIMO is a nationalist party in Mozambique that was also committed to liberation movements of the 1960s. However, they were rumored to be a puppet of the United States and the West. The President of FRELIMO, Eduardo Mondlane, claimed that they were open to contacts with both the East and the West in order to reach their ultimate goal of liberating Mozambique; they therefore claimed neutrality in the Cold War. In response to these claims, the Soviet Union chose to give more money to the SACP and ANC whose positions they trusted more. Nevertheless, the money given to support the ANC and the SACP was to the benefit of the South African antiapartheid movements, especially in the form of funding lawyers to represent the leaders of the movements in legal matters.

The Soviet Union also provided military assistance to the antiapartheid movements, particularly in the form of training the militant wing of the ANC, uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK), Zulu for "the spear of the nation." The threat of violence from civil wars and other forms of internal conflict was already looming over Southern Africa as a whole, but the bloody Sharpeville Massacre rocked South Africa nonetheless. Following these events, some leaders of antiapartheid movements were concerned that their nonviolent efforts were not making enough headway by themselves, so they formed MK. In a meeting of SACP members, Michael Harmel is said to have claimed, "... peaceful methods of struggle were over; that one had to now look at alternatives; and that the alternative was armed struggle—violence. And it set this in the context of Marxist theory and communist theory, and revolutionary practice." Again, before the USSR took direct action, the people of South Africa were turning to communist ideology to gain inspiration and justification for their own action.

In this case, ideological inspiration led to physical help for the MK as the Soviet Union allowed soldiers to come and be trained for combat in their country. The invaluable knowledge instilled in the soldiers trained in the Soviet Union helped move the antiapartheid movement in a new and provocative direction. Isaac Makopo was one of these soldiers. He took part in a number of sabotage operations before he left the country for training. He says, "... I trained in Moscow for about a year. ... There were also comrades from MPLA, FRELIMO, SWAPO, and other groups from Latin America, Vietnam, and various other countries that were fighting against colonialism in their respective countries, who were being assisted and trained by the Soviet Union."  

The Soviet Union then was not only committed to helping South Africans out of oppression, but those from other countries whose people were being taken advantage of by the West. The type of training that they received in Moscow was rigorous and important. Makopo explained the training as "basic guerilla warfare, concentrating on specialized clandestine urban guerilla warfare, sabotage, explosives, weapons, politics, and organizing military and guerilla units." Other soldiers who trained in Egypt, such as Grassen Moagi, did not feel that the training they received was on par with those who trained in Moscow. A farmer by trade, Moagi was recruited by the ANC to be trained militarily in another country. He says of those trained in Moscow, "you could tell a difference, these were real soldiers." Along with operations in South Africa that Makopo was involved in, soldiers from the ANC even fought in the Angolan civil war and helped the people defend their sovereignty from the Western backed opposition.

The USSR also provided more traditional military training along with the guerilla warfare tactics. Lawrence Phokanoka, who spent some of his childhood years in Alexandra Township, said he saw "violence as something very common there." Later in life he joined the SACP and was trained militarily in the USSR.

to fight back against the violence inflicted on those oppressed by the apartheid government. He said, "We were trained in typical guerilla warfare. Hundreds of MK units that were to come later went to Odessa to a proper military academy for training in conventional warfare." 26 The Soviet Union took care that the soldiers from MK and other antiapartheid organizations were prepared to fight in whatever way necessary. This military support from the USSR further shows how big of an impact they made on the antiapartheid movements in South Africa.

Upon reflecting on the role of the USSR on the antiapartheid movements, Brian Bunting insisted, "The Soviet Union gave us whatever support they could in every way possible. They gave military support to MK. They gave financial support. They provided a home from home for people. Anybody that was sick could go and get treated in Moscow hospitals. . . . Anybody who needed further education could get it in the Soviet Union." 27 Though historians have differing opinions on the role that the Soviet Union played in South Africa, the words of those who experienced this movement firsthand prove that they did indeed play a significant role in the antiapartheid movements. The people interviewed about their involvement were different races, backgrounds, and political views, yet they were united in their acknowledgement of Soviet influence and Soviet help. Long before—and after—the USSR gave money and military support, the people of South Africa found inspiration and direction through the ideologies of communism and socialism that were championed by the Soviet Union. Through informal traveling, schooling, and formation of their own communist party, the hope of equality shined a guiding light to those in opposition to the apartheid government. Financial assistance came after, and provided funds to help leaders of these movements deal with lawsuits, as well as provide families with relief after tragedies such as the Sharpeville Massacre. Later with the formation of MK, the USSR provided both conventional and guerilla military training for those who were willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for the chance to live in a country not separated by white supremacist laws. Those interviewed about liberation of South Africa played different roles in the antiapartheid movements, but their testimony of Soviet help was a common thread that wove their stories together.