The Past as Prologue: Deconstructing South Africa's Liberation History

Garth le Pere

External Mission: The ANC in Exile, 1960-1990

by Stephen Ellis
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The historiography of the African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Communist Party (SACP) will always be subject to contestation. Their moral battle for freedom and justice was, of course, arrayed against the ideological shibboleths of a heinous and noxious regime. However, in the operational milieu of struggle, they were up against an elaborate state apparatus of coercion and violence buttressed by a legally-sanctioned infrastructure of repression, intimidation, and torture which was capable of carrying out murderous acts against apartheid's opponents or silencing them through draconian laws.

Thus, when the ANC and the SACP were forced into exile and the SACP declared its resort to armed struggle in December 1960 with the setting up of the joint armed wing Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK – The Spear of the Nation) in July 1961, they perforce had to function under a penumbra of secrecy, intrigue, paranoia, and internal power tussles as their flanks were increasingly exposed to betrayal, factionalism, intelligence failures, and infiltration. Whether the relationship between the ANC and SACP in reality was symbiotic or dialectical – or a combination of both – is a subject that continues to provoke debate and stir passions, often in a manner that is highly tendentious and partisan. It is well known that senior ANC leaders were also members of the SACP and President Mandela's professed SACP affiliation is subject to differing interpretations. Ellis's book thus falls into the genre of historical scholarship that seeks to unearth the exact nature of this highly controversial relationship as it took shape in the crucible of the formative exile years from 1960 to 1990.

The essential ambition of this book is to demonstrate – through careful analysis and meticulous scholarship – that the SACP was able to penetrate the very sinews and marrow of the ANC in exile to the point where mainly white communists were able to exercise a much more profound but undue organisational, ideological, and political influence over the ANC than is usually conceded. *Ex hypothesi*, it would seem then that this influence has continued to shape the ANC's style of governance since coming to power in South Africa in 1994 and helps to explain its many pathologies as a ruling party.

The book under review is a sequel to an earlier work, *Comrades Against Apartheid: The ANC and the South African Communist Party in Exile*, which was published in 1992 and co-authored with an ANC and SACP member under the pseudonym of Tsepo Sechaba. This book seeks to fill the lacunae in the broader narrative because, at the time of writing *Comrades Against Apartheid*, Ellis says that '…the ANC and SACP had been remarkably successful in preventing information about their own past from being publicly known, other than sanitised versions that they released for public consumption' (p. 310). In this much more extensive and richer analytical and historical enterprise, Ellis seeks to expose the mythology of the ANC and the narrative of SACP's struggle as he interprets it.

In a lively polemic which he stirred in the pages of South Africa's *Mail & Guardian*, Ellis claimed that '[s]uccessive ANC governments have done everything to burnish the myth of the armed struggle, which was always more theatrical than real' (3 January 2014). In Ellis's view, the battle of Cuito Cuanavale, where Cuban and Angolan forces purportedly defeated the might of the South African defence force, is a case in point (p. 296). Moreover, he holds that'[t]he ANC doesn't just spin the latest news – it suppresses key historical facts and invents others' (*Mail & Guardian*, 24 January 2014). In going about his exposé, Ellis has consulted archival sources in Botswana, Germany, Ghana, and the UK, but the most extensive material comes from South Africa, spread across six cities and one suburb and eight institutions. And some of these sources have only recently been made available. A substantial nine page bibliography of published books, chapters, articles and diverse newspapers and magazines is complemented by unpublished manuscripts. Hence, despite its controversial and often coldly dispassionate nature, this book of eight chapters must be taken seriously as it takes the reader through a chronologically arranged but often very disturbing tour of the critical years of struggle from 1960-1990.

In setting the scene in the opening chapter, entitled 'Call to Arms', Ellis frames the basic organisational and normative logic of the struggle. Here, we see the influence of white communists such as Arthur Goldreich and Percy 'Jack' Hodgson, who had military experience, but there is also the roles played by SACP Central Committee members Yusuf Dadoo, Michael Harmel, Joe Mathews, and Vella Pillay in shaping relations with Moscow and Beijing. While not totally eschewing links with China, the strategic tilt towards the Soviet Union came in the vortex of the onset of the Cold War and Moscow's unequivocal and greater material support for Africa's liberation movements. Moreover, Marxist-Leninist ideology retained an explanatory resonance for South Africa as a case of 'colonialism of a special type' (p. 16). A critical turning point was a SACP meeting in December 1960 outside Johannesburg, which was attended by the likes of Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, and Govan Mbeki (the father of Thabo Mbeki). While the meeting discussed the state of emergency and the banning of the ANC, the real significance according to Ellis was the inauguration of the armed struggle and the birth of Umkonto we Sizwe or MK (even though this was opposed by Moses Kotane,General Secretary of the Communist Party of South Africa, as it was then called). Remarkably, the ANC president at the time and Nobel Peace Laureate, Albert Luthuli, and other senior colleagues were unaware of the agreement to resort to armed struggle. At this point, Ellis enters the debate about Mandela's alleged membership of the SACP. His semantic deconstruction and deductive reasoning (pp. 21-23) does nothing to discredit the widely held view that this was more of a tactical ploy than a strongly held ideological conviction on the part of Mandela. The SACP ideologue and strategist, Joe Slovo, could therefore complain after Mandela's Africa tour in January 1962: 'We sent Nelson off to Africa a Communist and he came back an African Nationalist' (p. 33). Mandela's real or alleged SACP membership is really much ado about nothing by Ellis. It seems rather cynical to suggest that African nationalists in the ANC were co-opted into the SACP's Central Committee simply so that they could serve the instrumental end of communists taking control of MK and the armed struggle.

This notion then helps to feed Ellis's thesis of the SACP as the force and *deus ex machina* behind the ANC in exile and in the ensuing chapters he tends to be quite persuasive. In the next chapter, 'External Mission', Ellis shows that the ANC in exile was undergoing testing times. He says: 'Not only was the ANC almost penniless, but it was struggling to set up an effective administration abroad' (p. 45). By contrast, the SACP was increasing its hold and leverage over the ANC because of its close links with Moscow and access to privileges such as bursaries to the Lenin school (p. 48). This is also where Ellis introduces several of the controversial issues which form some of the critical and revisionist aspects of the book. For example, the commander of the Kongwa camp in Tanzania, Ambrose Makiwane, is said to '…sometimes come home roaring drunk and force the cadres to do military exercises in the middle of the night, lashing out at them with a sjambok [a heavy whip]' (p. 53). Moreover, camp life was rife with homosexuality and Xhosa-Zulu tribal friction. Joe Modise, who was to become Mandela's first Minister of Defence, emerged as a villainous and very divisive figure in camp life. By the late 1960s, the SACP was also beginning to evolve its own security networks for gathering intelligence, especially since the apartheid regime's own security services were proving increasingly capable and adept at using ANC rank-and-file as agents to extract information. Another important event of this period was the 'Wankie and Sipolilo campaigns' in then Rhodesia in 1967-68, which is often romanticised in ANC annals and '…hailed by the ANC as a success' (p. 63). What started out as a collaborative military exercise between MK and the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army, with the ultimate aim of carving an infiltration route into South Africa, '…was notable for its lack of planning' (p. 62) and '… was a resounding military failure' (p. 70), such that MK suffered 48 fatalities at the hands of better trained Rhodesian forces.

The disillusionment of the Rhodesian campaigns was followed by a memorandum written by one of its veterans, Chris Hani, who alleged that the ANC in exile was suffering from a 'deep crisis' of leadership. He pinpointed its army commander, Joe Modise, and the secretary-general, Duma Nokwe, as most culpable for the ANC's parlous state of affairs (p. 69). A possible response led by the SACP Central Committee was to open ANC membership to all races in order to increase the leadership pool and hence the importance of the Morogoro Conference that took place in Tanzania in April 1969: Coloureds (of mixed descent), Indians and whites could now formally join the ANC but could not serve on its central decision-making structures. The creation of a new body, the Revolutionary Council, to steer the armed struggle was especially salutary for the SACP since Council members would include all minority groups. The Party further triumphed with the adoption of the strategy and tactics document authored by Joe Slovo which mapped new political and military contours that would increase the involvementof the urban masses in the liberation struggle (p. 77). The SACP's guiding role with regard to the ANC was further augmented after Chris Hani and Thabo Mbeki became '…the youngest-ever members of the Central Committee' (p. 82). Ellis is careful to document ANC and SACP developments in exile in the context of political events in South Africa and internationally. At the time when apartheid was increasingly subject to international opprobrium and a growing sanctions regime, its architects were turning the state into an expansive bureaucratic system of security

management and police control with the collusion and backing in particular of the United States. After Marxist and pro-Soviet regimes came to power in Angola and Mozambique, the South African government launched a region-wide economic and military destabilisation campaign under the guise of an anti-communist offensive to check Soviet expansionism.

The ruling MPLA and FRELIMO parties in Angola and Mozambique, respectively, were friendly and supportive of the ANC; so much so that the ANC was able to set up major camps for new MK recruits, crucially following the massive influx of young men and women after the Soweto students' uprising in 1976. Ellis thus devotes the entire chapter four to 'New Strategies'. He pays special attention to the most important camp at Novo Catengue in Angola. Not only were there '…frequent allegations of sexual abuse of women by camp officials' (p. 119), but in what is now part of ANC folklore, the Black September incident in 1977 resulted in as many as 500 people being affected by food poisoning with word spreading '…that the incident was the work of enemy agents…' (p. 120). Meanwhile, a study tour of Vietnam in October and November 1978 was led by Oliver Tambo and included Slovo, Modise and others. Slovo, as a stalwart of the SACP, came away most impressed believing '…that political struggle should be the basis of armed struggle' (p. 123). This led to the increasing use of 'armed propaganda' by way of dramatic sabotage attacks against the apartheid regime, together with popular mobilisation and international isolation, as the three main pillars of struggle. Thus on 1 June 1980, MK launched a spectacular attack on Sasol's oil facility (p. 138). Ellis goes on to show the deleterious effects of international isolation and sanctions not only in the areas of sports and culture but also as a result of the arms and oil embargos. The apartheid state, moreover, was in the throes of a fiscal crisis starting in 1985. Chase Manhattan Bank refused to extend existing loans, and since the government was spending between 25 and 30 per cent of its budget on security and defence by 1987-88, '…it had been close to bankruptcy' (p. 231). For Ellis, these impacts were much more consequential in apartheid's demise than the ANC's desultory armed struggle (p. 301).

For his part, the ANC attempted to build its own security and intelligence capacity following the huge influx of new recruits and turned to East Germany's security service or Stasi for the purpose (p. 152). It is equally revealing that for training in urban guerrilla warfare and bomb-making, the ANC sought the help of the Irish Republican Army (pp. 137-38). In exile, the ANC also built detention facilities to house a growing number of security suspects, dissidents, and mutineers in its ranks. The most infamous was the Quatro camp in Angola at a time when ANC camps were increasingly exposed to air raids by the South African Air Force (p. 154). The ANC was becoming more vulnerable to infiltration by apartheid's security agents who made such raids possible (pp. 197-204). According to Ellis, this period from the mid-1980s marks a heightened paranoia among camp commanders not only to brutally control the rank-and-file but also to assassinate those considered to be traitors, such as what happened to Tennyson Makiwane in June 1980 (p. 155). What complicated an already fraught environment was the surge in corruption. Financial corruption took the form of illicit money-making by senior ANC officials and the theft of donor money from Scandinavian governments (pp. 162-63). But there was also involvement in car-theft rackets. Ellis writes equally damningly that '[s]ome ANC members in the frontline states were in contact with car thieves inside South Africa, taking delivery of stolen vehicles once they had been driven over the border' (p. 162). Besides car theft and with the blessing of senior leaders, ANC personnel were further involved in drug smuggling and illegal diamond dealing (p. 163). Joe Modise's name again surfaced as a figure that was at the centre of all this corrupt and criminal activity (p. 167). These are serious allegations indeed and are sure to stir the hornet's nest.

The next historic turning point is captured in chapter six, 'War among the People' with a rising crescendo of township violence and protests starting in 1984. The United Democratic Front (UDF) was established as an organisational channel for township anger and popular resistance but also emerged as a sympathetic and politically-aligned ally of the exiled ANC, even though Ellis avers that '…the ANC hierarchy was often quite suspicious of the UDF' (p. 211). Further adding to the internal combustion was the ANC's difficult relationship with Chief Gatsha Buthelezi and his Zulu chauvinist movement, Inkatha. With the urban areas on fire and PW Botha's government declaring two states of emergency to quell the unrest, the SACP became more concerned about how it could strategically position itself on the right side of history, assuming that the ANC was the ruling party in-waiting. The first consultative conference since 1969 held at Kabwe in Zambia in June 1985 presented the SACP with an opportunity to do so. Most significantly, the conference agreed that minorities who up to then could only be members – would be allowed to sit on the ANC's highest decision-making organ, the National Executive Committee (NEC) (p. 218). This opened the way for senior communists such as Joe Slovo and Ronnie Kasrils to serve on the NEC, in Ellis's view thus '…reinforcing the Party's grip' (p. 219).

Ellis is very incisive in his portrayal of the changing international context. The symptoms that would result in the collapse of the Soviet imperium were becoming evident during the Gorbachev era with all that this portended for the SACP and ANC losing their primary ideological patron and source of financial support. A two-pronged approach was devised that was hardly complementary: the ANC would pursue the path of negotiation led by Thabo Mbeki (p. 229), while the SACP would expand its insurrectionary activity within South Africa on the basis of the highly clandestine Operation Vula (pp. 233-34). Ellis is correct in observing that Operation Vula '…posed a clear challenge to Thabo Mbeki's plans to push on with negotiations' (p. 234).

Up to this point in the book, most troubling is Ellis's gratuitous portrayal of Oliver Tambo, the ANC Presidentin exile who kept the disparate and fractious ANC/SACP family together through the force of his personality and quiet but effective leadership under most trying international circumstances. If Ellis had cared to read Luli Callinicos's authoritative *Oliver Tambo: Beyond the Engeli Mountains* (David Philip 2004), he would have been saved from egregiously wrong assessments of Tambo such as '…the perfect frontman…' whose '…manner was disarmingly mild…' and who '…could generally be relied on to deliver whatever speech was put in front of him by his aides…' (p. 219). That Callinicos's book is not listed in Ellis's bibliography is a major oversight by an otherwise thorough historian.

With South Africa's racial order feeling the effects of local election boycotts, marches and civil disorder, work stoppages, attacks on police stations and local collaborators, and direct confrontations with the army and police, there was even more of an imperative to break the impasse lest the country descend into civil war. This was when FW De Klerk made the dramatic gesture of releasing all political prisoners and unbanning the various formations of the liberation movement on 10 February 1990. An incongruous hallmark of the negotiations that followed between 1990 and 1994 was that it was one of the most politically-inspired violent periods in South African history, during which some 14000 South Africans lost their lives (p. 268). Nevertheless, the grand compromise and narrative of reconciliation which brought an end to apartheid and resulted in De Klerk and Mandela sharing the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993 set South Africa firmly and irrevocably on the course of a hopeful but challenging democratic transition.

However, it is in the interstices of South Africa's transitional dynamics that Ellis's argument starts to falter. If his depiction of SACP hegemony over the ANC in exile is quite convincing, it would seem that after the 'Homecoming' in chapter seven and the SACP having shot its strategic and tactical bolt in Operation Vula, that its influence over the ANC decidedly begins to wane. Certainly, senior SACP figures such as Joe Slovo, Ronnie Kasrils and others were key players during the negotiations but, once ensconced in power, it would appear that roles were reversed: the SACP was becoming more of a political appendage of the ANC (and some would argue, a strategic liability). Ellis does not enter this debate lest it dilute the thrust of his overall argument. He does concede, however, that the SACP '...has had little influence within the alliance for the last two decades' (p. 299). If that is the case, it *a fortiori* begs the question of why it is so and which factors have conspired to cause this decline of SACP's influence?[1] Indeed, the transition to democracy in South Africa has spawned much more ideological and policy convergence between the ANC and SACP, such that both are committed to constitutional government, albeit under the rhetorical umbrella of promoting a 'national democratic revolution' and building a 'developmental state' on the basis of party vanguardism. To his credit, though, Ellis is correct in his observation that this vanguardism has resulted in other formations of the liberation movement being expediently '…written out of the historical narrative' (p. 299). This includes the UDF and the Black Consciousness Movement, both of which did much to keep the fires of resistance alive in South Africa when the apartheid state was at its oppressive worst in the 1980s.

But the problem of residual SACP doctrinal influence on the ANC will not simply disappear and requires further dissecting. Ellis can be challenged on several fronts here. For example, and as a measure of its ideological rigidity, he writes that '[t]he ANC in power has remained little interested in understanding the world as it is or has become' (p. 300). This is an astounding assertion for a party that can justifiably claim a progressive foreign policy that has positioned South Africa in the epicentre of world politics and international relations. Next, '…the ANC has blithely continued since 1994 to suppose that the rest of the world still has special regard for the ANC as the bearer of the moral torch' (p. 304). Yes and no. The ANC under the presidencies of Mandela and Mbeki enjoyed strong international support because the ANC had an unassailable moral claim to govern by virtue of its growing international legitimacy and its subsequent electoral victories. The strength of this moral currency has only recently depreciated with the poor administration, rising levels of corruption and misrule under President Jacob Zuma.

Overall, Ellis has succeeded in writing a '…history of power, centred on the ANC in exile' (p. 306). As a well-written and accessible book, it raises new questions about the ANC's past and advances different interpretations about critical historical events and the complex and diverse cast of characters who animated and gave life to these. Ellis is appropriately critical of the ANC's dissimulation of its past as an integral part of the process of constructing its own mythic character. Above all, he has marshalled an impressive vein of empirical, factual, and documentary evidence to make his case. That said and judging from his academic writing, Ellis has built something of a reputation for courting controversy and with this book he has certainly burnished that reputation. His detractors have been rather scathing in their denunciations of his work. In an opinion piece (*Business*

Day, 10 February 2014), Adekeye Adebajo, the Nigerian scholar who heads the think-tank Centre for Conflict Resolution in South Africa, accused Ellis of Afrophobia. Adebajo's strident critique of Ellis is based on the latter's controversial writing about Liberia and Sierra Leone's civil wars as well as Ellis's perceived patronising attitude about what needs to be done to rebuild Africa. Ellis can speak for himself, as he has done in responding to Thandika Mkandawire's accusation that his work on Liberia was'poorly veiled racist'.[2]

However, for this reviewer, even though *External Mission* might contain many uncomfortable assertions and unpalatable claims and sometimes suffers from polemical overkill, it is a book that should be engaged with on its scholarly merits. This is because Ellis has managed to excavate and elaborate certain neglected aspects of the ANC's exile and war experience. And as an exegetical exercise, he has elucidated the dominant and problematic dynamic of SACP influence over the ANC, delineating its main themes and actors as well as highlighting their inconsistencies, ambiguities, and human frailties. Ellis's book is thus certainly testimony to the philosopher Spinoza's famous maxim:[3] 'All men certainly seek their advantage, but seldom as sound reason dictates; in most cases appetite is their only guide, and in their desires and judgements of what is beneficial they are carried away by their passions, which take no account of the future or of anything else.'

Notes

1. I owe this observation to Chris Saunders who reviewed Ellis's book in *Historia*, 58:2, 2013, p. 161.
2. See Thandika Mkandawire, 2002, 'The terrible toll of post-colonial "rebel movements" in Africa: towards an explanation of the violence against the peasantry,' *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 40:2, pp. 183-84. Ellis's response (2003) appears as 'Violence and history: a response to Thandika Mkandawire', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 41:3, pp. 457-75.
3. A.G.. Wernham, (ed.), 1958, *Spinoza: The Political Works*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 93.