The past as prologue: Deconstructing South Africa’s liberation history

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by Stephen Ellis


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 pointed out 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 SAPC 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) and non-African communists who could not 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 SAPC 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 proposed a new political and military contours that would increase the involvement of the urban masses in the liberation struggle (p. 77). The SAPC’s guiding role with regard to the ANC was further augmented after Chris Hani’s assassination. Joe Modise became ‘…the youngest-ever members of the Central Committee’ (p. 82). Ellis is careful to document ANC and SAPC 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 notion 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. After mobilisation and internationalisation, as the three major 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 sanctions that ‘…the ANC hierarchy was disarrayed. That is why Slovo, as a stalwart of the SACP, came away most impressed by Ellis’s view of SACP hegemony over the movement believing ‘…that political struggle should be the base 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 urban violence and work stoppages, attacks on police stations and local collaborators, and industrial confrontations with the armed 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 banning 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 the ANC was one of the most powerful and 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 this book’s transitional drip-feed that Ellis’s argument starts to falter. If his depiction of SAPC hegemony over the ANC in exile is quite convincing, it would seem that after the ‘Homecoming’ in chapter seven and the SAPC having shot its strategic and tactical bolt in Operation Vula, that its influence over the ANC decidedly begins to wane. Certainly, senior SAPC figures such as Joe Slovo, Ronnie Kasrils and others were key players during the negotiation but what was most pronounced in power vacuity and that roles were reversed: the SAPC 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 SAPC ‘…has had little influence within the alliance for the last two decades’ (p. 299). If that is the case, it is a fortiori begs the question of why it is so and which factors have conspired to this decline in SAPC’s influence? Indeed, the transition to democracy in South Africa has swamped much more ideological and policy convergence between the ANC and SAPC, 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 that the liberation movement 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 SAPC doctrinal influence on the ANC will not simply disappear and requires further discussion. Ellis’s view of SAPC hegemony over the ANC is not without its criticisms. His detractors have been quick to criticise his historiography as a major weakness of Ellis’s work. In an opinion piece (March/Mars 2014) he would argue, a strategic liability). Ellis is correct in observing that [the] ANC in power has remained little interested in understanding the ANC’s role in the world it has become (p. 300). This is an astonishing assertion for a party that can justifiably claim a progressive foreign policy that has supported 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 successes. However, the ANC’s perception is the ANC’s political economy for the ANC its legitimacy and its subsequent electoral successes. The ANC’s perception is the ANC’s political economy for the ANC its legitimacy and its subsequent electoral successes. The ANC’s perception is the ANC’s political economy for the ANC its legitimacy and its subsequent electoral successes.
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: ‘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.’

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