

Biography lacks heft and precision

HANI: A LIFE TOO SHORT

Janet Smith and
Beauregard Tromp
Jonathan Ball Publishers
REVIEW:
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CHRIS HANI was and remains an influential and iconic figure, not just in the history of the ANC and the liberation movement, but also in South Africa's contemporary politics, as the debates at the party's Polokwane conference in December 2007 clearly showed.

However, especially among exiled South Africans, his iconic status certainly predated his assassination in April 1993 at the age of 50. After his death one of the biggest questions in South African politics very quickly became "what if Chris were still alive?"

Would he have become president? What would such a Hani presidency have looked like?

Such questions are both the driving force behind continuing interest in his life and thought, and simultaneously, because they are unanswerable, the major difficulty facing his biographers.

The handsome and popular young prince, the heir apparent, struck down and killed before he could fulfil his potential, is an archetypal figure in myth, folklore and literature.

Given the extreme violence of most twentieth-century political struggles against colonialism, the history of the world's liberation movements is not short of such figures, whose lives as they were actually lived are usually transformed by their heroic deaths into the stuff of legend.

A more-or-less random list might include John Chilembwe of Malawi, killed in 1915, Amilcar Cabral of the PAIGC in Guinea-Bissau, killed in 1973, Maurice Bishop of the New Jewel Movement in Grenada, killed in 1983, and Thomas Sankara of Burkina Faso, killed in 1987.

Some were struck down during nationalist struggles, others seized political power but died before they could really begin transforming their respective nations. But what if they had lived?

Biographers can opt, in

such circumstances, to write an account of a real person's life as it was really lived. Alternatively they can produce a version of the legend.

The choice is between warts-and-all narrative or hagiography, between deconstruction and respect for the dead, between the life and "the life".

Often enough and perhaps ironically, the most frank of biographies are the most truly sympathetic, because they show us a real individual battling with difficult moral choices, and sometimes getting them wrong.

Heroes have flaws just like the rest of us. What they usually have as well is more courage, compassion and commitment than most.

The new biography of Hani by journalists Janet Smith and Beauregard Tromp exemplifies this dilemma but sometimes tries to sidestep it.

Smith and Tromp admire Hani, who they never met, and go to great lengths to try to understand his social, economic and cultural background.

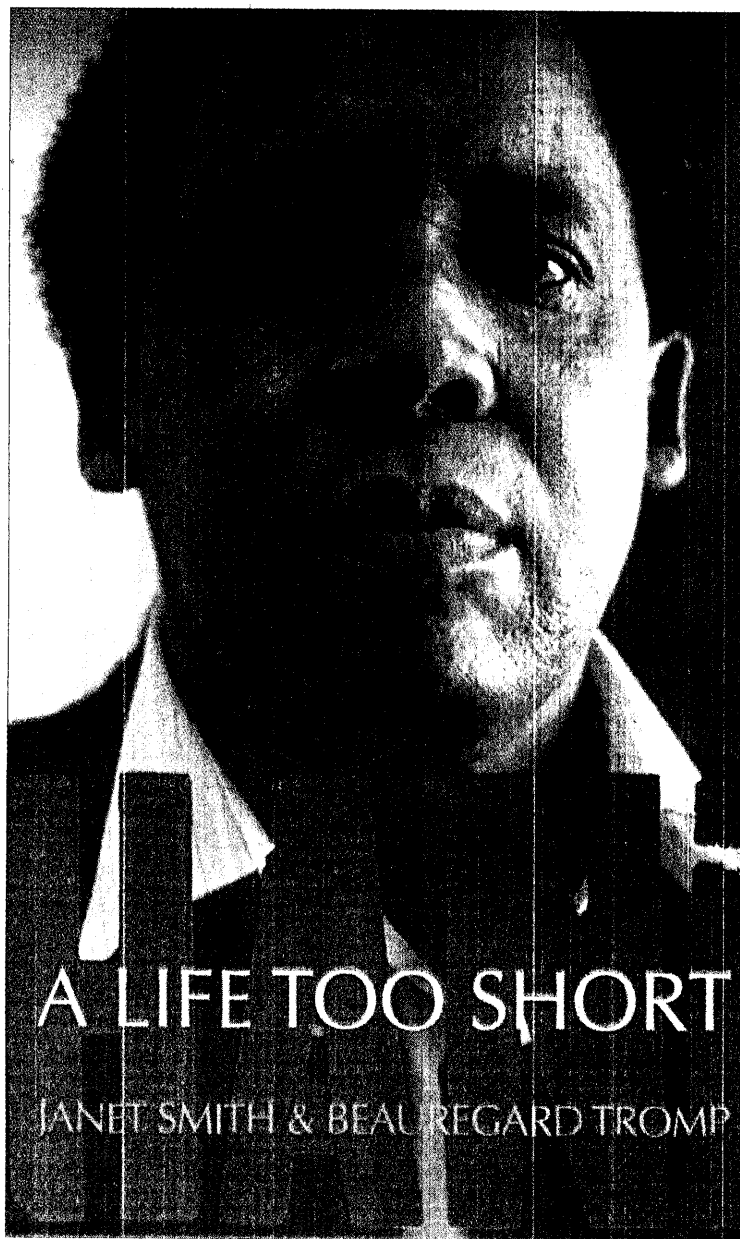
Why did he become a communist, given that his educational opportunities offered alternatives?

They travel to remote areas of the Eastern Cape to attend funerals and weddings and to interview people who knew Hani – encounters that they often tell us about in great detail, like anthropologists.

But their account of Hani's personality, not surprisingly, remains elusive in this account, based as it is mainly on contemporary interviews, with all the usual problems of feedback and the (re)construction of memory.

Thus we are shown a series of repeated thumbnail sketches of Hani as, for instance, the disciplined intellectual. These show a man who would go to parties and then disappear as soon as he could into a bedroom where there were books and whenever visitors came the quiet Hani would go to his bedroom with a book.

Similarly, we are shown Hani the military commander sharing his soldiers' hardships, as a man of the people who would sleep in the camps, do his morning run there, attend classes, eat beans and rice, and not with the leadership.



However, the question of Hani's possible role in the violent abuses committed at Quatro and other ANC camps in Angola is discussed only in the

vaguest of terms.

Astonishingly the authors appear, perhaps unwittingly, to endorse the view that this was not the business of anybody

but the ANC.

The authors have opted to structure the book as a simple chronological narrative, starting with Hani's childhood and

youth and proceeding through to his assassination and its aftermath.

Confusingly, there are occasional "flash-forwards", written in the present tense, and the absence of anchoring dates in the text requires that the reader concentrate, in order not to lose track. Oddly, a chapter on Hani's relationship with the Englishwoman Anne Duthie is tacked on to the end, almost as an afterthought, and there are a couple of appendices, including the text of the post-Wankie campaign memorandum of 1969.

Smith and Tromp sometimes show a novelist's omniscience – they know for example that Limpho Hani was "breathless" and "excited" and "couldn't speak fast enough" when telling the story of the 1982 raid on Maseru, even though they never interviewed her.

They do not always have an easy command of the English prose sentence, and sometimes their intended meaning is not entirely clear.

To choose a random example, in describing criticism of Winnie Mandela's football club as "iniquitous", are Smith and Tromp actually arguing that such criticism was grossly unjust, unrighteous and wicked?

The book is seriously marred by a completely inadequate referencing system, which consists of nine pages of chatty notes, linked to specific points only by a page number.

In some cases, newspaper articles are referenced only by the month of publication, and many direct quotations in the text are not sourced at all.

There is no bibliography. On p 197, in a passing reference to Thami Mali's 1993 book *Thami Mali remembers Chris Hani: The Sun that set before Dawn*, the authors manage not only to misquote the title, but get the publication date wrong by over 10 years.

Hani: A Life too Short may be accorded a warm but cautious welcome as the first full account of the life of an important contemporary South African figure. That said, the definitive biography of Chris Hani remains unwritten.

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