

BOOK REVIEW

The hidden thread: Russia and South Africa in the Soviet era, by Irina Filatova and Apollon Davidson, Johannesburg and Cape Town, Jonathan Ball, 2013, 553 pp., £21.50 (paperback), ISBN 978 1-86-842499-3, also available as an e-book.

The Hidden Thread is an important addition to the small but growing shelf of scholarly post-Soviet books in English on the role of the Soviet Union, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and – for a brief period – the Comintern in the long struggle against apartheid in South Africa and the southern African region. Such works include the two editions of Vladimir Shubin's *ANC: The View From Moscow* (1999 and 2008), and Filatova and Davidson's own documentary collection *South Africa and the Communist International* (2 volumes, 2003) co-edited with Valentin Gorodnov and Sheridan Johns. Although it casts a wider net, Maxim Matushevich's edited collection *Africa in Russia, Russia in Africa: Three Centuries of Encounters* (2007) might also be included in this list.

Both Filatova and Davidson have been prolific writers on African and South African topics: most recently Davidson was editor-in-chief of the little-noticed collection *Istoriia Afriki v Dokumentakh, 1870–2000* [The History of Africa in Documents], published in three volumes by the Academy of Sciences in Moscow between 2005 and 2007, and including over 600 primary documents in Russian translation in its more than 1600 pages. Davidson and Filatova have also published *Rossiia i Iuzhnaia Afrika: Tri Veka Sviazei* [Russia and South Africa: Three Centuries of Relations] (Moscow, 2010), which

covers much the same ground as the book under review, although the new work is longer and much more detailed.

The book is the culmination of many years of collaborative scholarly effort by the two authors, one of whom, Apollon Davidson, remains active into his eighties. The work is not strictly a study in international relations – in the sense of relations between states – since it deals extensively with CPSA and SACP history in the context of Soviet and Communist support for the anti-apartheid struggle in general, and for (largely unrealised) revolutionary outcomes in particular.¹

Despite the break-up and disappearance of the Soviet Union in 1991, this topic is still of more than merely historical interest, although it should be said that such interest remains significant in both Cold War and regional historiography. At present, ideas rooted in Soviet and communist thinking continue to exert influence within South Africa's governing party, the African National Congress (ANC): as the authors correctly note, the 'offshoots' of Soviet political education and practice 'still dominate South Africa's political landscape today' (140). The venerable concept of the 'national-democratic revolution' remains alive and well, and of course the SACP is still a key component of the tripartite alliance, while party members have held and continue to hold ministerial portfolios in successive ANC administrations.

The book is hugely informative, based on archival research in both Russian and South African archives and extensive use of published primary and secondary sources. It includes significant new material on, for example, secret trade negotiations in the 1920s and clandestine diplomatic

contacts in the early 1980s, well before the Brazzaville meeting of December 1988. These later encounters resulted in the opening in 1984 of a line of communication between South Africa's National Intelligence Service and the KGB. Some elements in the Russian security services had apparently become disillusioned with the ANC's overall lack of progress and, according to Filatova and Davidson, 'thought that the USSR was betting on the wrong horse' (430). Much of this story is previously unknown, and the new details will add nuance and complexity to our understanding of Soviet–South African contacts in the apartheid years.

The text is organised into 19 chapters, beginning with an account of early encounters between Tsarist Russia and South Africa before the Bolshevik Revolution. The final chapter also deals with Russian relations with South Africa after the Soviet period. In fact, in the case of pre-Soviet relations, there is relatively little to be told – some visits by sailing ships; Russian involvement in the Anglo-Boer war (already covered in detail in the authors' *The Russians and the Anglo-Boer War, 1899–1902* [1998]); and the Imperial Russian fleet steaming past Cape Town on its long journey to catastrophic defeat at the Battle of Tsushima. The authors decline an opportunity to discuss questions of foreign policy continuity or discontinuity between Tsarist and Bolshevik states and the chapter adds little to the main narrative.

A similar criticism may be levelled at the section at the end of the book dealing with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the near-simultaneous defeat of apartheid. The chapters on change in both the USSR (perestroika) and South Africa ('Pretorias-troika') are detailed and informative, giving due weight to the southern African regional shifts and the role of great power actors that together made a negotiated settlement possible. However, the material on Russian business initiatives in South Africa after normalised relations had been

established in the 'jaunty 1990s' (481) might have been omitted with no loss to the main narrative. The writing style is generally accessible, with Filatova and Davidson occasionally exhibiting a sense of low-key irony, as when they quote a starry-eyed visitor to the Soviet Union in the 1920s writing home to say that the country does 'not even have drunks' (148). A couple of pages later, the legendary Red Cavalry leader Budenny is accosting Josiah Gumede 'in a merry mood' and boozily offering military assistance at what may well have been a less-than-enthralling 'Evening of National Culture' in Moscow.

The book may be said to begin in earnest with Chapter two, 'Enter the Bolsheviks', although this section nevertheless exhibits some of the anecdotal character of the earlier pages. Filatova and Davidson tell the story of how the October Revolution was initially, but briefly, welcomed by Afrikaner nationalists on the grounds that it represented a blow against British imperialism and capitalism. Chapter three, however, interestingly describes early business and political contacts, largely inconclusive, between the USSR and South Africa from the mid 1920s onwards, after the conclusion of the Russian Civil War (1917–1921). Both countries were interested in exploring possible mutual benefits, and Filatova and Davidson have uncovered new material, most notably a South African mission to Moscow that met with Foreign Minister Georgii Chicherin, but was unsuccessful in persuading Pretoria to pursue further trade contacts (59–66).

Filatova and Davidson provide us with a detailed account of the education of South African (and other African) students at the Communist University of the Toilers of the East (or KUTV, to use the Russian acronym) in the 1920s and 1930s. They emphasise the extreme secretiveness that surrounded the student body. Students were known only by pseudonyms and were isolated, at least in theory, from the

local Russian population: but ‘no doubt the whole neighbourhood knew where these crowds of foreigners headed to every day, particularly such exotic foreigners as Africans’ (118). Usefully, the authors reproduce extracts from such documents as a code of secrecy, some curricula and an individual student assessment. They comment that ‘the main purpose of formal instruction at KUTV was ... indoctrination rather than education. The courses were highly ideological ...’ (131), but do not explore the epistemological (as opposed to the performative) aspects of such an agenda. After all, Soviet education and research in the 1920s was marked by relatively open competition between Marxist and ‘bourgeois’ epistemologies, under the assumption that the superiority of critically engaged Marxist method would soon become self-evident.

Formal, if one-sided, diplomatic relations between the USSR and South Africa were established in 1942, as part of the war effort. While Soviet consular offices were opened in Pretoria and Cape Town, and a trade mission in Johannesburg, the South African government never sent representatives to Moscow. Unsurprisingly, the consulate was finally closed down by the Nationalist government in 1956, as being ‘not in the interest of the peace and well-being of South Africa’ (196); Filatova and Davidson comment that in a decade and a half there had been no ‘increase in trade or any other forms of economic or cultural cooperation’ (199).

The ninth chapter deals with Soviet theory about and policy towards South Africa during the Cold War. These areas were, in Filatova and Davidson’s words, necessarily ‘transformed’ by the processes of decolonisation in the rest of Africa starting in the mid 1950s. The theoretical problem concerned the nature of independence when granted by a colonial power and inherited by a bourgeois party with no liberation struggle. Were liberation movements genuinely ‘natural allies’ of the

USSR? Could African countries bypass capitalism and achieve socialism on the basis of pre-capitalist modes of production? Our knowledge of the high-level debates remains provisional, as Filatova and Davidson point out, so long as the archives of, for example, the CPSU’s International Department, the KGB, the Foreign Ministry and Military Intelligence all remain closed (225). They make the point that while Soviet aid to the ANC was consistent over more than 30 years (236), southern Africa does not seem to have been regarded as especially important as far as Soviet *strategic* interests were concerned (226–227). On the contrary, support was driven mainly by ideological considerations, and indeed, by the 1980s there was some pessimism regarding the possibility of an ANC victory (245). The ‘total onslaught’ of the apartheid regime’s nightmares, write Filatova and Davidson, was driven by the South African people themselves, not by a Soviet-directed world conspiracy.

The extent and costs of Soviet support to the ANC and to other liberation movements, most particularly the Angolan MPLA (*Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola*), remain extremely hard to evaluate. The authors devote an entire chapter to Soviet involvement in Angola (269–297), where, as they point out, the Russians had no doubt that their main opponent was South Africa, and not UNITA (*União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola*). Indeed, Angola was the only place where soldiers from the two countries met in combat. Calculating the cost of military aid to the MPLA is complicated by lack of access to archival sources, as well as by the need to factor in aid to Cuban forces fighting in this theatre. (In the interests of full disclosure I should mention that I have corresponded with Filatova on this subject, and she cites a published book review of mine that discusses the question.)

The Hidden Thread represents the culmination of an ambitious research project,

covering a period of more than 70 years and discussing such diverse topics as trade and diplomatic relations, Soviet education, the Comintern, the history of the communist parties of both countries, the Cold War, military history and the liberation struggles of southern Africa. Theoretically, Filatova and Davidson are thus implicitly international relations ‘liberals’ rather than ‘realists’, insofar as they accept that non-state actors such as the Comintern and the CPSU were key players, that ideology was a crucial determinant of Soviet behaviour and that encounters between the two states included important commercial and cultural elements.

Especially in the chapter on the Comintern (which includes a short discussion of the ‘Independent Native Republic’ slogan), the authors do not shy away from recognising the brutal nature of the Soviet system, and describe the tragic impact of ‘Bolshevisation’ and of Stalin’s purges on both the Russian and South African communist movements in some detail; careers ruined, lives lost. Among the victims of these processes, in one way or another, were such figures as Zusmanovich, Potekhin and Bunting; many others were executed or sent to the Gulag. Davidson and Filatova seem to believe that these were in some sense inexplicable events, commenting on the purges ‘in which millions died’ that ‘nobody has come up with a theory adequate to explain this phenomenon’, a view also expressed in their earlier *South Africa and the Communist International* (vol.1, p. 22).

Any serious student of the political history of South and southern Africa in the twentieth century will need to refer to

this book, which opens up many new avenues of research, and poses – as it should – as many new questions as it answers older ones.

Note

1. The Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) was established in 1921. In the face of the Suppression of Communism Act in 1950, the party was forced to dissolve and the underground successor South African Communist Party (SACP) was founded in 1953.

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