

OHIO'S SHORT HISTORIES: ENCOUNTERS OF THE PAST IN THE PRESENT

Govan Mbeki.

By Colin Bundy.

Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2013. Pp. 168. \$14.95, paperback (ISBN 978-0-8214-2046-1).

The Idea of the ANC.

By Anthony Butler.

Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2013. Pp. vii + 139. \$14.95, paperback (ISBN 9780821420539).

Spear of the Nation (Umkhonto Wesizwe): South Africa's Liberation Army, 1960s–1990s.

By Janet Cherry.

Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2012. Pp. 156. \$14.95, paperback (ISBN 978-0-8214-2026-3).

The ANC Youth League.

By Clive Glaser.

Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2013. Pp. 168. \$14.95, paperback (ISBN 978-0-8214-2044-7).

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Writing in the South African newspaper *Mail & Guardian* in January 2014, academic Stephen Ellis claimed that at the time of Nelson Mandela's arrest in 1962, he was a member of the central committee of the South African Communist Party (SACP) and that it was the SACP, not the African National Congress (ANC), that was behind the turn to armed struggle. Ellis contended that 'ANC heavies' and the Nelson Mandela Centre of Memory (NMCM) had suppressed this fact until after Mandela's death in an effort to 'burnish the myth of the armed struggle, which was always more theatrical than real'. For Ellis this is part of a broader problem in which the ANC have continually refashioned the past to 'underline [their] own claims to legitimacy' in the postcolonial state. Later that month, Ellis also wrote a piece for the Internet news site www.politicsweb.co.za, in which he questioned the NMCM's timing in releasing a draft of Mandela's autobiography that was smuggled off Robben Island in 1977. Ellis posited that the main differences between the manuscript and the book that eventually became *Long Walk to Freedom* centred both on 'key historical details' and 'the abundance of information ... on Mandela's personal relationship with the SACP and his embrace of the main tenants of Marxism-Leninism'.

Other commentators have also noted the significance of the prison manuscript, with James Myburgh arguing on politicsweb that large parts of it were 'scrubbed' because of 'Mandela's support for the Soviet Union'. The implications of this apparent recasting of history are at least three-fold. First, Mandela could have simply placed less emphasis on the importance of Marxist-Leninism by the time *Long Walk* was published. Secondly and perhaps more importantly, if scholars such as Patrick Bond are to be believed, this reluctance to foreground left wing ideology was part of the ANC's leap to the right during the 1990s, particularly in the context of the end of the Cold War. Thirdly this 'omission' could also be seen as part of a broader postcolonial intellectual project in which the victors (the ANC) rewrite history to cement broader notions of national identity, and to shore up their own position as the ordained leaders of the country. As Anthony Butler notes in his sobering but measured account, *The Idea of the ANC*, at the party's centenary celebrations in Bloemfontein in 2012, in Jacob Zuma's 'January 8th Statement' he 'treated

[his audience] to a prolonged mediation on the history of the ANC' (p. 9). For Butler, when the ANC leadership faces, as it often does, difficult questions about its inability to transform the lives of the majority of the country's population, it 'turns to history' to deflect attention from pressing social issues because 'it is upon claims about the past that assertions of legitimate power depend' (p. 13). It is something of a truism that a failure to appreciate history will lead to its mistakes being perpetuated, but in an accessible manner, synthesising competing historiographies and thus ideas, the *Ohio Short Histories* under review in this essay provide comprehensible introductions to the nature of South Africa's past, particularly the role that the ANC have had in shaping the trajectory of the country's recent history.

For Butler, the history of the ANC is one marked by conflict and division. Yet, the party has remained 'intact' because of its 'capacity for strategic reflection' (p. 4), and because of its historic pragmatism in terms of membership and direction. Class formation, Butler argues, is the one issue that could mortally wound the party, as there is a growing divergence between the interests of ordinary members and the 'empowered classes' (p. 5). Surprisingly, however, he does not draw significant enough attention to the controversial policy of Black Economic Empowerment (BEE), now Broad-Based BEE (BBBEE) that has been seen to exemplify this class divergence. Despite this, Butler argues that there are three capabilities (that the party is in government; its serious disagreements are processed 'behind the scenes'; and, it understands the appeal of its liberation history) that 'allow it to retain ... integrity and cohesion' (p. 6). These key issues of agency, unity, and liberation are then drawn out throughout the rest of the monograph in which Butler aims to explain how, and to what consequence for the future of the country, the ANC has survived.

The chapter entitled 'agency' chronologically charts the party's key moments, including its formation in 1912, resurgence between 1933 and 1948 in the context of South Africa's second industrial revolution, and the 'putsch' organised by the youth league (ANCYL) in 1949, in which a new generation of intellectual activists including Mandela, Oliver Tambo, Walter Sisulu, and Govan Mbeki came to increasing prominence within the party. Butler skilfully demonstrates that pre-Sharpeville the success of political protest in the country was largely down to either the Communist party (CPSA) (bus boycotts) or to the break-away Pan African Congress (PAC) (pass campaign). Following the Sharpeville massacre, the turn to armed struggle and the imprisonment of virtually all the top echelons of the ANC at the Rivonia treason trial meant that, for Butler, 'the ANC virtually ceased to exist for a decade' (p. 37). In addition, following the Soweto uprising in 1976, when a new generation found themselves imprisoned on Robben Island, the ANC, to a certain extent, found its fortunes revitalised, as it was able to harness and intellectualise this student movement. Yet, as Butler notes, the main progenitors of urban protest in the 1980s were the United Democratic Front (UDF). When, in 1985, Tambo called upon black South Africans to render the country 'ungovernable' he was opportunistically trying to 'place the ANC as the head of an unfolding social revolution' (p. 50). Scant attention is paid to the role of the ANC following the release of Mandela and the transition to democracy, but Butler does examine how the ANC have exercised their agency to role out basic service delivery in the country, while at the same time 'cloaking [themselves] in an extra-constitutional mantle of unquestionable political authority and validating their own claims to serve as the instruments of historical destiny' (p. 57).

A key element of this political authority has been the prioritisation of 'unity' and the promotion of cohesion within the party. Recognising that at various historical junctures the party has been deeply divided, Butler observes that tribalism was eschewed and nonracialism promoted during the struggle against apartheid. Once in government, the ANC developed a complex, perhaps often competing, system of alliances with the pursuit of unity bringing both 'stability and compromise' to the party (p. 77). Like other liberation parties turned governments on the continent, the ANC argued that the attainment of democracy is only the first step towards attaining true 'liberation'. Despite this, and as Butler judiciously explores in the final chapter, democratic freedoms have largely failed to be translated into socioeconomic rights so much so that 'even when black citizens are no longer denied political rights, their lack of assets and skills can leave them effectively in chains' (p. 96). A lack of political will coupled with differing conceptions of liberation and liberal democracy have thus meant that the ANC failed to meaningfully transform the lives of historically disadvantaged groups.

When the party choose to look to the past, the activities of its dynamic youth league of the 1940s often provide comfortable shelter. As Clive Glaser notes in his nuanced and lively account, the Youth League (YL) have, at certain times, played a pivotal role in shaping policy in its parent organisation. For Glaser, the rise of the YL needs to be seen in the context of the broader political and economic landscape of industrialisation and urbanisation, when 'the townships of Johannesburg became an extraordinary melting pot of young, educated Africans' (20). The intellectual stimulus for the Youth League came from AP Mda and Anton Lembede, born respectively in the Eastern Cape and Natal, who both moved to Johannesburg seeking work as teachers. Radicalised by their experiences on the rand, 'together [they] shaped the ideology that would underpin the ANCYL' (p. 27). Part of a broader collective of 'angry young men', which included Self Mampuru, Tambo, Mandela, Sisulu, William Nkomo, Peter Raboroko, and Jordan Ngubane, the ANCYL came into existence in 1944 with Lembede as president and Mda as deputy, and crucially with the support of ANC president AB Xuma who had already embarked on a project to modernise and professionalise the party. However as Glaser notes, 'the ANCYL, it was made clear, was never to set itself up in opposition to the mother body but rather change it from within' (p. 30), to effectively broaden the appeal of the party.

In 1947, Lembede died suddenly, leaving Mda to head up the YL. Mda, teaching in Basutoland, began to rely heavily on Sisulu, Tambo, and Mandela who were all based in Johannesburg. The election of the National Party (NP) in 1948 further radicalised the movement with the YL executive asking Xuma for his support in a programme of direct action. Xuma refused, prompting YL members to approach James Moroka, to see if he would run against Xuma for the presidency in 1949. Often referred to as a coup, Moroka won, and Sisulu was installed to the party's executive. As Glaser observes, the significance of this moment in history was that the YL now had the support of its parent organisation in launching a programme of direct mass action. It was during this time that the YL leaders began to exert greater influence in the ANC, particularly in terms of ideological orientation, as the party began a closer relationship with the SACP.

In this context, Glaser now shifts attention to the divisions within the YL, particularly the growing band of 'Africanists' associated with Mda who were dismayed at ANCYL nonracialism (p. 51). Drawing on the late Lembede's ideas of psychological emancipation,

Mda and the 'Africanists' argued that Africans could only depend on themselves for their liberation. For Glaser the 'Africanists' ideology became attractive, because 'it seemed to be an appropriate response to the growing anger of the African masses' (p. 61) as the NP further limited the space for peaceful protest. Formed in 1959 with Robert Sobukwe at its head, the breakaway Pan African Congress (PAC) embarked on a mass recruitment drive, organising the pass campaign of 1960. Following the banning of both the ANC and PAC, Glaser demonstrates how the YL 'effectively ceased to exist' (p. 71), as it was student movements (sometimes linked with the Black Consciousness Movement) that 'reignited the struggle' (p. 75) in the 1970s. While the ANC tried to harness this new student movement, as Glaser observes, 'by the mid-1980s a kind of politicised black youth subculture had emerged, widely referred to as "the comrades"' that largely operated outside of organisational control (p. 93).

Tracing the trajectory of the YL to March 2012, Glaser also briefly examines the YL of the 1990s, but pays most attention to the ways in which the YL under the leadership of Julius Malema actively tried to draw comparisons between itself and the YL of Sisulu, *et al.* This book is sure to become required reading for students and scholars of youth politics in South Africa and the continent more widely. My only criticism centres on the genderless nature of this book. While Glaser essentially does note the patriarchal and narrow nature of African politics in this period, women are totally absent from this story. An attempt to recover some 'hidden narratives' would have certainly been a welcome addition to this already fascinating monograph.

The activists behind the revitalised YL of the 1940s were also the architects of what is commonly referred to as MK (*Umkhonto Wesizwe*), the armed wing of the ANC. Foregrounding her own sympathies for the soldiers of MK, Janet Cherry has set out to write a popular account which is both 'critical ... and ... profoundly empathetic to the experiences of ordinary soldiers fighting for a just cause' (p. 12). Outlining the context of the armed struggle, Cherry believes that 'it is difficult to find anyone in South Africa who thinks that the turn to armed struggle was not justified' (p. 13). However, she later cautions us against this teleology, reminding us that particularly the ANC were divided over the issue. Primarily aimed at installations, in an attempt to limit civilian deaths, symbolic sabotage was highly effective in conveying a message to the black majority that the time for peaceful protest was over. However, with the arrest and imprisonment of MK leaders at the Rivonia treason trial the early phase of MK activities came to an end.

Cherry then goes on to examine the limited success that MK had, paying particular attention to the Wankie and Sipolilo campaigns. While some black South Africans had left the country for training in Kongwa camp, Tanzania (she does not quantify how many), Cherry explains the difficulty of infiltrating back into the country because the frontline states had yet to experience decolonisation. Examining the harsh conditions guerrillas faced both in the camps and in 'action', Cherry then moves to discuss how MK adopted a dual strategy by trying to politicise the rural peasantry, in an attempt to win 'hearts and minds' while also continuing to send small number of guerrilla factions into urban areas to commit acts of sabotage. With the coming of the BCM and the important role that students began to play in challenging state hegemony, she pragmatically notes that 'popular unrest and civil revolt within South Africa came about largely independent of

the ANC or MK's actions' (p. 59). Furthermore, the majority of fighters who went into exile never saw direct action back in the country, rather languishing in camps (p. 66).

In the context of Oliver Tambo's call to make the country 'ungovernable' in 1985, Cherry examines how urban youths, often with no formal affiliation to MK, essentially formed paramilitary units carrying out 'MK strategy as they understood it' (p. 91). While arguably this MK-like movement enjoyed more successes than those of the trained guerrillas, Cherry notes that the political environment suddenly changed; Mandela was released and it was decided to suspend armed struggle in August 1990. Therefore for MK cadres there was no triumphant march on Pretoria. Cherry certainly succeeds in drawing out the ambiguities surrounding MK, yet some of the writing in this book is more empathetic than critical. It is important to bear witness to the sacrifices that many South Africans such as those mobilised into MK made, and if Cherry had concentrated more on the ordinary voices then this would certainly have been a richer study.

The interplay between the 'great individual' and the 'people' remains central to much historical writing, particularly in the South African case when there are such an arresting number of 'great individuals' to profile. Colin Bundy, recognising this relationship in his thoughtful biography of Govan Mbeki, examines the ways in which 'Oom Govan' himself placed greater emphasis than many other cadres on the political importance of rural people in 'an overwhelmingly urban nationalist movement' (p. 9). Educated at Healdtown, 'a flagship mission school', and Fort Hare, Bundy's monograph demonstrates the deep affinity Mbeki felt for the Eastern Cape throughout his life. This is not a conventional biography in the sense that it is not a straightforward account of what happened when; rather, Bundy is interested in the intellectual development of Mbeki and the way that he shaped the character of the ANC.

Deeply embedded in local politics in the Transkei, his period as editor of *Inkundla ya Bantu* (1938–43) is read by Bundy as 'an invaluable source for understanding his politics; and the arena where he first tested key elements of his later and better known writings' (p. 50). His political engagement in the Transkei taught him that if the ANC ever had any hopes of becoming a mass based movement then it must connect local grievances to broader nationalist issues. Leaving the rural Transkei in 1953 to take up a teaching post in Ladysmith, it is here that Mbeki became involved in urban politics. Banned from teaching in 1955, he moved to Port Elizabeth where he became editor of the SACP newspaper *New Age*. 1952 saw a successful defiance campaign in the city where Mbeki was credited as being the key political educator in the region.

Continuing to edit *New Age*, Mbeki's life changed dramatically between March 1960 and July 1963, as he was on 'the road to Rivonia' (p. 104). Playing a key role in the decision to turn to armed struggle following the Sharpeville Massacre, Bundy sees this move as a decision which 'gather[ed] momentum' rather than emanating from any particular resolution (p. 110). Later arrested at Liliesleaf, Bundy notes that unlike Mandela, Sisulu and Mbeki were subjected to days of hostile cross-examination in which both men deported themselves with courage and restraint.

Spending twenty-three years and four months in prison, Bundy notes the growing tension between Mandela and Mbeki, reminding the reader that Mandela often exhibited a dogmatic uncompromising 'leadership' style. It was in this context that the two men had a falling out, only finding rapprochement between 1977–8 with the new influx of

Soweto prisoners, when they further transformed Robben Island into 'the university'. Upon his release in November 1987, he once again disagreed with Mandela over his unilateral approach to negotiating. Chronologically Bundy's monograph ends here, and it would have been interesting if he had charted Mbeki's role in postapartheid governmental politics. That issue aside this is a very accomplished monograph. Neither sentimental nor vague and dispassionate, Bundy distils Mbeki's legacy as that of writer, teacher and revolutionary, albeit one who had participated in a 'modest revolution' (p. 158).

The books profiled in this review essay are part of a broader collection of short histories that aim to provide 'succinct introductions to important topics in African history'. However, as the collection stands at the moment, it rather seems that its focus is firmly South African. This issue aside, the books discussed here certainly provide interesting perspectives on wider currents of South African history, and as Fred Cooper argued twenty years ago:

In Africa, the encounters of the past are very much part of the present. Africa still faces the problems of building networks and institutions capable of permitting wide dialogue and common action among people with diverse pasts, of struggling against and engaging with the structures of power in the world today.¹

Those who want to understand the myriad ways in which the past and the present are deeply entangled in the South African context would certainly do well to take these books as their starting point.

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1 F. Cooper, 'Conflict and connection: rethinking colonial African history', *American Historical Review*, 99:5 (1994), 1545.