

DEBATING THE ANC'S EXTERNAL LINKS DURING THE STRUGGLE AGAINST APARTHEID

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*Several recent publications have explored the African National Congress's (ANC's) external links during South Africa's apartheid years. The following four texts offer an insight into the very different personal and methodological approaches that have so far shaped attempts to understand this aspect of the ANC's struggle. The section starts with a review of Stephen Ellis's recent book *External Mission: the ANC in exile, 1960–1990* by Hugh Macmillan, who argues that Ellis overemphasizes the relationship between the ANC and the South African Communist Party (SACP). In a response to this review, Stephen Ellis justifies his approach by pointing to the importance of interpretation for the production of history, but also by referring to the different networks and resources, both in South Africa and beyond, on which he and Macmillan were able to draw. A review of Hugh Macmillan's new book *The Lusaka Years: the ANC in exile in Zambia, 1963 to 1994* by Arianna Lissoni follows. Lissoni agrees with the author that the debate about the ANC in exile must be understood in the context of contemporary disaffection with South Africa's ruling party. Emphasizing the specificity of the Zambian experience, she welcomes Macmillan's focus on the multiplicity of experiences in exile as potentially opening new avenues for further study and reflection on the ANC. Finally, Mariya Kurbak's consideration of Irina Filatova and Apollon Davidson's *The Hidden Thread: Russia and South Africa in the Soviet era* explains that the authors' close understanding of Russian–South African relations enables them to illuminate the previously hidden importance of the Soviet Union in the history of South Africa and the ANC.*

STEPHEN ELLIS, *External Mission: the ANC in exile, 1960–1990*. London: C. Hurst and Co. (hb £20 – 978 1 84904 262 8). 2012, 288 pp.

I should, perhaps, begin by declaring an interest. I have recently published a book, *The Lusaka Years: the ANC in exile in Zambia, 1963 to 1994*, which, though different in its focus, may be seen as being in competition with this book. Stephen Ellis's book is a rewrite of an earlier book, *Comrades Against Apartheid: the ANC and the South African Communist Party in exile*, which he wrote with Tsepo Sechaba (the pen name of Oyama Mabandla) and published in 1992. That was the first book to expose some of the worst incidents in the exile history of the ANC, the mutinies in Angola in 1984 and their suppression by the Angolan military and the ANC's own security department, referred to in that book and in this one as *Mbokodo* – the grinding stone. The original book emerged out of Ellis's role as editor of *Africa Confidential* and drew on the personal experience and knowledge of his informant, Sechaba/Mabandla. The new book cites an impressive array of archival sources including the ANC archives and Tambo papers at the University of Fort Hare, the ANC papers at the Mayibuye Centre at the University of the Western Cape, and the Simons papers at the University of

Cape Town. Ellis has had access to some of the files of the East German security service, the Stasi. He also had access to some State Security Council files while working as a researcher for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 1995 and has used some information from confidential sources, including transcripts of radio messages sent between Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) commanders during the Angolan mutinies. His account of these mutinies remains the best available, although a different picture may emerge when MK and ANC security files become available and work is done on the relevant Angolan government and military archives, assuming that they have survived.

External Mission is a much better documented book than *Comrades Against Apartheid*, but it is, like its predecessor, a polemical work that appears to be driven, as reviewers of the earlier book noted, by a conspiracy theory of history and ‘an indecent obsession’ (Garth Strachan, ‘Indecent obsession’, work in progress, September 1992) with the role of the SACP. In a ‘Note on Method’, Ellis states that he has ‘tried as far as possible to correct some of the errors in my earlier attempt at telling the story. Its basic line of analysis I believe to have stood the test of time’ (p. 311). His basic theses relate to the alleged dominance of the ANC by the SACP, which ‘bounced’ (pp. 26–7) the former into armed struggle in 1961; assumed effective control of it through the opening of the organization to non-racial membership at the Morogoro Conference in 1969; founded and ran the security department using ‘Stalinist’ methods (pp. 78–9, 184–5); and was at all times, up to and including the era of Gorbachev, *glasnost* and *perestroika*, subservient to the Moscow line.

Readers, especially students, should be warned that these are not historical ‘facts’ but are tendentious claims, and that the evidence in the book has been carefully selected to back them up. Both the ANC and the SACP were split on the issue of the turn to ‘armed struggle’ – which initially meant sabotage and armed propaganda – and it suited both organizations to establish MK as a nominally autonomous unit. The SACP was never recognized as a liberation movement in Tanzania or Zambia and was compelled by its illegality in those countries, and by the ANC leadership, to operate clandestinely within the organization. Its inability to hold meetings of more than a handful of people seriously hampered its activities. It was split on the question of non-racial membership – the real pressure for that came from within MK, which was always non-racial. There is no evidence that the security department was set up or run by the SACP – on Ellis’s own evidence, some members of the SACP thought that it should set up its own security department, which would not have been necessary if it controlled the existing one. Ellis acknowledges that the SACP has had little influence on the ANC in government over the last twenty years, and there is no reason to believe that its influence on the ANC in exile was anywhere near as pervasive as he suggests.

The new book is spiced up with the suggestion that Nelson Mandela was a member of the SACP from 1960 to 1962 – something that would, if true, support the claim that the ANC was little more than a front for the SACP, but which Mandela himself consistently denied from his Treason Trial speech in 1960, through his Rivonia Trial speech in 1964, to his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, in 1994. The SACP waited until shortly after his death to claim that he was a member of the party and the central committee, but produced no new evidence to support this claim, which Mandela would undoubtedly have

refuted were he still alive and able to speak for himself. The lines between the ANC and the SACP were blurred in the illegal underground in the early 1960s – there were no party cards or party lists, and few meetings of more than a handful of people, and it is possible that Mandela attended one or two meetings of the central committee in 1961–62 in his capacity as commander of MK. He may have been briefly co-opted to the central committee, but that does not mean that he was a member of the party. There is no compelling reason to doubt the word of one of the world's most respected people.

The book has a new emphasis on factionalism and the criminal connections of the ANC and the apartheid government. The end result is a book that equates the apartheid government's murderous 'third force' with the ANC's Operation Vula and comes close to equating the ANC and the apartheid state. The ANC in exile is given little credit for the end of apartheid, which is attributed to internal and international pressures and the collapse of the Soviet Union. The weaknesses of the ANC in government are attributed to the 'culture of exile' and not to nearly twenty years in power with minimal opposition.

The book contains many errors of fact – too many to list here – but it is the errors of interpretation that are the most disturbing. To suggest that the main activity of the leaders of the ANC in Lusaka was 'factional manoeuvre' (p. 104) is absurd, just as it is to suggest that Oliver Tambo was 'the perfect front-man, since he was not a communist, his manner was disarmingly mild and he could generally be relied upon to deliver whatever speech was put in front of him by his aides' (p. 219). Errors of judgement of this kind occur throughout the book. It should be read with caution.

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AUTHOR'S RESPONSE

'The historian is engaged on a continuous process of moulding his facts to his interpretation and his interpretation to his facts,' according to E. H. Carr in his classic *What Is History?* – written, clearly, in the days when it was casually assumed that historians were men.

This being so, it is misleading for Hugh Macmillan to suggest that the interpretation of the ANC's period in exile contained in my book *External Mission* is backed up by evidence that has been 'carefully selected'. Of course it is: every historian selects evidence to support his or her interpretation. By the same token, good historians should be prepared to review their interpretation in the light of the evidence as it becomes available.

Like many British people three or four decades ago, when I first became conscious of the ANC, I considered it to be an essentially moderate opponent of the apartheid system in South Africa. I thought that allegations of communist influence were propaganda and lies. Only over a period of years, especially as a result of interviews with rank-and-file activists in exile, did I come to the