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## **The South African Communist Party and the collapse of the Soviet Union**

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51. *Angop Document*, No.72 (19 Nov. 1990), p.5; *Projectos de Teses*, p.15.
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53. Emanuel Carneiro, reported on Radio Nacional de Angola, 16 Nov. 1991, in BBC SWB ME/W0207 A2/1-2 (26 Nov. 1991).
54. *Angola, São Tome and Principe: Country Profile, 1990/91* (London: Economist Intelligence Unit, 1990), p.37; *Financial Times*, 26 Sept. 1991.
55. Author's interview with Angolan commercial attaché, London, Nov. 1989.
56. *Angop News Bulletin*, No.150 (22 Oct. 1990), p.3, and No.160 (25 April 1991), p.17; *Facts and Reports*, Vol.21(M), 28 June 1991, p.23; *Financial Times*, 26 Sept. 1991; *Angola Economic Notes*, Vol.1, No.3 (Oct. 1991), p.1.
57. Jose Eduardo Dos Santos, 'There Will be Peace in Southern Africa', *World Marxist Review*, 1989, No.10, p.14.
58. Information on Angola's relationship with the communist countries is derived from Webber, op. cit., Chs.3 and 5.
59. The same can also be said of the two competing successor organizations to the Soviet Union: the Union of Sovereign States and the Commonwealth of Independent States.
60. *Financial Times*, 20 Aug. 1991; *Africa Economic Digest*, Vol.12 (7 Oct. 1991), p.12.
61. This latter agreement was known as the Lusaka Accord and provided for a South African withdrawal from Angola in return for Angolan assurances that it would restrain infiltration of vacated areas by armed fighters of the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) who were opposed to the South African presence in Namibia.
62. Webber, op. cit., Ch.4.
63. In addition to Angola, this includes Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde, and São Tome and Principe.
64. 'We Want Peace and Tranquility: Interview with Paolo Jorge' (then Angolan foreign minister), *People's Power*, No.18 (Summer 1981), pp.23-4.
65. For a discussion of Angola's non-alignment see Oye Ogunbadejo, 'Non-Alignment and Africa's International Relations: The Case of Angola', *Nigerian Journal of International Relations*, Vol.7, Nos 1 and 2 (1981), and Vijay Gupta, 'Dynamics of Angolan Foreign Policy', *Africa Quarterly*, Vol.29, Nos.1-2 (1988).
66. Jurie Van de Walt, 'Angola Flirts with South Africa', *New African*, No.283 (April 1991), p.28.
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68. Keith Somerville, 'Africa Moves Towards Party Pluralism', *The World Today*, Vol.47, Nos. 8-9 (1991), pp.152-5.
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## The South African Communist Party and the Collapse of the Soviet Union

STEPHEN ELLIS

For 40 years (1950-90) the South African Communist Party (SACP) was banned by a government that represented international communism as the source of all political evil. The conditions of exile go some way to explaining the SACP's continuing attachment to Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy. The practical consequences of the quasi-Stalinist regime which the SACP introduced in ANC camps in Angola, especially, were unknown to people back home in South Africa. The fact that the SACP was such a militant foe of apartheid, but did not have a record in government to defend, has contributed to its popularity among black South Africans today. It is arguably the only communist party in the world whose popularity is on the increase.

The South African Communist Party (SACP)<sup>1</sup> was for nearly 70 years Moscow's most faithful ally in Africa south of the Sahara. As the Communist Party of the Soviet Union collapsed, followed by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics itself, the SACP looked on with dismay and deep concern. It did not, though, either panic or renounce its faith in Marxism-Leninism in spite of the almost slavish admiration for the USSR that the SACP had professed throughout its life.

The SACP's reaction was simply to admit the failings of socialism in Eastern Europe and then continue much as before. As Joe Slovo, then the SACP General Secretary, remarked in early 1990 when asked if the crisis in the socialist world proved that Marxism as a theory was flawed: 'No, not at all. The serious errors that emerged in the practice of existing socialism are not rooted in the basic tenets of Marxist revolutionary science. They are the result of distortions and misapplications.'<sup>2</sup> It is notable that not only does the SACP continue to defend Marxism-Leninism, but it does so using the vocabulary and style characteristic of party literature of earlier times. The difference is only that the party is now willing to accept, for the first time in its history, that the USSR suffered from serious problems rooted in the type of political regime that governed it. For the first time in its history party literature, too, is now

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prepared to consider the merits of socialist thinkers earlier condemned as heretical, notably Leon Trotsky. At the time of writing, in late December 1991, with the Soviet Union disappearing altogether, probably the SACP's closest friend in the world is the Cuban Communist Party, which it regards as the last surviving bastion of orthodoxy.

The extraordinary loyalty – or obstinacy – of the SACP in remaining faithful to its old friends and its old ideas has provided rich material for its opponents, who have found it much easier than previously to represent the SACP as a band of old-fashioned Stalinists too blind to see that the world has left them behind. Like any effective criticism, this is not devoid of truth, but polemics of this sort fail to examine the reasons why the SACP should prove so resistant to the changes taking place elsewhere in the world. They also fail to note that this is not the first time that something vaguely comparable has happened in South African history in the sense that a political ideology of European origin has lived on in South Africa long after it had been discredited in Europe. After all, was not the ideology of the National Party government which came to power in 1948 closely related to the vision of national socialism whose European variant had just suffered the most crushing defeat?

The irony of the situation by late 1991 was quite astounding. For some 40 years the National Party government of South Africa, first voted to power by a white-majority electorate in 1948, had regarded communism as the world's leading political demon. It had banned communism in South Africa in 1950 and had consistently labelled all its opponents, even rather mild liberals, as communist or communist-influenced. P.W. Botha, prime minister from 1978 and state president from 1984 to 1989, had publicly spoken of a 'total Marxist onslaught' against white South Africa and spoke frequently of the Soviet design on the whole of southern Africa, with South Africa as the prize.<sup>3</sup> This may have been lurid but it was not fanciful, for it was abundantly clear that there did indeed exist a Soviet strategy aimed at installing an allied government in South Africa. Soviet support for liberation movements in South Africa, Namibia and Zimbabwe and for governments in Mozambique and Angola was in large part a series of steps on this path. Who, then, would have believed, in 1986 or even later, that within five years Leningrad would change its name to St Petersburg, while a white South African foreign minister, Pik Botha, looked on as an official guest? Who would have believed that a white South African state president from the ruling National Party would plan an official visit to Moscow to coincide with the date that a legal SACP was planning to hold a congress in South Africa?<sup>4</sup> Or that Joe Slovo, the General Secretary of the SACP, would refer to himself in public, with characteristic self-deprecating humour, but with

an uncomfortable degree of accuracy, as the last remaining Lithuanian communist?

To trace how these things came about it is necessary to sketch briefly the history of the SACP and its predecessor, the CPSA, and of their relations with the Soviet Union. The CPSA was founded in Cape Town in 1921 by a small group of white South African socialists at a time of rapid change in South Africa.<sup>5</sup> The country had been transformed from a collection of British colonies co-existing with 'native reserves' and independent Boer republics into a unitary state as a result of the Anglo-Boer war of 1899–1902. Its mines, and the economy based on them, attracted large numbers of new European immigrants, and it was they who gave impetus to the early socialist movement and its most lasting political expression, the CPSA. Most of the party's founders appear to have been immigrants, mostly from Britain, strongly influenced by the British radical and trade unionist tradition. They were joined by socialists of Eastern European origin who migrated to South Africa in the 1920s.<sup>6</sup> They saw in South Africa many of the worst features of capitalism and imperialism expressed in their most unpleasant form and, like many socialists in the early 1920s, they considered the Bolshevik revolution an example that was sure to be emulated within a few years throughout the capitalist world, of which South Africa was now a part.

From the start the CPSA was a member of the Communist International, the Comintern, and cultivated exceptionally close relations with Moscow. The most famous illustration of this was the events of 1928, when a small delegation of South African communists visited Moscow for the sixth congress of the Comintern.<sup>7</sup> The meeting ordered the CPSA to adopt a new political strategy that consisted of working for the attainment of 'an independent native republic' or, in modern parlance, for black majority rule in South Africa. This strategy was regarded with dismay by the most influential South African communists as it appeared to be politically impossible in the circumstances of the late 1920s and suggested that there was to be no socialist revolution in South Africa in the foreseeable future. Although by 1928 no fewer than 1,600 out of 1,750 CPSA members were blacks,<sup>8</sup> most of the latter had been very recently recruited in anticipation of the change of party line. The party remained essentially run by whites. Nevertheless the CPSA obeyed the line enunciated by the Comintern and in time came to see the decision as a wise and far-sighted one, not least because it committed the party to recruiting black members and working for the political liberation of black South Africans as a first step towards socialist revolution. It also established a pattern of regular contacts between officials of the small South African party and Moscow. During the 1930s, as the CPSA was riven by factional

disputes and all manner of problems, there was a trickle of South African communists who visited Moscow and were even trained there. Three South African communists – Lazar Bach and the brothers Paul and Maurice Richter – were detained by the Soviet authorities in 1937 while they were in the USSR for a visit on party business. Hopelessly identified with the wrong faction in the disputes then taking place in the Soviet Union, espousing policies now rejected by the Soviet leadership, the three became caught up in Stalin's purges. The three South African communists were convicted of political offences. The Richters were both executed in 1938 and Bach died in a Soviet labour camp in 1941.<sup>9</sup>

Although the execution of Bach and the Richters was never made public, and continued to cause unease to the small number of South African communists who suspected the truth of what had happened, it did not disturb the close relations between the Soviet and South African parties over the next few decades. The CPSA opposed the Second World War at its outbreak on the grounds that it represented a carve-up of markets by rival capitalist powers. Only after the USSR's entry into the war in 1941 did the CPSA take a pro-war line, calling on workers to rally to the defence of the embattled socialist motherland and to suspend anti-government work in South Africa. The party was to follow the twists and turns of Soviet foreign policy faithfully until the late 1980s, successively supporting the invasions of Hungary (1956), Czechoslovakia (1968) and Afghanistan (1979).

Thus, the entry of the Soviet Union into the Second World War had the side-effect of putting the CPSA on the same side as the South African government, but this uneasy alliance was not to last, especially after a white-majority electorate in 1948 had voted into office a National Party government that was fiercely anti-communist and that proceeded, in 1950, to outlaw the party. The CPSA voted to disband itself in anticipation of its legal suppression. Nevertheless some members secretly re-established the party three years later under a new name, the South African Communist Party. Unable to work openly, party members were obliged to do so as members of other organizations. Black communists concentrated their efforts on working inside the African National Congress (ANC), in theory at least an organization open to black South Africans only, and they met with some success in this. The ANC had included communists or communist sympathizers in its ranks since the 1920s in conformity with its status not as a political party but as a congress open to black South Africans of every ethnic group and all political tendencies.

Under the circumstances of the 1950s, with black communists seeking more influence in the ANC than previously because of the banning of

their own party, and with the black community in general reacting against the systematic imposition of apartheid laws after 1948, the ANC and the illegal SACP became close. It was more or less an open secret that such leading ANC members as J.B. Marks, Govan Mbeki and Moses Kotane were also party members. Far from alienating them from non-communist colleagues such as Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo, the dedication of such communists won the respect of Mandela, Tambo and other non-communist ANC leaders and influenced their own thinking.<sup>10</sup> White, Indian and Coloured communists could not take up formal membership of the ANC but found outlets for their work in other organizations allied to the ANC, the whole forming an unwieldy bloc of organizations known as the Congress Alliance. By far the leading body of the Congress Alliance was the ANC but its most influential single organized group was the clandestine communist party, whose members were active in every component part of the Alliance.

The party's suppression in 1950 and its subsequent choice to continue underground work through the ANC or through penetration of other organizations had a profound effect on the party's thinking and is important in explaining its response to events in Eastern Europe and the collapse of the Soviet Union. The SACP was obliged to remain secretive, since open identification as a party member would lead to arrest in South Africa. Moreover, over the years its tactic of influencing or, as critics have charged, manipulating, other organizations was well served by the practice of secrecy. In 1961, after the ANC itself had been banned, key members of the party and the ANC decided together that there was no option but to launch an armed struggle in the pursuit of their political aims through an underground army, Umkhonto we Sizwe ('The Spear of the Nation'). From its inception in 1961 Umkhonto we Sizwe included a large number of communists in its ranks and in its leadership. For many years its chief military strategist was Joe Slovo, who was for years Chief of Staff of Umkhonto we Sizwe and served as general secretary of the party from 1986 to 1991.

The launching of the armed struggle in 1961, and the simultaneous retreat into exile of many leaders of both the ANC and the SACP, was a formative event. It made the SACP and the armed organization in which it had overwhelming influence, Umkhonto we Sizwe, at least symbolically into the most important armed opponent of the South African government. It also placed the party and its ANC ally in a position of some importance in the Cold War, as all of southern Africa from the 1960s until the late 1980s was riven by a series of armed conflicts, all interconnected, in which every major protagonist had either implicit or explicit backing from the Soviet and American superpowers. From the

superpowers' point of view, Angola, Namibia, South Africa, Mozambique and Zimbabwe were all part of a struggle for influence in southern Africa and constituted a regional theatre for the pursuit of the cold war. It was perhaps not such an important theatre as the Middle East or South-east Asia, but it was none the less seen as significant by the protagonists in Moscow and Washington.

The emergence of Africa, and particularly southern Africa, as a theatre of superpower conflict gave the SACP an influence quite out of proportion to its numerical importance or its status as an opposition group.<sup>11</sup> There were many reasons for this. In the first place, there was an important cultural and historical connection. Nowhere south of the Sahara did there exist such an old communist party as in South Africa or one whose members conformed so closely to the Soviet idea of what a communist party should be. It had a proven record of loyalty to the Soviet ideal and in the mid-1960s decisively rejected the Maoist version of Marxism-Leninism, unlike African socialists such as Robert Mugabe or Julius Nyerere who had been seduced by the Chinese vision of socialism, making them uncertain allies in Soviet eyes. Some leading South African communists were themselves of East European origin, which added a personal element to the good relations between the SACP and the Soviet Communist Party: Joe Slovo and Ray Simons, leading lights of the SACP over many decades, were both born in the Baltic republics of the USSR and emigrated to South Africa in their early years. South Africa, too, was by far the most industrialized country in Africa south of the Sahara and had an identifiable urban working class, which made it, in the view of scientific socialists, the African country best-suited for revolution and most fertile for the work of an orthodox communist party such as the SACP.

Over the years, Soviet policy-makers learned to trust the SACP as no other party on the African continent and to look to it for advice on how to navigate the complexities of southern African politics. SACP advice was crucial to any regional party or organization that was in search of Soviet sponsorship. It played a role in the Soviet Union's mistaken identification of Joshua Nkomo's Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) as the leading Zimbabwean guerrilla movement and its spurning of Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), as also with Soviet reconciliation with the South-West African People's Organization (SWAPO) after the latter had made an embarrassing strategic error connected with the independence of Angola in 1975. Moreover, the clear identification of the Soviet Union with the leading opponents of apartheid in South Africa, or more generally with many of the leading opponents of white colonial rule throughout Africa, was a political asset

to the Soviet government far outside southern Africa itself: the struggle against apartheid emerged in the 1970s as a major international issue in which the moral issues involved seemed particularly clear, and therefore cast Soviet policy in a favourable light in countries far away from Africa.

The Soviet Union was completely identified with the anti-apartheid movement while the USA, its arch-rival, was left to squirm as it attempted to reconcile its support for Pretoria with a stated commitment to fighting racism and supporting democracy. In Africa no issue rallied support as effectively as opposition to apartheid. In some countries of Western Europe especially, anti-apartheid movements became important and successful domestic lobbies. In Western European countries including Britain and the Netherlands – but not in the USA – anti-apartheid movements maintained a close connection with their national communist party and provided a good platform for increasing the party's influence in other spheres.<sup>12</sup> Quite apart from the geo-political importance of supporting the anti-Pretoria forces in southern Africa, the Soviet Union was in possession of a highly effective and relatively inexpensive propaganda and diplomatic asset of widespread usefulness.

For its part, the SACP derived from the relationship with Moscow considerable influence and prestige plus resources in the form of money, weapons, training and political support. Much of this support was not publicly identified as being intended for the SACP but for its more famous ally, the ANC, which the party increasingly came to dominate, as it sought to turn the ANC into a political front organization under party control.<sup>13</sup> The party's solid international communist connection provided training facilities in the USSR and other Warsaw Pact countries and Cuba, including military training for guerrilla fighters, training in intelligence and security work, and, for the elite of party members, courses at the prestigious Lenin School in Moscow which had spawned generations of leading cadres of the SACP. Not least, it provided an ideological star by which to navigate the South African revolution. In some respects, the tsarist empire and South Africa showed uncanny similarities, and the Bolsheviks' apparent success in transforming a semi-feudal, multi-national empire into a world power and a socialist state with a modern industrial sector therefore offered an attraction to South African revolutionaries far beyond that offered by any mere ally of convenience.

Above all, the Soviet Union, by the application of Marxist-Leninist principles, appeared, until it fell apart in the late 1980s, to have solved the national question and to have transformed a despotic empire into a state in which ethnic differences had become devoid of political meaning by insistence on the class, and not national, basis of its government. This seemed to offer a model for South Africa's own formidable problems and

its own national question.<sup>14</sup> In these circumstances the SACP was little touched by the doubts that increasingly beset communist parties outside the Soviet bloc, as in Western Europe especially they plotted the path of Eurocommunism. After all, unlike their West European comrades South African communists did not have to live close to the presence of communist states that had been established largely as a result of occupation by the Red Army. Nor were they struggling to compete in a social democracy in which the vote was available to all and in which workers were seduced with material benefits. Their enemy was an apartheid government which denied a vote to the majority and bore many of the hallmarks of fascism. The SACP continued to be dominated by a generation who had learned their Marxism under the influence of Joseph Stalin. The party's general secretary from 1939 to 1978 was Moses Kotane, born in 1905.<sup>15</sup> Yusuf Dadoo, Jack and Ray Simons and others were further examples of communists born in the early twentieth century who had imbibed the doctrines of Stalin and who continued to hold positions of leadership in the party into the 1980s, their faith undimmed.

The circumstances of exile and armed struggle contributed greatly to the suppression of heretical ideas about party policy. The struggle against apartheid was so all-consuming that public dissent seemed a form of treachery. Leninist doctrine and Stalinist practice provided an analytical tool for dealing with such dissent, and especially the technique of 'democratic centralism' which was gradually applied to the ANC as a whole. It was easy to condemn any dissident as an enemy and to have an offending person or group anathematized, confident that the influence of communist parties on anti-apartheid movements in Western Europe would prevent dissidents from finding an international platform. One of the few South African communists who was able to question the party orthodoxy and yet to remain near the heart of the party was Thabo Mbeki, one of the most prominent of the younger generation of SACP and ANC leaders in exile. Although he is said to have been removed from the Politburo for disciplinary reasons in 1982,<sup>16</sup> he was able to persuade the ANC to adopt positions that were much closer to Swedish social democracy, an unstinting supporter of the ANC, than to those of the party. Mbeki appears to have owed his relative immunity to his own tactical skill and obvious political ability, to his excellent personal connections in the upper reaches of the ANC and the party, and to his prominence in the international mass media.

In the circumstances of exile the party leadership controlled a patronage machine formidable enough to make criticism a risky business. Refugees from South Africa who joined the party were dependent upon it for their livelihood, their safety and their education. Within the ANC

alliance, by the mid-1970s many controlling positions were held by SACP members who controlled access to education, funds and foreign travel.<sup>17</sup> After 1976 ANC camps in Angola especially were controlled by party commissars and Soviet- or East German-trained security personnel – factors that did not encourage ideological or intellectual dissent. There are serious allegations that detentions in ANC camps in Angola in the 1980s were sometimes in effect purges of ideological dissenters who could easily be neutralized by bandying the charge that they were witting or unwitting agents of the apartheid regime in Pretoria.<sup>18</sup>

The requirements of Soviet orthodoxy plus the automatic condemnation of anything that could be labelled as pro-apartheid or racist contributed to efface any serious internal criticism of pro-Soviet positions in the SACP and in the ANC itself,<sup>19</sup> which came increasingly to adopt ideological positions pioneered by the party. Many potential critics were frightened away by the threat, explicit or implicit, that they would be publicly branded as tools of Pretoria if they made their views too public. Any thoughtful criticism from outside the ANC camp could be easily dismissed as the irrelevant musings of a troubled liberal conscience or the heresies associated with Maoism, Trotskyism or any of the other standard ideological errors. The continuing secrecy about the party's membership meant that reflections by journalists and academics on the struggle in southern Africa and the party's role were often woefully ill-informed. Such was the international condemnation of apartheid that criticisms of the party or of its dominant role in the ANC made from within South Africa could rather easily be written off as inspired by a mendacious South African government.

The combination of enforced exile and attachment to dogma blinded SACP members to the nature of some developments inside South Africa itself, although it must be said that party literature and analyses by party writers often contained penetrating insights.<sup>20</sup> Most damagingly, the ideological dominance of the party over the ANC and the international anti-apartheid movement generally meant that some ideas spawned inside South Africa, although generated in the front line of the struggle, did not gain the international currency that they might have merited. This was notably so in regard to discussion of ethnic questions, so that ideas taken up by followers of the Black Consciousness tradition inside South Africa, for example, had little impact on party thinking. The party's refusal to contemplate ethnic politics squarely almost certainly contributed to the rise inside South Africa of Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi's Inkatha organization as a national political force.

Thus among a range of anti-apartheid forces ranged inside South Africa during the 1980s there was considerable debate across the political



spectrum among liberals, Black Consciousness sympathizers, non-communist socialists and the broadly pro-ANC membership of the United Democratic Front. Arguably the most able non-communist intellectual in the ANC was Pallo Jordan, whose thinking was strongly influenced by Trotskyism. He was actually detained for a short period by ANC security officials in 1983 and was unable to give clear expression to his anti-Stalinist sentiments until, ironically, the unbanning of the ANC and the return to South Africa gave him the freedom to publish his thoughts on this matter.<sup>21</sup> The party itself, for all the talents of its leading theoreticians, held on to an ideological orthodoxy that came to appear threadbare. A measure of this is the manifesto of the SACP adopted by the party's seventh congress held in secret in Havana, Cuba, in June 1989. The manifesto, entitled *The Path to Power*, is an unambiguous celebration of old-fashioned Marxism-Leninism and includes incongruous mentions of the forces of socialism sweeping the world and the crisis of capitalism.<sup>22</sup> It was adopted just five months before the fall of the Berlin Wall and six months before the overthrow of Nicolae Ceauşescu.

It was only after the fall of the Berlin Wall that the SACP was able finally to abandon the pretence, or belief, or hope, that nothing much was wrong with the Soviet model of communism. In January 1990 the party issued a document written by its General Secretary, Joe Slovo, entitled *Has Socialism Failed?*<sup>23</sup> This essay concluded that there had indeed been grave flaws in socialism in Eastern Europe, notably in that it had been undemocratic, but that this did not invalidate the basic Marxist-Leninist blueprint. The paper, while discussing the failings of Eastern Europe at some length, said almost nothing about what was to be done in South Africa. In the following month, February 1990, the SACP was caught by surprise by its unbanning inside South Africa. From then on the party was on the defensive as it sought to reorganize itself legally inside South Africa for the first time in 40 years at the same time as it attempted to adopt appropriate tactics to deal with the government in new circumstances and struggled to find a theoretical model to fill the void left by the stunning collapse of the Soviet Union. By December 1991, when the party held its eighth congress, this time inside South Africa, and continued the gradual process of resurfacing into legality, there was a public debate in progress on the way forward. The outgoing party General Secretary Joe Slovo urged the congress to abandon the doctrine of Marxism-Leninism and to emphasize its character as a democratic socialist party, underlining his earlier commitments to maintain a mixed economy and a multi-party political system if the party should ever gain power in South Africa. These proposals in the direction of social democracy were rejected by the floor of the congress, which insisted on

retaining the Marxist-Leninist label and on an unqualified commitment to 'socialism'.<sup>24</sup> In the months leading up to the congress some leading party figures including Harry Gwala and Chris Hani (the latter elected General Secretary in December 1991) had publicly defended the old-fashioned approach, going as far as to lament the passing of the state of East Germany which had been such a good and faithful friend of the SACP. Gwala had even publicly supported the unsuccessful August 1991 coup in the Soviet Union.<sup>25</sup> 'Whatever the distortions of socialism in the Soviet Union', the SACP concluded after analysing the failure of *perestroika* and the August 1991 coup attempt, 'millions of working people have had a taste of its potential'.<sup>26</sup>

The SACP's insistence on remaining a supporter of old-fashioned Marxism-Leninism is hardly calculated to win it overseas support, nor the affection of the South African business community. It is important to note, too, that since its very earliest years the party has found it hard to recruit support in a key South African ethnic community: among Afrikaners, who have contributed few members to the party with some notable exceptions, such as the late Bram Fischer.<sup>27</sup> The Afrikaner community seems so wedded to an ethnic view of politics, and is so central to any calculations about South African politics, that this seems likely to remain a major handicap. But other constituencies find the party's ideological baggage less cumbersome. In this respect the party continues to have a number of assets that are less evident when seen from abroad than they are when viewed from inside South Africa. Perhaps most importantly it continues to have the prestige of being reputed the most militant of all organizations in the fight against apartheid and the least racist of parties. It has been a multi-ethnic organization since the mid-1920s and some of the most popular anti-apartheid militants in the country are also known as leading communists, the best example being Chris Hani. Prior to his election as party general secretary, Hani was the Chief of Staff of Umkhonto we Sizwe and one of the most popular members of the ANC's governing body. Second, although the party now displays more openness in its affairs as a result of its legalization, it remains a tightly-knit vanguard organization, much smaller than the ANC and benefiting from the presence of a relatively high proportion of trained cadres.

A clear and unambiguous call for socialism is well received among the many South Africans who are very poor and who are utterly unmoved by comparative arguments pointing to the history of Eastern Europe, of which they may never have heard or which they may not consider relevant to their own situation. More surprisingly, perhaps, the SACP's continuing attachment to Marxism-Leninism is not seen as a handicap by some of

the left-wing white intelligentsia. Some of the party's most articulate intellectuals are white, the leading example in the younger generation being Jeremy Cronin.<sup>28</sup> To some extent this continuing attraction may be explained by the party's reputation as the most militant opponent of apartheid and the only truly colour-blind party, but in fairness it must also be said that the notion of a socialism shorn of its most undemocratic and unpleasant characteristics retains a degree of appeal in a country where the disparities of wealth are more obvious than in most others and where even some captains of industry agree that future South African governments must engage in large-scale state intervention both to try to redress some of the enormous social problems faced by the country and to help build a larger consumer market.<sup>29</sup>

If state intervention on behalf of the poor can be described as socialism, at least in a vague sense, then it is common cause that South Africa is in need of some socialism. The question is, of what sort, by what precise means, and allied to what political programme? Here, despite the enormous handicap placed upon it by the collapse of communism in the USSR, the SACP still is able to articulate some sort of vision of the future perhaps more coherently than any other group on the South African Left. The party's basic orthodoxy continues also to exercise a powerful appeal to at least some trade unionists, helped by the fact that business in South Africa operates in a culture of confrontation and that many workers are so low paid that a simple and old-fashioned communist line exercises a continuing degree of appeal.<sup>30</sup>

President F.W. de Klerk's decision in February 1990 to unban the ANC and the SACP was motivated in large part by the perception that the Congress Alliance in which the SACP played a crucial role, by virtue of its clear strategic vision, its international connections and its occupation of the commanding heights of the ANC, no longer had the backing of a superpower. His decision to move towards the dismantling of apartheid's constitutional foundation was therefore a recognition of the enormous importance on the South African domestic scene of the international element, a point recognized by the party, too, in the considerable importance it attributed to the years to the international isolation of the Pretoria government.

Herein lies the most difficult problem faced by the SACP. So completely did the SACP regard Moscow as the home of world communism and Soviet socialism as the model for the future of South Africa that it will find it much harder to live its new life as an international orphan than merely to issue statements acknowledging the failure of the USSR but claiming that this has no relevance to the fundamental principles of what it persists in calling 'Marxist revolutionary science'. The advent of

Mikhail Gorbachev and his espousal of the policies of *perestroika* and *glasnost* imposed an almost insoluble dilemma. It was not that the SACP had any problem in reconciling itself to the change of line coming out of Moscow – on the contrary, it had taken so many changes of line in its stride that that proved no problem at all. What proved incomparably more problematic was the fact that the USSR after 1985 was rapidly moving closer to both Washington and Pretoria in its position on the southern African conflict. It was of increasingly little use to the SACP as an ally. This was a bitter blow indeed and one that party intellectuals have not made a very convincing case in coming to terms with. In these circumstances, perhaps it would be accurate to speak not of the SACP retreating from Moscow, but of Moscow losing interest in southern Africa, and certainly in the prospect of a revolution there. This leaves the SACP arguing that true socialism has not yet been seen in the world, and that South Africa is the laboratory where it might be tried. This will not convince many in the world and none of the power-brokers in South Africa. It does, however, continue to exercise a sort of messianic appeal among some sections of South African society.

What, then, is the likely future for the SACP? Clearly it can expect little international support in the foreseeable future. Already it faces a financial crisis resulting from the collapse of support from Eastern Europe. There are clear signs too that the ANC, by far the most popular political organization in the country, is taking its distance from the SACP. Pallo Jordan, the ANC's information chief, has explicitly attacked the party in no uncertain terms. Prominent ANC leaders including Thabo Mbeki, Jacob Zuma and Aziz Pahad, all once leading communists, have distanced themselves from the party. But it is unlikely that it will disappear. Led by Chris Hanu, an unreconstructed Marxist-Leninist, and under pressure from the rank and file, the party seems to have decisively rejected the social-democratic option. Perhaps it is most likely to revert to something like the role it played before its banning in 1950 as a home for both white and black intellectuals of the Left, with a solid base in the trade unions, able to influence mass parties but not equipped to win in electoral politics, a political gadfly and a party of permanent opposition.

#### NOTES

1. The Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) was founded in Cape Town in July 1921, and it retained this name until it voted to dissolve itself in 1950 when it became clear that it was to be outlawed by the South African government; it was illegally revived in 1953 under a new name: the South African Communist Party. The present



- text tries to respect the names and acronyms appropriate to the period under discussion.
2. *Umsebenzi*, Vol.6, No.1 (1990), p.5.
  3. Joe Hanlon, *Beggar Your Neighbours* (London: James Currey, 1986), pp.7-16.
  4. The eighth congress of the SACP was originally planned to open on 16 December 1991, and President F.W. de Klerk planned to visit Moscow at the same time, no doubt to distract media attention from the SACP congress; in the event, the SACP event was brought forward by some two weeks and De Klerk cancelled his trip to Moscow in view of the collapse of the Soviet Union as a legal entity.
  5. There is only one full-length history of the CPSA and the SACP: Henry Pike, *A History of Communism in South Africa* (Germiston: Christian Mission International, 1985). Although containing much original research, its robust anti-communism renders unreliable the judgments of the author, a right-wing American preacher. There is also a considerable literature produced by the SACP itself, such as A. Lerumo (M. Harmel), *Fifty Fighting Years: The South African Communist Party, 1921-1971*, 3rd revised edn. (London: Inkululeko Publications, 1987).
  6. On the early socialists I have benefited from information conveyed by Dr Baruch Hirson.
  7. Lerumo, op. cit., pp.57-9; see also the personal recollections of a member of the delegation, Eddie Roux, *Time Longer than Rope: A History of the Black Man's Struggle for Freedom in South Africa*, 2nd edn (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964); and Eddie and Win Roux, *Rebel Pity* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972).
  8. Lerumo, op. cit., p.57.
  9. *Umsebenzi*, Vol.5, No.2 (1988), p.16.
  10. See, for example, Mandela's attack on US foreign policy of March 1958, entitled 'A New Menace in Africa', reprinted in Sheridan Johns and R. Hunt Davis, Jr. *Mandela, Tambo, and the African National Congress: The Struggle Against Apartheid, 1948-1990: A Documentary Survey* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp.56-9.
  11. For much of the period of illegality, from 1950 to 1990, the SACP had only a few hundred members, mostly living in exile elsewhere in Africa or in Europe; recruitment probably rose into the thousands only in the early 1980s; by December 1991 the SACP claimed 25,000 members.
  12. A subject persistently investigated by an anti-communist lobby, the International Freedom Foundation: see, for example, *Freedom Bulletin*, Vol.5, No.4 (1991).
  13. Stephen Ellis and Tsepo Sechaba, *Comrades Against Apartheid* (London: James Currey, 1992).
  14. Marie van Diepen (ed.), *The National Question in South Africa* (London: Zed Books, 1988).
  15. Brian Bunting, *Moses Kotane, South African Revolutionary*, revised edn. (London: Inkululeko Publications, 1986).
  16. According to unattributable SACP sources.
  17. Ellis and Sechaba, *passim*.
  18. A consistent theme of the journal *Searchlight South Africa* and notably of Bandile Ketelo *et al.*, 'A Miscarriage of Democracy: The ANC Security Department in the 1984 Mutiny', *Searchlight South Africa*, Vol.2, No.1 (July 1990), pp.35-65.
  19. For example, 'The Enemy Hidden Under the Same Colour', in *South African Communists Speak: Documents from the History of the South African Communist Party, 1915-1980* (London: Inkululeko Publications, 1981), pp.400-417.
  20. The main sources for party analyses before 1990 are the journals *The African Communist*, *Sechaba* and *Umsebenzi*. Since the party's unbanning in 1990, the *South African Labour Bulletin* and *Work in Progress* must also be added to the list of essential reading for students of South African communism.
  21. For example in the *South African Labour Bulletin*, No.3 (1990).
  22. The South African Communist Party, *The Path to Power* (no place or date given).
  23. Joe Slovo, *Has Socialism Failed?* (no place or date given).

24. *The Independent* (London), 7 Dec. 1991.
25. *Work in Progress*, Sept. 1991.
26. Document of the Internal Leadership Group of the SACP, *Vrye Weekblad*, 6-12 Sept. 1991.
27. Naomi Mitchison, *A Life for Africa: The Story of Bram Fischer* (London: Merlin, 1973).
28. See, for example, the interview with Jeremy Cronin in *Vrye Weekblad*, 6-12 Sept. 1991; *The Independent*, 9 Dec. 1991.
29. Conversations with South African businessmen and others at the Britain-South African conference, Cambridge, July 1991.
30. *De Volkskrant* (Amsterdam), 14 Dec. 1991.