

The consequences of the Cold War for the ANC

Thula Simpson

University of Pretoria

CONTACT: Thula Simpson at thula.simpson@up.ac.za

As they watched the BBC *Six O'Clock News* broadcast of the latest from Bucharest, Janet Love asked 'What are they doing?' Ivan Pillay replied 'Everything we were told was right is falling apart'. Love had arrived in London from Johannesburg a few days before that Christmas Eve in 1989, but Pillay had been in England for weeks.¹ He later recalled other African National Congress (ANC) colleagues cheering as Nicolae Ceausescu's tanks sought to crush the protests.²

Love and Pillay were both members of Operation Vula, a top-secret ANC project to implant clandestine politico-military structures within South Africa. The geopolitical upheavals in Eastern Europe unfolded as the ANC closed in on an historic triumph. The party was unbanned on 2 February 1990, Nelson Mandela was released nine days later, and he would lead the movement to power in South Africa's first universal suffrage elections in 1994.

The ANC's response to Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine has prompted much discussion about 'emotional bonds' rooted in 'Cold War loyalties' that continue to shape the movement's allegiances.³ I however contend that the roots of the organisation's commitments have much deeper historical roots.

On 9 January 1912 in Bloemfontein, the Attorney Pixley I. Seme urged his fellow conference delegates to establish a 'South African Native National Congress' to overcome the divisions that had compromised previous efforts by black organisations to lobby the country's white authorities.⁴ His colleagues unanimously endorsed his proposal, and selected John Dube as their founding president. In accepting, Dube invoked Booker T. Washington as his 'patron saint'.⁵

Thus was the ANC founded. The contributions by Seme and Dube in their respective ways revealed an organisation committed to constructive dialogue with South Africa's white rulers, and which was not opposed in principle to segregation. Regarding the latter, when the South African government announced on 28 February 1913 its intention to introduce a Land Act to partition South Africa into black and white areas in accordance with the recommendations of a commission that would be established to proffer expert advice, the ANC did not dismiss the notion outright.⁶

It was only when the Beaumont Commission's June 1916 report revealed that Africans would receive less than 9% of the country, that the congress concluded, in the words of its resolution at a special conference in October that year, that white South Africa's real motive was to strip blacks of 'all opportunities for their economic improvement and independence'. Dube added at congress's February 1917 conference that the government's segregation policy threatened to strip black South Africa of all 'hope to raise itself mentally, morally, and socially'.⁷

If correct, Dube's analysis had far reaching implications. It would, inter alia, render futile any hope of achieving African self-improvement through partnership with the State. It instead

foreshadowed a much more contentious relationship, centred on contesting control over State power. The timing was also significant: preceding the Russian Revolution, it showed that the ANC's 'class' analysis of the South African struggle was an indigenous growth, and not one dependent on foreign developments. There is hence no reason to expect it to have collapsed with the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The ANC's realignment was a process, not an event. Even after 1916 many within the organisation held out hope for a negotiated solution of the land dispute, but the overall trajectory of government policy guaranteed the ANC's reciprocal radicalisation. The unfolding of that dynamic *is* the history of South Africa's liberation struggle. A key controversy within the realignment concerned the role of violence. Stephen Ellis's untimely passing meant his 2015 *Cold War History* article offered the final rendering of his thesis that Nelson Mandela joined the South African Communist Party (SACP) briefly in the late 50s/early 60s, and that he formed Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), which became the ANC's military wing, in accordance with a resolution passed at a secret communist party conference. Ellis argued in his first publication on the issue: 'the armed struggle in South Africa was inscribed in the politics of the Cold War'.⁸

Ironically, Ellis's *Cold War History* article eloquently expressed the contention of those of us who had critiqued his thesis, for in the piece he attributed Mandela's repeated denials of having ever joined the SACP to 'a legal pedantry that was in keeping with his professional training – using his lawyer's skills he could argue that, having never sworn an oath, signed an agreement or undergone any membership rite, he had never accepted Party membership'.⁹

Of course, if Mandela never underwent any process necessary to become a member of the party, he never became a party member. Ellis, however, puts the case too strongly: an absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. Given the poverty of the evidence, it is surely better to keep an open mind. But it should also be noted how little rests on the outcome. In his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Mandela noted that as early as 1952 he was convinced of the inevitability of an armed struggle in South Africa, while he also noted how, at an even earlier stage, he overcame his hostility to communists entering the ANC. Regarding the latter, he attributed his initial opposition to an ignorance that he overcame by consulting the writings of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Mao Zedong and others. By his account, the encounter was epiphanous: he was 'drawn to the idea of a classless society ... attracted to the scientific underpinnings of dialectical materialism ... [the] materialistic analysis of economics rang true ... The idea that history progresses through struggle and that change occurs in revolutionary jumps was similarly appealing'.¹⁰

Therefore, by his own emphatic admission, Mandela was a Marxist at the time he founded MK, and one furthermore committed to working with communists in advancing a struggle that he was certain would acquire a violent dimension. The only issue at dispute is whether, despite his equivocations, he did undergo some formal ritual/rite/process necessary to join the party. The contrast between his proud avowal of Marxist belief and his equivocation over whether he ever became a communist party member remains striking. It is entirely plausible, as Ellis suggests, that there was some procedure, some formality, some box that needed ticking that wasn't, that allowed him to deny, legally accurately but somewhat misleadingly, that he was ever a *card-carrying* communist. In the perilous conditions under which the underground operated during the early 1960s, this would actually have been a wise expedient.

The ANC's long realignment resulted in an internal consensus, articulated in a 1979 paper on strategy and tactics, that '[T]he seizure of power' had to be considered 'as the beginning of the process in which the instruments of the state will be used to progressively destroy the heritage of all forms of national and social inequality.' Regarding the process's ultimate destination, the authors noted that 'no member of the Commission had any doubts about the ultimate need to continue our revolution towards a socialist order'.¹¹

The Soviet Union offered both a model and a geopolitical framework in which that order could be built – that was the key to the ANC's alliance with Moscow. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the rise of unipolar American hegemony complicated the picture – that is what the ANC comrades were mourning in December 1989.

The ANC's election victory in 1994 positioned it to embark on rebuilding South Africa, albeit in ways cognisant of the new international realities. This framing will be controversial, for those versed in the literature on post-apartheid South Africa will be familiar with the argument that the ANC in power has betrayed the transformative commitments of the struggle era. As a 2019 collection on *Race, Class and the Post-Apartheid Democratic State* put it, the ANC's adoption of 'neoliberal' policies has allegedly both hindered 'radical economic transformation' and guaranteed the 'reproduction of racialised inequality'.¹²

Readers should, however, note that there is little evidence to support the critique. Scattered in the same book are various acknowledgments that ANC rule has seen the creation of 'an empowered black elite' through 'mining leases and government contracts as well as requirements regarding black ownership'; along with 'the emergence of a bureaucratic ... mainly black "middle class" [that] is wage-dependent on the state'; while '[f]or households in the bottom 40 per cent of the income distribution, social grants provide most of their total income'.¹³

Even this greatly understates the ANC's faith in the State's transformative powers. It overlooks, for example, the role of State-Owned Enterprises (the saga at Eskom, the utility whose monopoly on power generation now threatens South Africa's future as an industrial country, merits just one reference in the book).¹⁴ The evidence testifies strongly to an ANC whose commitment to employing state power to advance social emancipation has long outlived the Cold War. It is ultimately untenable to note the many socio-economic changes wrought by State intervention, before concluding that State intervention has only reproduced pre-existing relations. The oversight also obscures the extent to which not the betrayal, but the faithful implementation of radical economic transformation has underpinned both the ANC's hitherto invincible post-apartheid electoral coalition, and the present fragmentation of that coalition.

The lament regarding racialized economic inequality centres above all on discontent towards the distribution of skills and capital bequeathed by decades of segregation and apartheid. The central challenge facing any attempt to 'destroy' that heritage by administrative fiat, concerns how to do so without creating major inefficiencies in the allocation of skills and capital. The tension is inherent in the strategy outlined in the 1979 paper (the establishment of a command economy in 1994 would only have aggravated the underlying contradiction). The issue is also central to the administrative and financial crises that have accompanied practically every attempt to find a radical route out of the dilemma – including in institution after institution across all the sectors mentioned in the paragraphs immediately above. It is the resulting dysfunction of critical life support systems (for that is what electricity, water, sanitation, public

health, public safety etc. ultimately represent) that lies at the heart of the ANC's flagging electoral support.

And yet the policies underlying the poly-crises will likely prove resilient, gaining ballast as they do from a tradition that continues to inform the bonds, loyalties, and conceptions of 'everything we were told was right', that structure politics in the country. Since 1916, that tradition has been suffused by the blood of innumerable martyrs, while post-1994 policies have bequeathed powerful constituencies that will form a further, formidable block on change – any would-be reformer should expect to face strong resistance for jeopardizing this or that 'gain' of the revolution. The transition to a new, New South Africa is thus likely to once again be a process rather than an event, and to be a protracted and painful one at that, for the required reforms entail nothing less than shattering the consensus on which ANC hegemony rests.

Notes

¹ Conny Braam, *Operatie Vula: Suidafrikanen en Nederlanders in de strijd tegen apartheid* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1992), pp. 247-8.

² Evelyn Groenink, *The Unlikely Mr Rogue: A Life with Ivan Pillay* (Auckland Park: Jacana, 2021), p. 31.

³ See, for example, 'Cold War ties not worth US fight', *Citizen*, 12 May 2023; 'We're all extras in the ANC's theatre of the absurd', *Sunday Times*, 30 July 2023; 'Friends like these use ANC as a tool and hurt SA's best interests', 3 August 2023; 'Spotlight on SA/Russia ties', *Citizen*, 18 August 2023.

⁴ 'Native Congress', *Pretoria News*, 8 and 15 January 1912.

⁵ South African National Archives, Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository, CNC 59 (CNC214-1912), John L. Dube, Address to 'Chiefs and Gentlemen of the South African Native Congress', 2 February 1912.

⁶ 'Kaffir Farmers', *Sunday Times*, 2 March 1913.

⁷ Oxford University, Bodleian Library, MSS.Brit.Emp.s.22 G203, SOUTH AFRICA Natives' Land Act (Jun 1913-Nov 1917), 'South African Native National Congress. Resolution against the Natives Land Act 1913 & The Report of the Natives Land Commission, pp. 1-2; Oxford University, Bodleian Library, MSS.Brit.Emp.s.22 G204, 'South African Land Act'; 'The Whites, the Natives, and the Land', *Rand Daily Mail*, 14 March 1917.

⁸ Stephen Ellis, 'The Genesis of the ANC's Armed Struggle in South Africa 1948-1961', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 4, December 2011, p. 657, 658; Stephen Ellis, 'Nelson Mandela, the South African Communist Party and the origins of Umkhonto we Sizwe', *Cold War History*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 2016, p. 11. See also Irina Filatova, 'Mandela and the SACP: Time to Close the Debate', 24 June 2015 <https://www.politicsweb.co.za/news-and-analysis/mandela-and-the-sacp-time-to-close-the-debate>.

⁹ Ellis, 'Nelson Mandela, the South African Communist Party and the origins of Umkhonto we Sizwe', p. 16.

¹⁰ Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela* (London: Abacus, 1997) p. 137-8, 184-5.

¹¹ The Green Book, Report of the Politico-Military Strategy Commission to the ANC National Executive Committee, August 1979. <https://www.sahistory.org.za/sites/default/files/GREEN%20BOOK%2C%20August%201979.doc.pdf>.

¹² John Reynolds and Ben Fine, 'Introduction: Revisiting Harold Wolpe in Post-apartheid South Africa', and Robert van Niekerk and Ben Fine, 'Harold Wolpe: Towards the Politics of Liberation in a Democratic South Africa', in John Reynolds, Ben Fine, and Robert van Niekerk eds., *Race, Class and the Post-Apartheid Democratic State* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2019), pp. 21-2, 346

¹³ Ben Scully and Edward Webster, 'The Countryside and Capitalism: Rethinking the Cheap Labour Thesis in Post-apartheid South Africa', Robert van Niekerk, 'Transforming Policy and Financial Institutions for the Public Good: The Case of Health', and Robert van Niekerk and Ben Fine, 'Harold Wolpe', in Reynolds, Fine, and Van Niekerk eds., *Race, Class and the Post-Apartheid Democratic State*, pp. 42-3, 187, 350.

¹⁴ Ben Scully and Edward Webster, 'The Countryside and Capitalism: Rethinking the Cheap Labour Thesis in Post-apartheid South Africa', in Reynolds, Fine, and Van Niekerk eds., *Race, Class and the Post-Apartheid Democratic State*, pp. 42-3.