South African Society: Soviet Perspectives— 1917 to the mid 1950s

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It is a well known fact that throughout the Soviet era the Bolshevik Party and the Soviet government were mainly interested in Africa as a potential ally against world capitalism and imperialism and that, because Soviet research on Africa (as well as all other research) was supported only by the state, the results of this research were inevitably ideologically biased and thus academically invalid. It is more or less generally accepted that this is particularly true about the period of the 1920s-1950s when the Soviet version of Marxism was particularly crude, Soviet censorship particularly strict, and Soviet academics had no direct access to African countries. This is, however, only part of the story and a closer look at the Soviet writing of the time clearly makes this evident.

The mainstream Soviet African studies during the 1920s-1950s were dominated by the Communist International (Comintern) both ideologically and institutionally to such an extent that, strictly speaking, the end of this period should be marked by 1943 when the Comintern was officially disbanded or even by 1937 when it practically ceased to function. However, the next period which emerged with the upsurge of nationalist movements in Africa in the wake of the colonial era, clearly did not begin until the middle of the 1950s and, unlike the 1920s and 1930s, little was happening in Soviet African studies during the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s—which is why we have extended the 'Comintern' period for a decade.

In one of his early works Joseph Stalin (1946:49) wrote that the attitude of the Bolsheviks to national liberation movements should depend on the nature of every particular movement but that

> generally proletariat will not support the so-called 'national liberation' movements, since until now all such movements have been acting in the interests of bourgeoisie and have corrupted and distorted the class consciousness of proletariat.

Later the Comintern and the Bolshevik party moved away from this approach but

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during the 1920s and 1930s main attention focused on class, not on national liberation struggles. Thus, research was centred on the revolutionary potential of the working class and the prospects of the development of a revolutionary situation in Africa.

Only one Communist party existed in sub-Saharan Africa and was represented in the Comintern (from 1921), the Communist Party of South Africa. Accordingly, the attention of Comintern officials and academics was concentrated on the South African region. Although several prominent leaders from other African countries (such as Jomo Kenyatta) were invited to study at the Communist Universities in Moscow, the majority of students from Africa came from South Africa. This also meant that African studies in Moscow were centred on South Africa's problems. There is much evidence of the hopes of the Bolshevik party and of the Comintern that a revolutionary situation would soon appear in South Africa. In 1928 the Comintern came up with the idea of an 'independent native Republic' in South Africa in order to speed up this process.

The attention on Africa, and especially on South Africa, resulted in the creation of two institutions for the study and teaching of African problems within the Comintern. These were the African Section of the Research Association for the Study of National and Colonial Problems (NIANKP) and the African Department at the Communist University of Eastern Toilers (KUTV). Three Soviet academics were instrumental in the establishment and activities of both bodies: the Hungarian, Endre Sik (1891-1978), a prominent figure in the Comintern who was later to become Foreign Minister of communist Hungary; Ivan Potekhin (1930-1964); and Alexander Zusmanovich (1902-1965).

In April 1929 Sik ([1930]1989) presented a paper 'On Laying the Foundations of Marxist Study of Socio-Economic Problems in Africa' which became the first programmatic plan for Soviet African studies. Sik insisted on the importance of class analysis and stressed that 'special attention should be paid to the history of South Africa'.

Until 1937 when Stalin's purges stifled the Comintern, the African Section of NIANKP collected and reviewed materials on the political and economic situation in African countries, and particularly in South Africa. African and South African students from KUTV and from the Moscow Lenin School (the latter attended mainly by European and American Communists but included a smattering of Africans too) participated in this work and assisted with the materials.

The first Soviet book on Africa was published in 1931 by Georgy Gerngross (1892-1937) (cf. Yug 1931) who was somehow attached to NIANKP. It contained popular essays on South Africa. The most characteristic product of the research activities of NIANKP's African Section was *Forced Labour and Trade Union Movement in Negro Africa* published by Zusmanovich, Potekhin and Tom Jackson (Zusmanovich et al 1933). Tom Jackson was the pen name of Albert Nzula (1905-1934), Secretary of

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the Communist Party of South Africa, who in 1931-1934 worked and studied in Moscow.

The scope of analysis and the nature of Soviet approach to African problems during the 1930s are obvious from the titles of articles published in those years by the two most prolific Soviet academics of the time, Potekhin and Zusmanovich. During the 1930s Potekhin published more articles about South Africa than any other Soviet Africanist. Among these were: 'The Union of South Africa: Parties, Trade Unions and other Organisations, the Press and Politicians' (cf. Izotla 1935); 'Agricultural Workers in the Union of South Africa' (cf. Potekhin 1934b); 'National Reformism in the Union of South Africa' (cf. Potekhin 1934a); 'Imperialist Segregation of Natives in the Union of South Africa' (cf. Potekhin 1935b); 'Specific Features and Difficulties of the Struggle for Hegemony of the Proletariat in South Africa' (cf. Potekhin 1935a).

Zusmanovich also concentrated on South Africa but he wrote about the rest of the African continent as well: 'The Agricultural Workers' Movement in South Africa' (Zusmanovich 1933b); 'The Anti Imperialist Movement and the Struggle for the United Front in South Africa' (Zusmanovich 1935c); 'The National Revolutionary Movement and Proletariat in South Africa' (Zusmanovich 1935a); 'On Some Problems of the Communist Movement in South Africa' (Zusmanovich 1935d); 'The Strike Movement in Africa' (AZ 1935a); 'The Working Class in South Africa's Mining Industry' (Zusmanovich 1935b).

No doubt the quality of these studies was not very good. The authors lacked both a proper academic training and sufficient knowledge of foreign languages (although they did lecture to their students in English or French), and they did not have a chance to visit Africa. Moreover, their work was completely subordinated to ideological dogma and political directives of the Comintern. As a result, wishful thinking was often substituted for valid analysis.

Yet some of the problems posed by researchers of NIANKP and KUTV are still discussed by Africanist historians and political scientists today. Soviet academics attempted to study social structures in Africa, the labour movement, political organisations (especially, the South African Communist Party, the African National Congress and the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union—ICU). They were also interested in correlation between race and class. These topics attracted little attention from Africanist historians elsewhere at the time. Moreover, the Russians received some of their materials directly from African countries and worked together with their African students and colleagues who participated in their debates and in some cases became co-authors—a tendency which began to emerge in African studies elsewhere only several decades later.

Some ideas of Soviet Africanists found their way to the West and may have even influenced the birth of new approaches to African history there decades later.

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Zusmanovich, Potekhin and their colleagues published their articles in *The Negro Worker*, the journal of the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers which was published in English, first in Hamburg, and after Hitler's rise to power, in Copenhagen, Antwerp, New York and Paris. Their South African articles were often reproduced in *Umsebenzi*, the newspaper of the CPSA.

A fascinating example of Soviet academic ideas on and approaches to the nature of South African society is the article published in the *Negro Worker* by Zusmanovich and Potekhin. This article reflected the debate which unfolded in 1934-1935 on whether there was a Black bourgeoisie in South Africa at that time or not (A.Z. 1935b:18,19,22). Some academics thought that an African bourgeoisie did not yet come into existence, others asserted that it did. The authors of the article were of the opinion that a Black bourgeoisie did exist in South Africa but only as individuals, not as a class.

'In South Africa, it is true'—they wrote—

> there is no native industrial bourgeoisie. Imperialism has monopolised the entire economy of the country and does not make it possible for native industry to develop. But even here there are some first shoots. It cannot be denied that there are small furniture factories and other workshops in South Africa belonging to natives and employing as many as 10 or even more workers.

The existence of a commercial bourgeoisie—traders, shop-keepers, etc.—was also noted. In the opinion of the authors this was, however, not a class, but rather bourgeois individuals, of whom there were plenty.

> The owners of small factories, workshops, the traders, the house owners, the sub-renters of houses, the money-lenders, etc.—these are,

wrote Potekhin and Zusmanovich,

> an army of native businessmen living at the expense of the toiling population and receiving profits from the pockets of the native workers and toilers in general.

In the spirit of the time the debate was, of course, not a purely academic exercise with the goal of achieving a purely academic truth. It had a direct relevance to the assessment of the nature of struggle in South Africa, and thus direct political repercussions, for if there were capitalists, they were bound to mess around on the way of the revolutionary movement of South African proletariat. 'Stop these academic arguments about whether there is a native class or not', the authors appealed to their readers,

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> and explain to the workers that native society is not united, as Seme & Co. depict it, that it has classes, that it contains capitalists who exploit the workers and whose interests do not coincide with the interests of the toilers, and who therefore occupy a special position in the anti-imperialist movement.

The political conclusion was characteristic of the spirit of academic debates of the time and must have sounded quite threatening to the opponents of the authors:

> We must get an absolutely clear notion of the question that the denial of the existence of the native bourgeoisie logically leads to the denial of the necessity for a struggle against national reformism, to the denial of the struggle for the leadership of the proletariat in the anti-imperialist revolution.

The approach of the authors to this complicated problem was, no doubt, highly simplistic, their analysis crude and inadequate, and the political conclusions harmful to their own cause, yet this and other articles written at that time in Russia were the first ever attempts at a class analysis of the contemporary South African society. It may be worthwhile mentioning that all these articles were based on numerous South African sources: reports of South African Native Commissioners and other official publications, newspapers, such as *Umteteli wa Bantu, The Star, The Natal Mercury*. It is difficult to imagine now that all these materials were bought by Soviet authorities during the 1930s and that they were so carefully studied.

Gradually Africanists at and around KUTV and NIANKP acquired better knowledge, academic skills and a broader interest in the societies that they were studying. There are several manuscripts in the NIANKP archives and at least two publications to prove this.

The first was a collection of Zulu folk tales translated into Russian directly from the Zulu language and published by a Leningrad academic, Igor Snegirev (1907-1946), with Nzula's assistance (Snegirev 1937b). This publication is rather unusual for the time, for the translator did not in any way attempt to adapt his Zulu texts to make them easier for the understanding of his reader, neither in the sense of interpreting ethical norms and cultural values, nor in the sense of the language itself. This translation represented the mentality of a large rural segment of Zulu society and was thus an integral part of Soviet social studies.

Snegirev was well aware of the meaning of his cultural studies for social research and stated as much in his article 'Revolutionary Songs of South African Proletariat' in which he translated and analysed the texts of several Zulu and Xhosa songs supplied to him by Nzula and another South African communist, Edwin Mofutsanyana, who also was at that time in Moscow. 'It is quite natural', he wrote,

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> that new samples of oral literature can not but reflect the changes that occurred during the last centuries, more specifically during the last fifty years, in the social life of native tribes of Africa. In this respect the intense class struggle which is waged by Negro workers against their exploiters in several African colonies must be reflected in oral literature and first of all in songs. The publication of such songs,

he went on,

> is, of course, not in the interests of West European Africanists many of whom are connected either with colonial administrations or missionary organisations (Snegirev 1937a:89,90).

It should, perhaps, be noted that one of the songs that Snegirev reproduced and translated was *Mayibuye* and that this was the first ever publication of this hymn outside South Africa and its first translation into a foreign language.

Sik's *The History of Black Africa* existed at that time only in manuscript form. Sik had been working on it during the 1930s and it was several times discussed at the NIANKP. The manuscript which was completed in 1945 contained a detailed albeit crude analysis of societal structures (including the emergence of new social groups), economic and social evolution and forms of social and political movements and anti-colonial struggles on the African continent. The analysis was structured regionally with Southern Africa featuring prominently in the text. The huge manuscript was published in two large-format volumes in English and French only in 1966[1] and was, of course, completely outdated by that time: critics rightly noted numerous factual mistakes and the dogmatism of Sik's approach. But in the context of the 1930s and the early 1940s the book would have looked different for it was, in effect, the first ever attempt to write a history of the African continent as a whole and as a history of Africans, not of European conquests in Africa. Sik did not have enough sources and materials which could have enabled him to give a more valid description of African societies and of what was later called the 'African initiative'—thus the mistakes and wishful thinking in his writing. Had this book been published when it was written, it would have been quite an event in Africanist historiography.

The Communist University of Eastern Toilers was, of course, an ideological rather than an academic institution. As part of its 'revolutionary' education it offered courses in methods of underground work, subversive and military tactics. At the same time, however, it taught courses on world history, on the history of the world revolu-

[1] The second edition of these two volumes, supplemented by another two, was published in 1971-1974.

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tionary movement, on the history of the native region or country of the students, on political geography, philosophy and foreign (Western) languages, let alone Russian. Even though this education was heavily dogmatic and ideologically biased it greatly widened the students' perspectives and helped to build up their general knowledge, for the majority of them had come to Moscow with little formal education or none at all. The debate which unfolded around academic projects at NIANKP and KUTV actively engaged the students providing them with further opportunities to develop knowledge and skills which they could later on use in their political careers.

After the Second World War, when the Comintern had already ceased to exist, Africanists were scattered in different institutions of the Soviet Academy of Sciences and at Leningrad University. Their greatest achievement of the early 1950s was a huge collective monograph (more than 700 large size pages), *Peoples of Africa*, edited by Olderogge and Potekhin (1954). This volume was, in fact, a survey of all accumulated information about African societies and peoples (South African peoples among them)—economic, social, ethnographic and cultural.

It was at that time that Potekhin became interested in ethnic problems and processes in Africa and participated in the debate on this subject which was unfolding within the ranks of the CPSA (Forman 1992). This interest resulted in his book, *The Formation of the National Community of the South African Bantu* (Potekhin 1955). Based on numerous contemporary South African documents and publications the book was aimed at proving that two ethnic communities, the 'Bantu' and the 'Anglo-Boer', basically Black and White nations, were being formed in South Africa. Potekhin's argument about the formation of the Black ('Bantu') nation was based on the proximity of African languages and cultures in South Africa (which he showed at length) and on the on-going process of cultural, linguistic and economic consolidation of African societies which he thoroughly researched.

Potekhin showed that industrialisation and the resulting migration and mixing of representatives of different ethnic groups at their work places, first of all in the mines and in the cities, greatly facilitated the process of cultural consolidation. He failed, however, to notice the complexities and complications of this process and ignored divisions and counter-tendencies which made his argument too far-fetched and his conclusions irrelevant. Yet, the idea of studying, first, ethnic consolidation in Africa during the colonial era generally, and, second, of connecting this process with new socio-economic developments in African communities, was an important and interesting innovation for the time; it remains an important aspect of African studies world-wide even now. At the beginning of the 1960s Potekhin introduced this topic as one of the main directions of research in the newly founded Africa Institute of the Soviet Academy of Sciences of which (the Institute) he became the first director.

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Two other Soviet studies pertaining to our topic were published at that time. Unlike Potekhin's book, Irina Yastrebova's (1952) *The Union of South Africa after the Second World War*, and Z. Katsenelenbaum's (1954) *South African Gold and Contradictions between Britain and Germany* were practically unknown abroad, although both were well researched.

For somebody who is not familiar with the day to day realities of Stalin's era it is hardly possible to imagine the circumstances under which Soviet Africanists worked at that time. African studies were never singled out as a specific field for purges and repression, yet without exception all Africanists working at that time suffered in some way or other. Some, like Snegirev and Gerngross, were executed in Stalin's prisons; many were arrested and imprisoned; others lost their jobs; yet others were officially reprimanded by Party authorities. People lived in a bizarre, crazy world. When Olderogge and Potekhin were editing *Peoples of Africa*, their colleague Zusmanovich was not able to contribute for he was still in prison. There was a case when a South Africanist received his tutor's review of his thesis from prison for this is where the tutor found himself a short while before the thesis had to be 'defended' (there is a procedure of a formal defence of theses in Russia). Another had his degree—which had already been bestowed on him— withdrawn because it turned out that his thesis had not reflected the 'predatory role of American imperialism'—and this despite its being preoccupied with Namibia at the beginning of the century.

Yet, the fact remains that despite the madness of the situation around them, these people went on researching, writing and publishing. In some cases their writing offered new approaches and ideas which is particularly obvious in their study.

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