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Soviets and Surrogates:
Black Nationalism and the Steyn Commission

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This article has three purposes. The first is to summarise the Steyn Report's treatment of insurgent politics in South Africa. The second is to discuss and evaluate this treatment. The final objective is to assess the prescriptions which flow from the Commission's political analysis.

In essence the underlying argument of this section of the Report is encapsulated in the following passage:

'The Soviet Union has launched a fierce multidimensional and rapidly intensifying onslaught upon the Republic of South Africa... it operates preferably by the process of using proxy forces, such as the South African Communist Party, the ANC and the PAC, to conduct the revolutionary war in order to neutralise Western Europe by denying it access to strategic minerals and oil before finally tackling the USA' (p68)

The Commissioners and the testimony they draw upon conceive the Soviet Union to be an inherently expansionary power, this expansionism flowing from the logic of a revolutionary Marxist worldview. They perceive South Africa to be a crucial target from the vantage of Soviet strategy, as a result of its natural resources and geographical position. They therefore reason that the principal dynamic in the military and political challenge confronting the South African authorities to be Soviet interventionism. The manifestations of this challenge, according to the Commissioners and their advisors, are not confined to the clandestine guerrilla activities of the externally-based revolutionary movements. They can be detected in almost every sphere of opposition to the government. For South Africa is an extremely complex and sophisticated society, 'partly first world and partly third world' (p.70), and whereas force of arms is normally sufficient to impose Soviet hegemony in underdeveloped countries:

"In a developed society, the main confrontation happens in the cultural field...the indispensable pre-condition of permanent victory in the revolutionary struggle, is the detachment of 'civil society' from 'political society', that is subversion of the mind" (p.409)

Because of this, religious organisations, occupational and professional bodies, and of course the media are very important vehicles of the 'total onslaught' of Soviet expansionism.

The Commissioners proceed to substantiate this argument in the following fashion. Their basic understanding of African opposition movements is to view them as being purely instrumental and symptomatic of external manipulation.
In conformity with this thesis the genesis and development of the insurgent organizations can only be understood with reference to externally derived influences. In the case of the African National Congress (ANC), the political movement to which the Report gives the most sustained analysis, its history is given the following interpretation to demonstrate this point.

The ANC was founded at the suggestion of Dr Pixley ka Izaka Seme. Shortly before the ANC’s foundation Seme had spent some years in the United States, his period there coinciding with 'the emergence of the Social Gospel and radical black nationalism' in that country. It was therefore:

... highly probable that Dr Seme was not only aware of the existence of (exponents of the Social Gospel, etc), but that he knew of and was profoundly influenced by their ideas, especially the collectivising doctrines of both the Social Gospel and the Rev Woodbey’s militant Black Socialism. This influence is exemplified by Dr Seme’s insistence on the Collectivization of all Black people despite his awareness of their heterogeneity to which he accords no recognition... (p. 383).

The Report discerns in Seme’s advocacy of the putting aside of ethnic-inspired rivalries and the formation of a 'native union', the South African Native Congress (later the ANC) the influence of 'collectivizing doctrines'. Because of this disregard for traditional African social distinctions the ANC 'holds within itself the potential force for the destruction of true African cultural identity' (p. 385). In consequence 'the ANC was never a genuine liberation movement in terms of its founding ideology' (p. 1241). In fact it is 'most probable that the origin of the ANC ... sprang from the same seed whence came the Social Gospel, the politicisation of theology, the collectivization of society and Soviet Communism' (p. 385).

Worse was to come. During its 'legitimate phase' the ANC was increasingly penetrated by communists, especially members of the Congress of Democrats who 'concentrated on infiltrating the ANC' (p. 387). The activities of the ANC after 1935 (the year in which its leaders participated in the formulation of the Freedom Charter) were 'characterised by the prominence of Communist influence' (p. 587). The consolidation of the Communists' efforts took place abroad after the banning of the ANC in 1960:

... in the Soviet Union and Soviet proxy countries such as Libya and Tanzania the organizational takeover by Communists (today Joe Slovo in Maputo) was completed (p. 388).

That today the ANC is a revolutionary anti-SA Communist backed and controlled organ behoves no argument (p. 388).

The other illegal organizations are described in less detail. The Report is somewhat inconsistent in its appraisal of the Pan-Africanist Congress. Though it argues that like the ANC, the PAC is a 'proxy force' of the Soviet Union (pp. 67 & 72), and in consequence acts in collaboration with the other organizations (pp. 382 & 390), elsewhere it predicts that such collaboration will be a likely development in the future (p. 389), as well as
attributing the PAC's initial formation to tensions and disagreements that existed within the ANC (p. 391).

The Commissioners obviously felt that they were on surer ground in their discussion of the Communist Party; on its foundation in 1921 it

... immediately set out to try and infiltrate Black organizations such as the ANC and the Black labour movements ...

In 1930 formal co-operation between the communists and the ANC was agreed upon ... The Rivonia trial of 1963 clearly illustrated the takeover of the ANC by Communists (p. 392).

The material and expert evidence upon which the Report bases these arguments is of a one-sided and propagandistic character. One can hardly expect a balanced assessment of Soviet Strategy and its consequences when the main published sources cited are the works of Brian Crozier, Sir Walter Walker, Lewis H. Gann and Peter Duignan, Alexander Solzhenitsyn and a Taiwanese general, Wang Sheng. None of these authorities, with the exception of the rather special case of the novelist Solzhenitsyn, can be described as experts in the field of Soviet studies, and their writings are all characterised by a uniform anti-communist bias. The Commissioners also drew heavily on the oral testimony of a local expert, Professor Dirk Kunert of the Dept. of International Relations at the University of the Witwatersrand. Most of his testimony, which is clearly reflected in the Report's main argument, consisted of unsubstantiated assertions presented in such a fashion as to foreclose any argument. Kunert's evidence comprised mainly a crude distillation of modernization theory infused with a passionate antipathy towards Marxism and the Soviet Union. By the frequent usage of such phrases as 'it is an undeniable reality' (see, eg., p. 348) in place of supportive argument, Prof. Kunert succeeded in providing a persuasive rationale for the inarticulate prejudices of the Commissioners.

In the space of this short article it would be impossible to provide a comprehensive critique of the Report's interpretation of Soviet strategy. It must suffice here to say that other views exist and a less intellectually dishonest inquiry would have at least mentioned their existence. It has been argued, for instance, that Soviet strategy is opportunistic and defensive rather than consistently and calculatedly expansionist (1). Even if it is conceded that official doctrines of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union logically involve the promotion of world revolution, it is not necessarily the case that South Africa represents a target of the importance suggested by the Commission. The view that South Africa's mineral resources are of vital strategic importance to the West is far from being one that is unanimously held by experts (2). Furthermore, the significance which is attached to this country's geographical position in relation to shipping routes is also thought in some quarters to be exaggerated (3).

The above issues are the subject of serious debate among Western scholars of strategic studies and international relations. Though the Commission presents its arguments in an extremely tendentious fashion it does nevertheless reflect a view which is not entirely disreputable among European and American academics. In contrast the discussion of South African revolutionary movements is based on a misrepresentation, distortion and selection of
the available evidence. Here it would be too charitable to suggest that the Commissioners interpretation arose from their ideological predisposition; it is either the consequence of mendacity or imbecility - or both.

Almost every single point which has been recapitulated in the above summary can be refuted. Dr Seme left the United States in 1906 to undergo legal training in London, two years before the Federal Council of Churches adopted the American Methodist Social Creed which inspired the Christian socialism known as the Social Gospel. There is not a shred of evidence that Dr Seme was influenced by socialist doctrines, indeed his period of ascendancy in the ANC was distinguished by hostility to the Communist Party and the advocacy of an indigenous capitalism. Nor did Seme disregard or neglect traditional African culture and political institutions; the ANC's original structure, which Seme was partly responsible for, included an upper house of chiefs. In 1932 Seme himself was to urge:

... our educated young men and women not to lose contact with your own chiefs. You should make your chiefs and your tribal Councils feel that education is a really good thing. It does not spoil their people nor detrabilise them (4).

The pan-tribal identity which the ANC espoused on behalf of African South Africans was a reflection of different groups being forced to participate in one economy and being uniformly affected by segregationist legislation; it was these processes which were creating a fresh 'African cultural identity' and undermining the old rather than any 'collectivizing doctrine'.

Turning to the question of Communist influence it is highly unlikely that any members of the Congress of Democrats attempted to infiltrate the ANC. The members of that organisation were white, and during the Congress of Democrats' period of existence the ANC did not permit white membership. It is difficult to discern 'the prominence of Communist influence in any of the ANC's campaigns up to its banning in 1960. In at least two strategic decisions, the switch from a general wage strike to a demonstration to coincide with the 1958 (white) elections - and the winding-down of the opposition to women's passes - the influence of the more conservative elements in Congress's leadership was paramount. Neither Libya nor Tanzania can be regarded as Soviet proxies, not least because of their willingness to harbour anti-Soviet African liberation organisations. There is considerable debate today on the extent to which the assistance offered to the ANC by communists gives them the ability to control the external movement. It is worth noting in this context that none of the ANC's three senior office holders are communists, that a minority of the imprisoned 'Robben Island Leaders' are communists, that the ANC still adheres to the Freedom Charter, essentially a social democratic programme, and that the movement contains within it distinct, and in some cases divergent political tendencies, and it is difficult to predict which one will become dominant in the long term. The ANC-SACP alliance can best be described as a marriage of convenience. It would be reasonable to assume that as the ANC re-established its internal organisation, SACP influence will recede in importance.
Contrary to the impression given by the Report, the ANC and the PAC are bitterly opposed to each other and the PAC receives no assistance from the Soviet Union whatsoever. Its propaganda is notable for the ferocity of its attacks on Soviet communism. The South African Communist Party did not from its inception immediately set out to try and infiltrate Black organisations; for the first few years its basic concern was to attempt to build a white working class following. There was no formal agreement of co-operation between the ANC and the Communist Party in 1930 - that year marked the termination of a very brief period of collaboration between a few isolated members of the ANC executive (including its president, Josiah Gumede) and the Communist Party. The years which followed during which Seme presided over the ANC were characterised by tension between the two organisations. Whereas the Rivonia trial of 1963 did indicate that the Communist Party was once again playing an important role in African resistance through its participation in the founding and command structure of Umkonto we Sizwe, the trial certainly did not clearly illustrate the takeover of the ANC by communists: it simply demonstrated the extent of co-operation between radical African nationalists and members of the SACP.

In addition to the distortion and simplification of complex issues, the Report contains errors, wrong dates and so forth, as well as some passages which are completely incomprehensible:

Following a number of unsuccessful attempts to blow up post offices and pass offices, Parliament (the white front for the banned Communist Party) was also proscribed. During 1964 many members of Umkonto we Sizwe and Umno as well as the ARM (African Resistance Movement) were alerted... (p.391)

On the whole however the flaws in the Report's argument are less innocent. Its insistence that the history of African nationalism in this country can only be understood with reference to the impulses of international communism, leads to the invention of a wholly imaginary relationship between one of the ANC's founders and a group of American theologians; to the omission of any detail which might complicate or contradict its presumption that the relationship of the ANC to the SACP has always been one of sub-ordination; and a confused and false presentation of the position of the Pan-Africanist Congress. The Commissioners' view of South African history is not one which allows for the existence of independent African initiative and thought.

Because in their view, the ANC and like organisations do not represent genuine African aspirations (indeed it is difficult to comprehend, from their point of view, that Africans could have any genuine aspirations at all), the relationship which exists between such organisations and the Black population must be coercive in nature. In other words the ANC does not attempt to win popularity; rather it compels widespread endorsement of its activity through creating a climate of terror. In this context the ANC is compared to the elitist and avowedly terrorist Western European groups, as well as the Palestine Liberation Organisation and the Irish Republican Army (p. 1241). In fact, in contrast with all these, the ANC's activities are not geared primarily to attacks on human life, and indeed its general strategy (as the Report itself admits elsewhere) is a complex combination...
of military and political tactics (p. 70 & p. 409).

The main thrust of the Report's recommendations concerning this area of the investigation is that through a register and code of conduct, journalists should be controlled in the fashion in which they report on insurgency. Given the muddled reasoning and straightforward duplicity which inform the Commissioners' discussion it is obvious that their criteria for journalistic professionalism do not include truth, accuracy or logic. But then such qualities are not characteristic of propaganda and one should hardly be surprised if in the present climate the liberal notion of a free press is regarded by the authorities as superfluous. The only hope is that the personnel who will staff the restructured ideological apparatus will be men of the calibre of Judge Steyn and his colleagues, for then even the converted will find it difficult to believe.

Notes and References


3. R.W. Johnson argued in a lecture delivered at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1980 that if the USSR wished to disrupt Western oil supplies a missile attack on oil installations in the Middle East would be an easier and probably more effective measure than any blockade of the Cape shipping route. Jack E. Spence in his Strategic Significance of South Africa, Royal United Services Institute, London, 1970, suggests that in terms of super-power global strategy South Africa is only of secondary importance.