

A special place in the struggle

Dan van der Vat

How Can Man Die Better: Sobukwe And Apartheid, by Benjamin Pogrund (Peter Halban, £14.95)

WITH apartheid on the skids and a free Nelson Mandela bestriding the scene, South Africa has little time to reflect on the "what if's" of its contemporary history, such as — what if Robert Sobukwe, founder of the Pan-Africanist Congress, had been alive today?

He would have been only 66, a useful five years younger than Mandela. He would also doubtless have fronted the argument for black self-reliance as the best route to liberation, against the multiracial approach of Mandela's ANC.

Such a debate would be rather more constructive than the tragic war between the ANC and Buthelezi's Inkatha, which is playing into De Klerk's hands at a cost of more than 3,000 black dead.

Sobukwe stood out intellectually from boyhood and joined the ANC's youth-wing when the Afrikaner Nationalists came to power in 1948. A year later he put forward his doctrine of "non-collaboration" with white institutions, warning against missionaries, white liberals and paternalism.

Entirely in keeping with his Africanism was Sobukwe's vehement rejection of communism, a singularly bitter irony in view of what Pretoria did to him under its Suppression of Communism Act. He profoundly distrusted the Moscow-oriented SA party's often decisive role in the ANC.

The PAC broke from the ANC in 1958. At its first congress Sobukwe proclaimed Africans "will by themselves formulate policies and programmes and decide on the methods of struggle without interference from . . . the minorities who arrogantly appropriate to themselves the right to plan and think for the Africans".

Sobukwe was no less passionately committed to non-violence and denied the PAC was an attempt to confront white racism with black racism.

The potential reader of this definitive book may reasonably ask what another white journalist is doing writing about another black hero, like Donald Woods on Steve Biko. A favour, for a start. Even among blacks Sobukwe is in danger of being forgotten in these hectic times. He mounted the peaceful 1960 campaign against the pass-laws, to which the regime's response was the Sharpeville mas-

sacre, cynical breaches of faith, a ban on the ANC and PAC and an escalation in repression.

Sobukwe got three years for incitement. When he was due out the government introduced the iniquitous "Sobukwe Clause" extending the confinement of a political prisoner year by year if the regime did not like the cut of his jib.

Sobukwe therefore spent another six years in solitary confinement on Robben Island, the only victim of the monstrous clause named after him. When they bundled him out in 1969 because his uniquely cruel indefinite sentence had brought him close to mental breakdown, he was "banned" and forced to live in Kimberley, where he knew nobody.

Even so, his reputation was huge among the politically aware, as great as Mandela's despite the laws which prevented him from seeing more than one person at a time and even from being publicly quoted. He was still a banned person when he died of lung cancer in 1978, after the most callous interference in his treatment "for security reasons". He was just 53.

At his funeral there was a riot against Buthelezi, a "white stooge" in black radical eyes. Pogrund was prevented from speaking despite an invitation from the widow. It was a militant, nationalist occasion — from which Sobukwe would have recoiled in horror.

The second reason why Pogrund is the right person for his self-imposed task is his 21-year friendship with Sobukwe. From late-night political debates in the townships to prison visits and frantic efforts to save his life at the end, the author and his subject tore up the rule that a black nationalist and a white liberal cannot be true friends, especially under apartheid.

There is a third reason: this is a moving story well told. It is a detailed, even dense, biography which does not allow the personal side to obscure the view of one of apartheid's most distinguished martyrs. It is based on unique knowledge and documents, written with all the fluency, commitment and authority of the reporter who himself enraged the regime by exposing conditions in South African prisons.

Pogrund stakes a timely and irrefutable claim for Robert Sobukwe's special place in the history of a struggle which still has a long way to go but might well be won within his normal span, had he eschewed tobacco and not just alcohol. In that sense his prediction of victory within his lifetime may yet come true.

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Robert Sobukwe Papers

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