

The forgotten man

HOW CAN MAN DIE BETTER... : SOBUKWE AND APARTHEID

Benjamin Pogrund
Peter Halban £14.95

R.W. Johnson

When Nelson Mandela and Robert Sobukwe were sitting side by side in jail sewing mail bags, it would not have been easy to predict that the former would acquire world fame while the other sank into semi-obscurity.

At one stage, indeed—in the months surrounding the Sharpeville massacre of March 1960—Sobukwe and his Pan Africanist Congress entirely stole the initiative from the ANC. Old ANC hands still speak with awe of the speed with which the PAC gathered support after its split from the ANC in 1958 over the issue of the behind-the-scenes influence within the ANC of white and Indian communists. The key to the PAC's success was its straightforward "Africa for the Africans" appeal combined with its civil disobedience campaign against the pass laws—but this campaign ran straight into a hail of police bullets at Sharpeville. Sobukwe and most of the other PAC leaders were arrested, a blow from which the PAC never really recovered.

As a cub reporter Benjamin Pogrund had befriended Sobukwe in the pre-Sharpeville days—indeed, Pogrund is able to give an eyewitness account of the Sharpeville massacre itself—and maintained the friendship right up to Sobukwe's death in 1978. He is thus able to give an unusually close and intimate account of this major figure within the South African black nationalist movement—nothing remotely comparable exists about Mandela, Sisulu or Biko. It is a heart-breakingly sad story, for Sobukwe was both a man of exceptional talents and almost a living saint in his gentleness and refusal to seek refuge in bitterness. And yet his life was very largely wasted: he was jailed for three years for his part in the anti-pass campaign and then held in captivity or seclusion for the rest of his life.

Pogrund sheds some new light on the intense politicking that led to the PAC's birth. Clearly, desperate methods came as easily to black politicians then as now—at the crucial ANC conference the PAC faction hoped to prevail by kidnapping the whole ANC top leadership simply because it had lined up more armed thugs than the PAC had. He is also acute about the PAC's major failure—when the predictable crackdown came after Sharpeville the movement had failed entirely to build the sort of organisation which could field a second and third tier of leadership, with the result that the movement virtually fell apart.

Part of the problem seems to have been that the PAC relied far too heavily on a few brilliant individuals like Sobukwe: once they were in jail

there was no real strength in depth on which to fall back. Ever since then the PAC has been dogged by wild, irresponsible and feuding leadership and even today it is far from clear that the PAC will rise to the challenge of freedom sufficiently to build a properly structured mass movement. It would have been good to have had Pogrund's own assessment of why the PAC has proved so personalist and fissiparous, as well as some evidence as to how far the PAC's accusation of white communist influence over the ANC was justified. But fairly enough, if a little disappointingly, Pogrund sticks to a biographical account interspersed with a good deal of potted South African history.

At the moment the ANC—and especially Nelson Mandela—is enjoying celebrity status as the South African liberation movement. Partly, the media find it simpler to put it that way and we are anyway habituated to the notion

of the single party mass movement. And understandably enough, the ANC does nothing to discourage such an identification. But it is a little shocking to see some of the results of fashionable bandwagoning that goes with this. Pogrund writes with some bitterness of how this affected Sobukwe when international visitors like Andrew Young and Arthur Ashe first made Sobukwe's acquaintance and were fulsome in his praise, but later dropped him like a hot brick once it was clear that they had got hold of the wrong hero of the liberation movement.

Pogrund's book is welcome not just because it bears witness to the real complexity of black liberation politics but as a monument to a fine and remarkable man who Nelson Mandela would doubtless be generous enough to accept was not just his main political rival but, as a man who gave voice to the voiceless, every bit his equal.

Robert Sobukwe Papers

PUBLISHER:

Publisher:- Historical Papers, The Library, University of the Witwatersrand

Location:- Johannesburg

©2010

LEGAL NOTICES:

Copyright Notice: All materials on the Historical Papers website are protected by South African copyright law and may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, displayed, or otherwise published in any format, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner.

Disclaimer and Terms of Use: Provided that you maintain all copyright and other notices contained therein, you may download material (one machine readable copy and one print copy per page) for your personal and/or educational non-commercial use only.

People using these records relating to the archives of Historical Papers, The Library, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, are reminded that such records sometimes contain material which is uncorroborated, inaccurate, distorted or untrue. While these digital records are true facsimiles of paper documents and the information contained herein is obtained from sources believed to be accurate and reliable, Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand has not independently verified their content. Consequently, the University is not responsible for any errors or omissions and excludes any and all liability for any errors in or omissions from the information on the website or any related information on third party websites accessible from this website.

DOCUMENT DETAILS:

Document ID:- A2618-Da43

Document Title:- New Statesman and Society: The forgotten man, review by RW

Johnson (copy)

Author:- RW Johnson, New Statesman and Society

Document Date:- circa June 1990