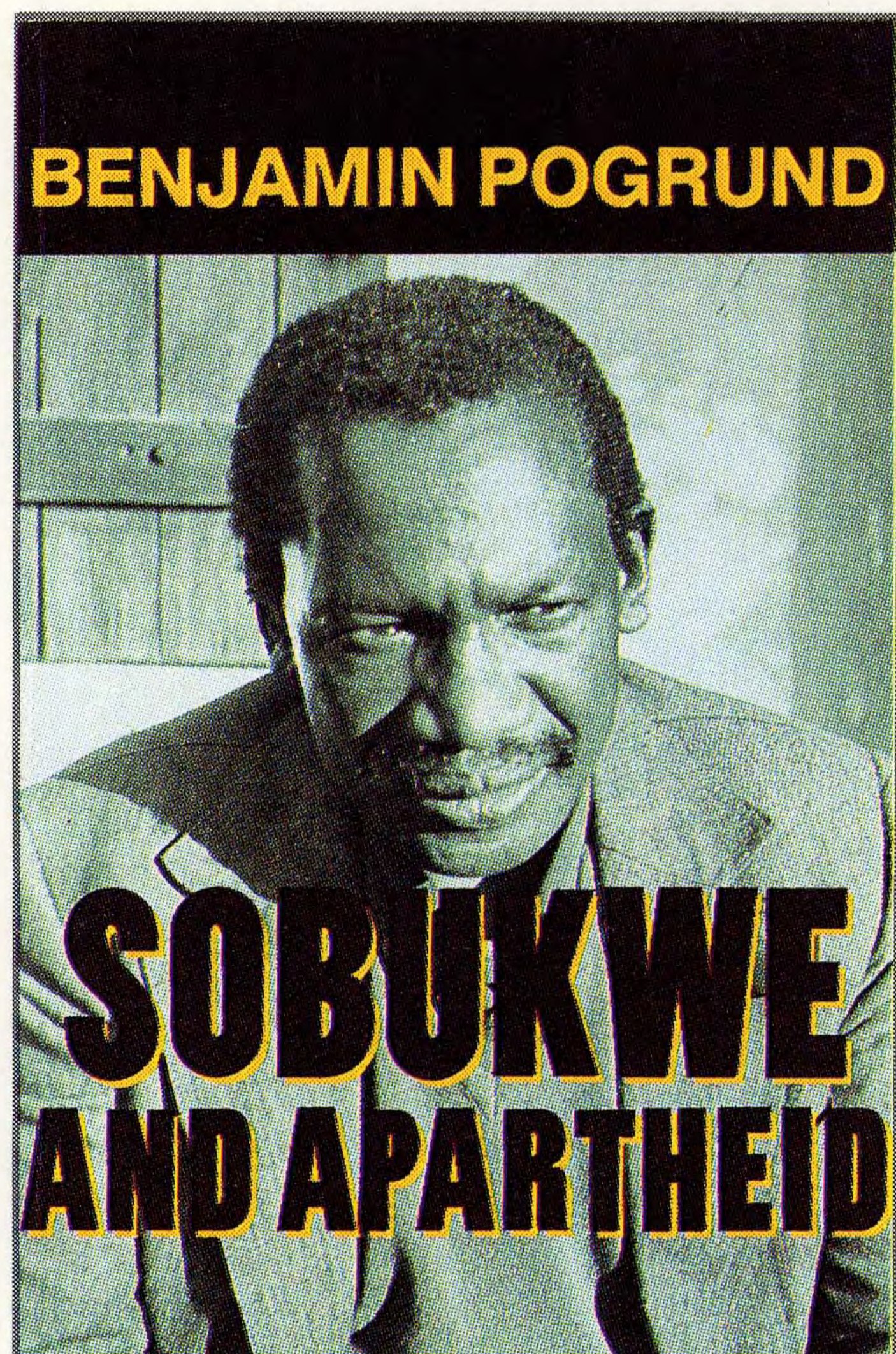


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**SOBUKWE AND APARTHEID**  
by Benjamin Pogrund  
(Jonathan Ball Publishers)

Among the many triumphs of east European transformation which South Africans will readily recognise is the disinterment of hitherto hidden history.

With the emancipation of our political estate, a veil is being drawn aside to reveal 30 years of history which passed us by even as it was happening. The sudden release of an entire body of opposition literature and forbidden thought is proving an intoxicating counterpoint to decades of officially sanctioned reportage.

No wonder, therefore, that our bookshops groan under an avalanche of pulp lumpen-history which elevates our recent past to a romantic pinnacle of undiluted heroism and unimpeachable struggle.

Benjamin Pogrund's *Sobukwe and Apartheid* stands in sharp contrast to that impoverishment of our need to understand the forces, the ambitions and the personalities that have brought us to our present state. It is a fascinating contribution to our process of historical revelation and only Pogrund could have written it.

The title notwithstanding, this is not a biography in the strict definition of that genre, nor a record of the Pan-Africanist Congress, but one man's tribute to a friend and a fond account of an intimate relation-

ship made all the more remarkable by obstacles to intercourse which would have destroyed the relationship between slighter men.

For all Sobukwe's pervasive presence, Pogrund emerges as the hero of his own book. There can be no doubt it was he who sustained the optimism and nurtured the courage of Robert Sobukwe throughout the nine years he spent as apartheid's prisoner, the last six of them on Robben Island in conditions of virtual solitary confinement and psychological deprivation.

The book must inevitably invite comparison with another well-documented relationship between a liberal journalist and an Africanist politician, that between Donald Woods and Steve Biko. Where many – not least the PAC itself – have decried Woods' *momento amici* as self-serving and opportunistic, this volume displays a self-effacing modesty which will survive the antagonism of all who have newly leapt onto Sobukwe's Pan-Africanist coat-tails while understanding little of his apparent non-racial ideology.

Too, the book demands comparison between the black leaders of Sobukwe's generation and De Klerk's. Sobukwe and Luthuli seem, at the respectful distance which time affords, nobler men than, for example, Mandela, mesmerising the world with his dignity and years while devoid of vision or manifesto. Even sadder is the spectacle of the heir to Sobukwe's presidency, the rather pathetic figure of Zeph Mothopeng, as he shuffles his incoherent passage across our political landscape with all the declamatory obfuscation of Africa's own Michael Foot.

Sobukwe was, of course, the victim of a very particular exercise in state malevolence. His imprisonment differed qualitatively from that of Nelson Mandela, who was sentenced for an indisputably criminal act which would have attracted punitive response in any society governed by law, if not by justice. Sobukwe's initial three-year term was imposed under the peculiarly offensive Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1952 which transformed the minor offence of contravening the pass laws into a much more serious crime of incitement for their repeal.

But it was in the cynical prolonging of that sentence by six successive "Sobukwe

clauses" in annual statutory amendments that the Nationalists destroyed for all time the assertion of their ambassadors that no man was jailed merely on the grounds of his political convictions.

In that respect, Sobukwe is arguably a more heroic figure than Mandela, although history will almost certainly judge him of lesser political consequence.

Even in death, Sobukwe was not spared insult and indignity. Pogrund records the hideosity of his funeral, the obsequies abducted from his family and friends by "the children". As Mangosuthu Buthelezi, whose relationship with Sobukwe had been at best temperamental and volatile, was hurried away from the scene amidst spittle and jeers, Pogrund turned to his wife and remarked: "That man, with his enormous pride, has been totally humiliated. God knows what price South Africa will be made to pay for it."

We know the price today. Buthelezi's implacable hatred of the Congress movement is largely explained by that Graaff-Reinet funeral and Natal continues to suffer the consequences.

Sobukwe's Africanism has always been a difficult philosophy to understand. It has frightened Afrikaners in its irredentist stridency and reassured their prejudices in its nationalist exclusivity, while simply confusing liberals. Neither has understood his definition of the struggle for emancipation as deriving its imperative from the private well-springs of black experience, which are largely impenetrable by those whom Biko termed "black souls wrapped up in white skins". Biko, picking up Sobukwe's banner and adding to it the colours of Fanon and Aimé Césaire, drew the same uncomprehending criticism of anti-whiteism when he fashioned Black Consciousness.

To the white liberal, particularly, Sobukwe and Biko are unfathomable figures, but there is a discernible logic to their place in our ideological continuum, and Pogrund's rolling back of our political barriers spreads new light upon it.

Robert Sobukwe Papers

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