



CAROL BRICKLEY reviews BENJAMIN POGRUND's recent biography of 'How can man die better . . . Sobukwe and apartheid', documenting the life of ROBERT MANGALISO SOBUKWE, the Founding President of the PAC

SOBUKWE AFRICAN REVOLUTIONARY

It is perhaps the unfortunate fate of black revolutionaries from South Africa that their eventual biographers are white and tend to be liberal: Donald Woods on Steve Biko; Mary Benson on Nelson Mandela; and now Benjamin Pogrud on Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe, founding President of the Pan Africanist Congress of Azania (PAC). This says a lot about the role that white liberals played during the decades when the apartheid regime attempted to bury the voices of black revolutionaries.

Pogrud's book must be approached with caution. Donald Woods managed to obscure Biko's politics with his own, and to some degree Pogrud cannot avoid doing the same: not because his purpose is mischievous, but because, ultimately, he is an observer of only part of Sobukwe's life and a participant in even less, wholly dictated by apartheid. He is a white observer of a fundamentally black experience. At key moments he blunders. Nevertheless it is a brave book and a pleasure to read when so little is written about one of Africa's foremost revolutionaries.

YOUTH LEAGUE

Pogrud first met Sobukwe in 1957 when Sobukwe was working as a 'language assistant' at Witwatersrand University. This was one of apartheid's refinements - Sobukwe was a very talented linguist but could not be appointed a lecturer because he was black. By 1957 there was already much political water under the bridge, and Sobukwe's political standpoint was already formed as a member of the ANC Youth League (CYL).

Sobukwe had become politically active first as a young student at Fort Hare College where a branch of the CYL was formed in 1948, the year that the Nationalist Party came to power. The CYL was deeply critical of the ANC old-guard leadership both because of its record of collaboration with the regime (through the stooge body the Natives' Representative Council) and its failure to organise the struggle for liberation. The 'new generation', amongst them Mandela, Tambo, Sisulu, Lembede, Mda, developed an Africanist programme for the CYL, its fundamental aims being: '1) the creation of a united nation out of the heterogeneous tribes; 2) the freeing of Africans from foreign domination and foreign leadership; 3) the creation of conditions which can enable Africa to make her own contribution to human progress and happiness.' (CYL Policy Document)

The CYL proclaimed that the national liberation movement must be led by Africans, and even though some white people might condemn racial oppression: 'in the last analysis this counts for nothing. In the struggle for freedom Africans will be wasting their time and deflecting their forces if they look up to the Europeans, either for inspiration or for help in their political struggle.' Further:

'It is known... that a dominant group does not voluntarily give up its privileged position. That is why the Congress Youth puts forward African Nationalism as the militant outlook of an oppressed people seeking a solid basis for waging a long, bitter and unrelenting struggle for its national freedom.'

These principles remained at the centre of Sobukwe's politics for the rest of his life. In 1949 the CYL took over the leadership of the ANC and its Programme of Action was adopted at the Bloemfontein Congress. Sobukwe was elected National Secretary of the CYL. The reader will, however, look in vain for some of this detail in Pogrud's book, although the two central issues of non-collaboration and the role of communists in the liberation struggle are constant themes.

POLITICAL DIVISIONS

By the time Pogrud comes on the scene, the early 1950s had seen the enactment of major apartheid legislation like the Population Registration Act, the Group Areas Act and the Suppression of Communism Act (1950).

The Africanists, as Sobukwe and the group around him called themselves, were deeply suspicious of the role of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) which had dissolved itself shortly before it was banned (it was reformed three years later underground as the SACP). The Africanists suspected the CPSA of attempting to manipulate the liberation movement behind the scenes and sacrificing the liberation struggle in order to make an alliance with the white working class, with African workers not as the leadership of the struggle but as one part of an alliance. Sobukwe's group was striving towards a national liberation struggle of African people led by African people. It was this conflict of aims which then (as now) led the PAC's more scurrilous critics to describe the PAC as racist. It is a less than honest criticism, and one which Pogrud's book completely refutes: neither in his personal nor political life was Sobukwe a proponent of 'anti-white racism'.

The conflict with the South African communists was however very real. Developments in the ANC during the 1950s confirmed the Africanists' suspicions. Repression forged an alliance between the ANC and other groups, as the 'Asians' and 'Coloured' peoples were caught in apartheid's net. This co-operation was not opposed by Africanists - on the contrary, on the basis of a strong African-led liberation movement, they favoured co-operation with all oppressed groups. They felt however that what was happening was not co-operation but dissolution. In 1952 the white Congress of Democrats was formed and Pogrud suggests that it was widely regarded as a front for the disbanded CPSA.

Distrust was sharpened when the ANC in alliance with the SAIC, ACPO and COD² called for a 'Congress of the People'. The Congress, held in June 1955, gave birth to the Freedom Charter, which was ratified as the ANC's programme a year later. The Africanists felt that the 1949 Programme of Action, based on Africanist principles of national self-determination, had been abandoned in favour of an alliance against the injustices of apartheid.

The debate within the movement sharpened and the Africanists, with Sobukwe and Mthopeng in the lead, began to organise open opposition. The ANC was having difficulties: as a result of the Defiance Campaign the leadership faced the long Treason Trial and many had to operate underground. This in turn heightened the suspicion that the leadership was not accountable and was being manipulated from behind the scenes.

THE FORMATION OF THE PAC

At the end of 1958, Pogrud, by now a journalist for *The Rand Daily Mail*, was present at the key Transvaal regional ANC conference where the Africanists were expelled. Pogrud reports Sobukwe's view that the breach was inevitable: as a result the PAC was formed. At its founding conference in April 1959, Sobukwe expounded the PAC's three main aims:

'We aim, politically, at government of the Africans by the Africans for the Africans, with everybody who owes his only loyalty to Afrika and who is



Sobukwe at Orlando police station after the Sharpeville massacre

prepared to accept the democratic rule of an African majority being regarded as African. We guarantee no minority rights, because we think in terms of individuals not groups.

'Economically we aim at the rapid extension of industrial development in order to alleviate pressure on the land, which is what progress means in terms of modern society. We stand committed to a policy guaranteeing the most equitable distribution of wealth.

'Socially we aim at the full development of the human personality and a ruthless uprooting and outlawing of all forms or manifestations of the racial myth. To sum it up we stand for an Africanist Socialist Democracy.'

The inaugural address was a very concise statement of Sobukwe's politics. It contains intriguing sentences: 'In conclusion I wish to state that the Africanists do not at all subscribe to the fashionable doctrine of South African exceptionalism... Surely a comment on the SACP's new doctrine of the time 'colonialism of a special kind' which made South Africa out to be an exception in Africa where the white working class would struggle alongside the oppressed black majority.

Pogrud misses the fine details but his account of the Founding Conference is very interesting. In a question and answer session, Sobukwe replied to a question about whether he was a communist or socialist: '... we borrow from East and West - political democracy from the West and planned economy from the East. And this planned economy has no meaning unless it means finally, equality.'

SHARPEVILLE

In the first year of its existence, the PAC began organising and building its membership throughout the country. Here Pogrud is at his best, with direct experience of what was happening, honestly trying to assess the impact of the newly formed organisation. The PAC launched a Status Campaign aimed at developing the consciousness of black people.

Alongside this, in August 1959 it was agreed to launch an anti-pass defiance campaign. The ANC had called a campaign on pass laws for June 1959, but Pogrud records that little happened. The two organisations were now vying for support, and when the ANC declared that 31 March 1960 would be 'Anti-Pass Day' when 'deputations would call upon local authorities and government officials in charge of black affairs throughout the country to urge abolition', Sobukwe determined that the ANC's rather timid aims would not be allowed to interfere with the PAC's defiance.

21 March 1960 was chosen as the day when black people would leave their passes at home and present themselves at police stations for arrest, under the slogans 'No Bail! No Defence! No Fine!' Sobukwe was determined that PAC leaders would be at the head of marches. The decision had bitter consequences for his political future.

The events of 21 March at Sharpeville are well known - the police opened fire on a peaceful demonstration. 69 people were murdered, most of them shot in the back. Sharpeville reverberated throughout South Africa and beyond. A state of emergency was declared, millions of Rand were wiped off the Johannesburg Stock Exchange, and the regime unleashed the most bloody repression. Both the PAC and the ANC were banned and thousands were tortured, detained and imprisoned. As a result, first the PAC and then the ANC launched the armed struggle in response to the regime's terror.

Sobukwe, who had presented himself at the head of march to Orlando police station, was arrested and sentenced to three years imprisonment. Pogrud presents a vivid account of this period and its consequences. He also admits that for some time after Sharpeville he failed to contact Sobukwe: he re-established contact 18 months later when Sobukwe was in Pretoria Local prison. From this time on, Pogrud remained in touch with Sobukwe as a prisoner, looking after his and his family's needs.

THE SOBUKWE CLAUSE

For the next three years no one had any doubt that Sobukwe would resume leadership of the PAC on his release in 1963. He had been sentenced for incitement to break the law, not the more serious charges which followed the banning of the liberation movements and the launch of the armed struggle. But the regime had other plans.

Before Sobukwe's release date, a special law was enacted allowing prisoners convicted under security laws to be detained indefinitely after their sentence had been served. It was never used against any other prisoner and became known as the Sobukwe Clause. It was the cruellest possible outcome.

Sobukwe was kept in a separate compound - effectively in solitary confinement - on Robben Island for the next six years. Each year the provisions of the Sobukwe Clause were extended for a further year. Although the physical conditions of his imprisonment were much better than for the other Robben Island prisoners, isolation was a harsh regime, well documented in Pogrud's book. In 1969, fearful of Sobukwe's mental health, the regime suddenly released him, at the same time banning him for five years to Kimberley.

POGRUND THE LIBERAL

Over the period of detention and banning, Pogrud had remained a faithful supporter of both Sobukwe and his family. He fulfilled the role that only a white liberal could - Sobukwe could have no open contact with his comrades - he looked after Sobukwe's financial, physical and educational needs admirably. They also discussed philosophy, religion, literature etc, etc at great length. We are given, in this later part of the book, great detail about his physical needs, even down to the changing size of his trousers and his preference for conservative clothes.

But it is also here that Pogrud sets about imposing his own political preferences - Sobukwe as African saint, the political edges knocked off. It is the greatest pity that information on Sobukwe's contacts with his PAC comrades and Steve Biko is omitted - for indeed he did have contact. Pogrud cannot supply us with the detail and it is sorely missed.

Sobukwe became seriously ill in 1977 and until his death in February 1978 the regime continued its cruel treatment, making his treatment for cancer as difficult as possible.

But what a funeral! The black youth were robbed of the live Sobukwe - the regime had ensured that - so they came to reclaim his body and his political legacy in death. Expecting a 'dignified' African funeral at which he and Helen Suzman were invited to speak, Pogrud was horrified: 'The Children have taken over.' For two weeks students kept a vigil in the location. On the day of the funeral, as Zwelakhe Sisulu reported in *The Nation*, black youth poured into the small town of Graff Reinert, Sobukwe's birthplace. 'As the spearhead of the procession entered the arena, Buthelezi was spotted by the youths: "they broke into a song: When I see Mantazima, I see a stooge, when I see Mangope I see a puppet, when I see Gatsha, I see... (a derogatory word)." A young barefoot boy approached Buthelezi "and extended his hand: Here take this, he said as he handed over a two-cent piece, which was flung away..." The crowd forced Buthelezi to leave the stadium, along with other collaborators.

At this point the liberal Pogrud parts company with the legacy of the revolutionary Sobukwe; he could not bear to remain for the burial.

The youth who had risen up in Soweto had reclaimed Sobukwe. The fires which were lit in 1976 continued to burn for the next decade, and are still burning in the townships of Azania, unquenchable.

1. In his forthcoming book, *A Pan Africanist Speaks* (Skotaville), Zolile Keke cites the CPSA central committee report in January 1950 as a cause of suspicion by the Africanists: 'The national organisations, to be effective, must be transformed into a revolutionary party of workers, peasants and intellectuals and petty bourgeoisie, linked together in a firm organisation... and guided by a definite programme of struggle against all forms of racial discrimination in alliance with the class conscious European [white South African] workers and intellectuals. Such a party would be distinguished from the Communist Party in that its objective is national liberation, that is, the abolition of race discrimination, but it would co-operate closely with the Communist Party. In this party the class conscious workers and peasants of the national group concerned would constitute the main leadership. It would be their task to develop an adequate organisational apparatus to conduct mass struggles against race discrimination, to combat racism and chauvinism in the people, and to forge unity in action between the oppressed people and between them and the European working class.'

2. These were the South African Indian Congress, the Coloured People's Organisation and the Congress of Democrats.

3. Quoted from *A Pan Africanist Speaks*, forthcoming, as above.

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