

A man with compassion

How Can Man Die Better: Sobukwe & Apartheid by Benjamin Pogrund, Peter Halban, London, 1990. £14.95

And how can man die better

*Than facing fearful odds,
For the ashes of his fathers
And the temples of his Gods?*

(a favourite poem in PAC circles: by Thomas Babington)

So far little has been uncovered of the Pan-Africanist Congress of Azania/South Africa. Similarly, far less has been published on the PAC's first president, Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe or 'Prof' as he was fondly referred to among PAC comrades at the time.

Biographies should be judged on the extent to which they are able to convey the dialectical connection between both 'the personal' and the wider societal context in which the former is located. This book is significant for it gives a valuable insight into the political ideas of Sobukwe and the organisation he headed as well as his humble personality. Pervading this well-written biography is a strong sense of Sobukwe's quiet relentlessness and passion for justice.

Pogrund, a white middle class journalist who met Sobukwe in 1957, remarkably conveys both the essence of this dialectic. It is achieved in a lucid style. He is equally skillful in weaving the historical background to the evolution of apartheid ideology and legislation with the growth in Sobukwe's political consciousness.

A turning point for Sobukwe comes when as a teacher he is deeply affected by the 'inter-tribal' killings among black South Africans. He later realises that academic freedom is inseparable from the wider struggle for political freedom.

In December 1958 an ideological split from the mother body, the ANC, leads to the formation of the PAC by the 'Africanists'. As the first President of the PAC, Sobukwe gives the necessary ideological direction to the newly found Congress which encompasses non-violence, anti-white supremacy, black pride, socialism, the belief in one human races as opposed to a plurality of races and Pan-Africanism.

Another turning point comes when he decides to resign from his post as language assistant in order to take up activist work. This leads to the Sharpeville massacre of 1960 and Sobukwe's arrest. Whilst in prison the 'Prof' remains unshakeably dedicated to his political ideals and Pan-Africanism. Perceived as a grave threat to white society the 'Sobukwe Clause' extends his imprisonment. The special 'treatment' which the specificity of the Clause awards him, such as newspapers and a radio, cause him to feel 'unsettled and frustrated' at the fact that this fellow prisoners are not permitted such privileges to alleviate the oppressiveness of prison life.

Of his admirers, Sobukwe says of L.B. Johnson: 'He has one outstanding virtue for which I like him. He feels. Some have said he sentimental. And that is the man for me any day. A man who can be moved; a man who can feel anger; who can feel deep compassion. But above all a man who can weep in the presence of sorrow and suffering'. Similarly, in a beautiful letter on the fortieth birthday of his wife Veronica, he pays an 'emotional tribute' to her courage, dignity, and loyalty as 'the true embodiment of African womanhood'.

After nine years of imprisonment Sobukwe is released in April 1969. He is banished to the isolated town of Kimberly, where he continues to suffer the effects of the 'machine', as he referred to

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the constant surveillance and bugging by agents of the racist state. He is refused application for a passport by the government and in 1977 his health gave cause for concern. However, requests for X-rays from Kimberly hospital were denied. After a three month crucial delay by the government's refusal to allow him freedom of medical treatment, an operation removed a cancerous lung. The delay proves fatal and on February 27th 1978 the 'Prof' dies whilst being under 24 hour guard by two state security men. Explanations of his death by some PAC members are in dispute with the official medical prognosis. Individuals such as Peter Molotisis, a former PAC executive member are of the sinister opinion that the racist state poisoned Sobukwe.

It is towards the end of the book where Pogrund reveals the limits of his own liberal consciousness. The author criticises elements among the PAC youth who refuse to allow him and Helen Suzman to deliver speeches at Sobukwe's funeral and attributes their action to 'intolerance and anti-whiteism'. According to Pogrund, those 'intent upon sharpening their political axe' had 'betrayed the non-racialism which was the basis of (Sobukwe's) political beliefs'.

Unfortunately, liberal consciousness is flawed in an inability to recognise that 'anti-whiteism' is in itself simply a reaction to white racism. More fundamentally, 'black racism' is not a concrete material reality 'buttressed by economic or political power' over white lives. On the contrary, it is white racism which concretely determines every aspect of black people's lives.

As a non-violent man passionately committed to humanity regard less of colour, creed or race, Sobukwe makes no claims to 'super human' qualities. Neither is he consumed by vengeance or bitterness towards his fate.

Sobukwe never lived to fulfil his ambition of translating Shakespearere into Zulu, but how can one die better than by giving up one's life for the struggle?

• Ama Biney

Robert Sobukwe Papers

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