

Sobukwe: The Lost Leader?

How can man die better... Sobukwe and apartheid by Benjamin Pogrund
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The central irony of this biography of the late PAC leader, Robert Sobukwe, is that it should be written by a white man. Sobukwe, after all, rose to fame by championing an exclusively black struggle against apartheid.

The publishers seem to acknowledge this irony and sell the book as the story of the "remarkable friendship" between Sobukwe and his biographer Pogrund. This is not just publisher's hype. Sobukwe during his Robben Island years told Pogrund he regarded him as his "brother".

The friendship was strengthened after Sobukwe was released under strict banning orders to the black ghetto of Galeshewe near Kimberley. Although always harassed by the security police, Sobukwe and Pogrund spent much time together.

As a result of this intimate access, Pogrund is uniquely qualified to write this biography. Pogrund first befriended Sobukwe while working for the *Rand Daily Mail* in the late 1950s - he was one of the few white journalists to cover black political activity at this time. The PAC came into being under Sobukwe in 1959, after a group of Africanists split from the ANC in 1958. Sobukwe believed that collaboration with whites, especially white communists, would undermine the black fight for liberation.

In fact the split in the short-term greatly undermined the pass law campaigns that both the ANC and the PAC planned in 1960. Sobukwe launched an anti-pass law campaign on 21 March, pre-empting the ANC campaign which was to be held on 31 March.

Like many of the liberation leaders, Sobukwe was amongst the best educated blacks under the apartheid system. Mandela and Tambo could have had careers as lawyers, Sobukwe had a comfortable job as a lecturer at the University of Witwatersrand. In planning the pass laws campaign, Sobukwe sacrificed his job and

collaboration "was doing more harm than good". However, in his editorial in the *Rand Daily Mail* on Sobukwe's funeral, Pogrund still acknowledges Buthelezi as "a courageous fighter for black rights".

The death and funeral of Sobukwe seems to have been a watershed in South African history. First, it underlined the divisions of blacks which has underpinned the government's promotion of "separate development". Throughout the 1980s these divisions became increasingly manifest and increasingly violent. Pogrund notes that he told his wife at Sobukwe's funeral that Buthelezi "with his enormous pride has been totally humiliated. God knows what price South Africa will be made to pay for it". Second, the death of Sobukwe led to the demise of the PAC. Pogrund asserts in his book that Sobukwe was the natural, unchallengeable leader of the PAC. If he were alive and active it appears inconceivable that he would not be representing the PAC at the talks between the ANC and the Nats.

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ultimately his freedom. It was a matter of pride for Sobukwe to lead from the front: he was the first to walk into Orlando police station on 21 March and to ask to be arrested for not carrying his pass.

Initially he was given three years. However, at the end of his sentence the Nats passed a law which allowed the Minister of Justice to keep anyone who transgressed the security laws in jail indefinitely. Sobukwe was kept on Robben Island for six years under this law which became known as the Sobukwe Clause as he was the only person imprisoned under it.

Pogrund mentions briefly how Sobukwe met white communist Joe Slovo during his trial in 1960 and Nelson Mandela in Pretoria prison before he was transferred to Robben Island. It appears contacts such as these helped change Sobukwe's mind on an exclusively black, exclusively PAC liberation struggle.

Furthermore, Sobukwe respected the white liberals who had served the struggle during the black stay-at-home campaign in Cape Town which followed the PAC pass law campaigns. Patrick Duncan editor of the liberal newspaper *Contact* was to become the first white member of PAC.

It is only speculation but Sobukwe might have been able to heal the deep divisions of South African society: both the divisions between blacks and the division of white and black.

Sobukwe's mother was Mosotho and his father Xhosa, but he married a Zulu and taught Zulu at university. He pointed out that he was a living denial of Afrikaner Nationalist racial ideology. As such he might have had a broad appeal throughout black ethnic groups.

Indeed although he was highly critical of Buthelezi, at a chance meeting in a Kimberley store Sobukwe was prepared to shake hands with the Zulu leader. South Africa needs leaders whose pride will not stand in the way of reconciliation.

On Robben Island, Sobukwe was kept away from other political prisoners. The South African government boasted that, according to the International Red Cross, Sobukwe's accommodation was equivalent to "that of a high-ranking officer in time of war".

It seems that had Sobukwe shown any willingness to compromise his political views he might have been set free. In fact Sobukwe was only released when, as a result of his solitary confinement, he became psychologically disturbed.

He spent the rest of his life "imprisoned" in Galeshewe under the surveillance of the security police. In 1977 Sobukwe contracted lung cancer. The efforts made to give Sobukwe the best medical attention were severely hampered by the banning orders. He died in February 1978.

The book has a dramatic and sad ending. Sobukwe's wife, Veronica, asked Pogrund and white liberal MP Helen Suzman to speak at the funeral. However, the crowd of mourners objected to their presence and they were not allowed to speak. As Desmond Tutu pointed out, the mourners "were deeply incensed that Suzman and Pogrund were scheduled to speak when so many of those who worked with Sobukwe had to be left out".

Buthelezi in tears

Furthermore, Chief Buthelezi had asked to attend and Sobukwe's brother, Ernest, thought he should give an address at the funeral. However, Buthelezi, because of his collaboration in the state's separate development policy, became the object of vitriolic abuse from the mourners. Tutu told Buthelezi to go - which he did with tears running down his cheek. As he left he was kicked, spat at and jostled. He escaped to his car with a leg injury.

Pogrund seemed not to have expected the intensity of feeling at the funeral. He notes that the funeral was "hijacked by people intent on sharpening their axe and I had no particular wish to be associated with it".

Moreover, Pogrund appeared at the time to be unaware of the hostility against Buthelezi. He notes that Buthelezi and the bantustans had become "the major disagreement between Sobukwe and me". Pogrund says that he eventually admitted to Sobukwe that Buthelezi and his policy of

Astonishingly, Sobukwe seems never to have harboured any bitterness against his enemies. On his death bed, he was visited by Methodist minister Alex Boraine. Boraine reports that Sobukwe said that we must forgive the government "because they don't know what they are doing. We must pray for them that their eyes will be opened".

Matthew Rake

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by Benjamin Pogrund

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