

Review

Irina Filatova and Appollon Davidson (2013) *The Hidden Thread: Russia and South Africa in the Soviet era*. Johannesburg and Cape Town: Jonathan Ball

Keith Somerville

K.Somerville@kent.ac.uk

Having spent many decades reporting on southern Africa and writing about the region and the role there of the Soviet Union, I was particularly interested in reading this large and weighty tome. It is packed full of detail, references and so is a mine of information and leads to follow for academics studying the Soviet engagement with South Africa and its wider engagement with Africa. They will not be disappointed with the wealth of material and the chance to hear from two experts who started their careers in the Soviet Union – there is a huge amount of interesting ore and nuggets of information to be quarried from the rock. There is also a huge amount of the book that is irrelevant, gossipy and sheds little light on the relationship. Some parts read like old Kremlinological accounts of Soviet politics written by Western conservatives, others like a Cold War era spy novel. The book would have benefitted from an editor's red pencil in many places, thereby making the very valuable sections more accessible.

The authors are at their best when delving into the making and content of Soviet policy towards South Africa and the construction of approaches such as the national democratic revolution. They identify clearly the ambivalence towards and lack of knowledge and understanding of Africa among Soviet academics and ideologues. Their summing up of the national democratic revolution and non-capitalist path is spot on – 'Long or short, these definitions were so vague that they could be stretched in any direction. Clearly, there were no tangible criteria for a government to be recognised as a revolutionary democracy, and for a country to be considered a national

democratic state' (223). I was slightly disappointed not to find any discussion of the Soviet idea of correlation of forces which was a guiding principle in the 1970s and 1980s in knitting together strategic and ideological considerations to make what the Soviets clearly felt was a joined up international policy.

Having read numerous accounts of the Soviet role in Angola and been party to academic debate over the importance of Cuito Cuanavale, I was underwhelmed by the sections of the book dealing with the Soviet role in that country. I wanted to get the Soviet view of the importance of the political defeat of the South Africans (brought about by a costly failure to take the town from Angolan and Cuban forces) for the future, and of the Soviet diplomatic role in negotiations that brought about rapid changes regionally; and a view of whether they would have been willing to pour in more materiel and technical/command support to enable the Angolans and Cubans to inflict even greater damage on the SADF. As in much of the book, there was a lack of context here about the causes and nature of the Angolan conflict, the relationship of that conflict to Namibia and South Africa, and the Africa, Soviet and Cuban engagement. In such a large and well-researched work there is a surprising tunnel vision and lack of context about the Cold War, US and other Western policies towards South Africa and even about the development and nature of apartheid and of the ANC as a liberation movement. Individuals and their actions and the minutiae are too often chosen at the expense of fitting events into context.

This narrowness of focus means they are inclined, in an almost Cold War fashion, to ascribe far too much importance to the Soviet role in South Africa and its relationship with the SACP and ANC. The Soviet cart is too often put in front of the ANC horse and we get a theme all the way through that you can't understand the ANC without taking full account of the 'deep and lasting impact of the trajectory of South Africa's history' of the Soviet role. Certainly, it is an important part of that trajectory but apartheid, capitalism and the structure of the South African economy are paramount and the ANC's need for the alliance with the SACP and the USSR are products of that and are not things in themselves. The ANC today is centralised but not Leninist. It uses a vocabulary that apes aspects of Marxism and the national democratic revolution is referred to often, yet actual policy, actions and the ambitions of ANC leaders bear no relation to any form of socialism, thus the current NUMSA trajectory and growing criticism of the ANC's economic policies of the last two decades by Ronnie Kasrils, Ben Turok, and others.

This is also reflected in the discussion of whether or not Mandela was a member of the SACP central committee. This was at the centre of debate at the recent Mandela: myth and reality conference I organised in London. There, Stephen Ellis argued that he was, and Hugh Macmillan questioned this certainty. But, for me, the crucial comment was from Saul Dubow, who said that the actual nature of his relationship matters less than the policies, actions and consequences that came from what was clearly a close working relationship. That sort of nuance is missing from the book, whatever its other very considerable merits. There is no real discussion of Mandela's extensive writings, speeches, etc, on the struggle and how the SACP fits in, or on socialism, redistribution of wealth or nationalisation, let alone Soviet-style Marxism, in post-1990 South Africa. The ANC tail wagged the Soviet/SACP dog and not vice versa.