Review

Luli Callinicos (2004) *Oliver Tambo: beyond the Engeli Mountains*. Cape Town: David Philip

Hugh Macmillan

For all but the last few months of the thirty years that followed the ANC’s banning in 1960, Oliver Reginald Kaizana Tambo, known to many as ‘OR’, and to his intimates as ‘Bones’, was the leader of the ANC in exile. After the death of his mentor, Albert Luthuli, in 1967, he became the *de facto*, but only latterly the *de jure*, leader of the ANC as a whole. A mild-mannered man, courteous in an old-fashioned way, an intellectual with the cautious demeanour of a country lawyer, ascetic in his personal habits, and moderate in his political beliefs, he was rather wooden as a speaker from a prepared text, but more effective *ex tempore*. His charm or charisma, and there is no doubt that he had both, worked best with small groups. He was highly respected by almost all members of the ANC in exile. He sought to make himself accessible to all and he never wavered in his conviction that the overthrow of apartheid required the widest possible combination of forces. He knew from an early date that apartheid would be ended by negotiations, and he did his best to ensure that the ANC was prepared for that eventuality. He has been rightly credited with performing a very difficult feat – leading and holding together a motley crew, and ensuring that the ANC did not suffer the violent internal squabbles that weakened the leadership of most other southern African liberation movements. He achieved this feat by placing himself as near as he could to what he saw as the centre of gravity of the movement, with one foot in the African nationalist wing and the other, with a little less weight, in the radical and socialist wing. He sought to perform a similar balancing act in terms of global politics, having to live with the Cold War, and trying with some success to gain diplomatic and material support from western social democrats, on the one hand, and
eastern, or at least Soviet, communists on the other hand. He did his best to provide for a growing number of exiles, many of whom became wholly dependent on the ANC. As Luli Callinicos points out in the preface, Tambo was the ‘glue’ that kept the ANC together.

Born at Kantolo in Pondoland in 1917 – like KD Mantanzima he was given one of his names in honour of the German emperor – he was the son of an enterprising and industrious father who was, for a time, a man of relative wealth. He had several mothers, but his own mother and father both died when he was fifteen. He was devoted to his youngest mother, but he found a new family in the Anglican Church. For Tambo there was never any doubt that CPSA stood for ‘Church of the Province of South Africa’, and not for ‘Communist Party of South Africa’. Tambo is recorded in this book as weeping twice, once when Trevor Huddleston was compelled to leave South Africa by the Community of the Resurrection, and a second time when he was himself told that he could not take part in a risky and misguided attempt to land an ANC expedition on the coast of Pondoland. Although he had been working as a lawyer for a decade, and had held leading positions in the ANC, he was still seeking to be ordained at the time when he was selected by Luthuli to represent the ANC abroad. If he had not become the leader of the ANC, he might well have become the first black Archbishop of Cape Town. It is tempting to think that his model of the ANC lay in the Anglican Church – the ‘broad church’ designed to bridge the divide between Catholics and protestants – a church whose leaders have usually had to conceal their own theological positions, while balancing the demands of Catholics on the one hand and evangelicals on the other.

This is a big book; it is the result of over ten years’ work and draws on nearly 200 interviews. Luli Callinicos describes her initial concept as ‘a gendered, social’ biography, though the finished product reads as a political biography. It is also an authorised biography and has been written with the co-operation of Tambo’s widow, Adelaide, and the Oliver Tambo Foundation. The book’s greatest strength lies in the evident admiration and affection that Luli Callinicos has for Oliver Tambo – a man whom she knew and interviewed before his death. Another strength is the fascinating account of his early life, which draws on his own recorded memoir of his first twenty-five years, and describes his family background in Pondoland; his education at Holy Cross, St Peter’s Rosettenville, and at Fort Hare; his love of stick-fighting, maths and music; the early development of his spiritual and political beliefs, and the links between them; and his later
emergence, despite his reticence and because of his intellectual strength, as a national leader of the ANC.

Among the book’s weaknesses is its tendency, especially in the latter half, to lose focus on its subject. The subject of a biography should appear on every page, but there are sections of up to five pages in this book, as for instance on the history of the Anti-Apartheid Movement, where Tambo does not feature at all. Another weakness relates to sources. Although Callinicos refers to one or two of Tambo’s notebooks and diaries, and to some letters and speeches, only a small minority of the references are to his own written words. This makes it very difficult to follow the evolution of his thought, and the reliance on oral testimony makes for a rather static view of the subject, as there are very few interviewees, in any context, who provide a coherent narrative or an accurate chronology. Callinicos refers in her preface to the discovery, after the completion of her book, of twelve briefcases full of documents belonging to Tambo in a Lusaka safe house. Their contents might have provided us with more evidence for the development of Tambo’s thought on critical issues. What did he really think about the decision to launch the armed struggle – a decision of which he was not a part? What were his real views on the expulsion of the ‘Gang of Eight’, a decision that he is said to have opposed, and to have regretted? A much more serious problem is the failure to provide a ‘warts and all’ portrait of a great man. This is not quite a hagiography or praise poem, but it comes rather close to being one.

The acid test of an authorised biography is how it deals with the most embarrassing and difficult episodes. For a biography of Tambo, this has to be the author’s treatment of the executions, torture, and other abuses, including neglect, which occurred in the ANC’s camps in Angola in the 1980s. I recall hearing rumours within the ANC in Lusaka of these executions at the time and finding it hard to believe that the ANC was executing its own people, whether they were criminals, rebels, dissidents, spies, or the innocent and wrongly accused, at the same time as an international campaign was being waged to stop the execution of its members, such as Solomon Mahlangu, in South Africa. The ANC was fortunate that these executions were not widely known outside central Africa before 1990, as they could have done its international reputation a great deal of harm.

Callinicos acknowledges that 34 people were executed in Angola, but implies that none of them was executed as a consequence of the mutinies of 1983-4. She says that no executions were carried out after the Kabwe
Conference of 1985, but the ANC’s own submission to the TRC states that there were two executions as late as 1989. She acknowledges that ‘as Supreme Commander of MK, Tambo took ultimate responsibility’ (2004:466), but she quotes Thabo Mbeki as saying that ‘this was not an OR problem … the information about abuses came to the leadership quite late because it was dealt with by the military structure, including intelligence’ (2004:468) Tambo was chairman of the Revolutionary Council until 1983, and from that year was chairman of its replacement, the Politico-Military Committee. There is really no question as to where the buck stopped. Furthermore, he appointed the Stuart Commission, which produced an excellent report within weeks of the first of the mutinies in 1983-4, but before most of the executions. It spoke of the serious deterioration of conditions in the camps, and in the morale of MK members, since the bombing of Novo Catengue in 1979. It warned that, if prompt action were not taken to remedy abuses, further mutinies would occur. Callinicos’ summary of the report seems to draw its sting, and she does not examine the serious implications of the report, and its aftermath, for Tambo’s reputation. It pulled no punches and was, in its impartiality and clarity, a tribute to all that was best in the ANC in exile, but Tambo did not submit it to the National Executive Committee. The report was damning in its criticisms of Mzwai Piliso, and the security department, and of Andrew Masondo, the National Commissar, but it was more than two years before Piliso was removed from the security department and from Angola. Masondo was eventually removed from his post as National Commissar, and from the NEC, at the Kabwe Conference in 1985, but, almost bizarrely in view of his reputation, he was redeployed in 1986 as principal of Somafco. Zola Skweyiya was appointed, as a lawyer, to oversee the implementation of the Code of Conduct that was drawn up at the insistence of Chris Hani in 1985, but he was denied access by the security department to Angola in 1986 and 1987, and was only able to visit the Quatro detainees at the end of 1988. These are not just matters of detail, but, supposing that they were, there is evidence that Tambo did concern himself with them. In 1989 he personally asked Simon Zukas, a civil engineer, politician, and an old friend in Lusaka, to design a prison which would be built in Uganda, and to which the ANC’s detainees could be transferred after the scheduled closure of the Angolan camps at the end of that year (Zukas 2003:147).

A good biography should ask and address the difficult questions. This biography may prompt, but it does not confront the hard questions. The
answers to such questions, in the case of Tambo, need not necessarily detract from his very considerable achievements. They may illustrate the extraordinary difficulty and complexity of his position and the limitations on his capacity for action. They may emphasise the scale of his simultaneous achievements in other areas – in, for example, leading the ANC, against a good deal of opposition, towards negotiations in the 1980s. The effort that he put into the writing and selling of the Harare Declaration contributed to the stroke that put him out of action at a critical moment in 1989. His balancing act held the ANC together, but there was a price to be paid for the ‘glue’. He knew what was going on in Angola, and he certainly did not personally condone the abuses, but, with his need to balance factions and interests, he may not have had the power to achieve quick changes. He was not a dictator, nor was he a great disciplinarian, though he could be withering in his criticism of failure. The need for consensus meant that he had to move slowly, sometimes at the pace of the slowest, and he was reluctant to condemn. He was a man of deep convictions, but he was conscious that his style of leadership might make him appear to be ‘all things to all people’. Wryly, he told one associate that people must understand his need to be ‘many things to many people’ (2004:353) – a phrase that would make a good epitaph for a remarkable and, almost certainly, a good man – and a man to whom all South Africans owe a great deal.

References