

THIEVES IN THE THIEVES' KITCHEN:

THE SOVIET UNION AND SOUTHERN AFRICA

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The Peace that Broke Out

There was a week, not very long ago, when I laughed and laughed and laughed. There it was on the box: Mikhail Gorbachev embracing Fidel Castro. Just like embracing a bear, I thought, and not a very cuddly bear either. However, that embrace was almost innocent of affection. Then Mikhail was all but smothered by Margaret ('we' who had just become a grandmother) as he stepped off the plane at Heathrow. Comrade Thatcher (to use the title bestowed upon her in Zimbabwe) had just jet-stepped through Africa, spreading largesse in Malawi and Mozambique, before waltzing into Namibia to oversee peace (and a little slaughter of Swapo guerillas). She went there to talk to her old friend, Pik Botha. Not to be outdone, Pik took his new/old friend, Comrade Anatoly Adamishin, on a helicopter trip over the Witwatersrand. The mind boggles over what might have been discussed in Havana, London and Windhoek, over the luncheons and suppers. The menus were well publicized, but what did they talk about all the time? What did they discuss as they picked over the fish-bones, or sipped the wines? Was it the shortage of food in the USSR, or indeed the misery of millions in the former colonial states? What did Maggie and Pik talk about, beside condemning Swapo fighters? Was it perhaps about South Africa supplying a few guns to Protestant loyalists in Northern Ireland? And what did Pik say to Anatoly as they flew over Johannesburg? Did Pik point out that lovely garden suburb called Soweto, and did they compare the relative merits of using Caspirs or shovels in crowd control? And did Anatoly say anything about the use of poison gas to disperse demonstrators?

These kissings, huggings and salutations have become a bore. It was zany when the pope went around kissing the land, fructifying the good earth. It was clean fun (until he got to Lesotho), it was quite sexless, and it got him into the publicity in the media just as effectively as all these statesmen, with pride of place alongside royalty, film stars, pugilists and Page 3 models. With this new round of kissing I thought of switching off the box and the radio, but I am a sucker

for the news service. In any case, I could not, because I had to get the 'good news'. Peace, it seems, was breaking out everywhere: in Afghanistan, in the Gulf, on the Chinese-Soviet border, in Kampuchea, in Nicaragua, in Angola. At least, that is what they said. Not that the press-comrades were out of work. Oh, no. There were still massacres on the Palestinian West Bank, Lebanon and Northern Ireland, land mines and ambushes in Sri Lanka, genocide in Kurdistan, Guatemala and Haiti, and an attempted coup in Ethiopia. Troops were pursuing 'rebels' in Burma; were in control of South African townships and keeping the peace in Prague, Georgia, Kosovo, Jordan and Kabul—while the 'faithful' hoped to bring 'peace' to Jahajabd. And the army of Comrade Li Peng, fresh from its peace mission in Tibet, was in the streets of Beijing. But I must stop taking up precious space just listing place-names.

It seems, despite this peace offensive, that there is still a lot of travelling ahead for these peace-comrades, and for their wives (or husbands), their friends and relations, and maybe their foreign ministers too. Even the Queen can join in and if she cannot bring peace to Ireland, at least she can win hearts and minds in Moscow. I can just see the little boys and girls lining the streets around Red Square, the Union Jack in one hand and the red flag in the other, singing *Land of (Soviet) Hope and Glory, Mother of the free....God who made thee mighty, make thee mightier still...*

Come to the point say the editors, so, O.K, to the point. What the papers seem to be saying is that we have by-passed Armageddon and are about to reach that Garden where the lion lies down with the lamb. But maybe there is something behind these pronouncements. Perhaps we are at the stage where the USSR desperately needs to disengage in Africa, Latin America and Asia in order to survive, and the west needs eastern Europe as a market for its goods? Is all this peace-trotting only a space-maker in which the Nato and Warsaw pact countries draw closer, and insulate themselves from possible upheavals, and shame-of-shame, the possibility of revolution?

So, perhaps I got it all wrong. There I was, thinking all those years that the workers were to be encouraged to overthrow their masters and take possession of the bountiful earth. I thought that the chains of slavery were to be burst forever; that the workers were to bring socialism, and with it peace between countries. But this was all a (bad) dream. The world is to be saved for us by the Comrades: Bush (after he has removed any socialists from central America?); Thatcher (after she has removed the word socialism from the dictionary?); Gorbachev (after he has restored market forces and settled accounts with the Soviet working class?); Deng (after he has a buried a few more of the old guard, and a few hundred students?)

One Body, Two Faces?

The peace-makers kiss and talk: lesser mortals of the communist world have only mastered knee-jerking. Not a pretty spectacle, but worthy of some study if it makes it easier to understand what is happening, and for this I take as a prime example the case of the South African Communist Party (SACP). Readers are warned that what follows is not a pleasant spectacle and more sensitive souls who might be embarrassed should skip this section..

On 4 November 1988, Joe Slovo, Secretary-General of the SACP declared (in an interview in the London *Independent*) that until glasnost he had been a Stalinist. In the best tradition of the great purges of the 1930s he confessed that: 'For there to be a personality cult, there had to be worshippers and I was a worshipper.' Continuing, he said that until he read about it in the Soviet press, he did not believe stories about Stalin's massacres: now 'Stalin may well have to be tried posthumously.'

Now Comrade Slovo is not a fool, and there is little purpose in asking what he believed or did not believe before he read the Soviet press. But there are some facts that have to be confronted. Slovo had heard these accounts of Stalin's crimes over many decades: was he deaf, or did he lack a sense of morality? He heard them from Trotskyists in Johannesburg in 1943, he knew them when he read about the condemnation and rehabilitation of the Jewish doctors in the USSR, or from the writings of H. Levy (veteran member of the CPGB) on Soviet anti-semitism, from Solzhenitsyn on life in Soviet prisons, from Khrushchev's revelations at the 20th congress of the Soviet Communist Party in 1956, and so on. He knew, and he read about, the crimes of the Soviet regime when the Red army walked into Hungary and Czechoslovakia, and he could not have avoided news of the faked trials of Laszlo Rajk and Slansky, or missed the fact that they were rehabilitated posthumously in 1963. Even more depressing, it must be asked whether a man who needs such details spelt out in the Soviet press can be trusted to think for himself. Is he just another knee-jerker, a blind follower of a line handed down from above, and what will he say when the story is changed again?

However, if Comrade Slovo has now seen the light, his 'comrades' in the SACP are not impressed by these revelations from the USSR. The latest issue of the party's journal, the *African Communist* (First Quarter, 1989) reprints an extract from an article by Gus Hall, national chairman of the Communist Party of the USA. Mr Hall is angry because in an 'explosion of self-expression' Soviet people 'now feel they have a civic duty to express their views' in which he detects slan-

der, exaggeration, falsification and provocation. There had been mistakes, he concedes, but using the arguments once advanced by Stalin, he said these could not be understood if the struggles of the times, and the existence of the class enemy are ignored. Consequently, he claims, history has been distorted.

Yes! There it is in print. What can I say about a man who still thinks (if that is a word that can be used when writing about Gus Hall) that the history of collectivization needs to take account of 'the class nature of the kulak who killed, terrorized and burned crops.' Concerning this, one of the worst of Stalin's crimes which carried off millions of lives, Hall makes a mockery of those people who were murdered. I hesitate to suggest to anyone that they read the Soviet press, but if Mr Hall followed in the footsteps of Comrade Slovo, and did read the Soviet journals (and could work his way through a jungle of misrepresentations) it might stop him writing this nonsense. And perhaps the editors of the party journal would cease disseminating these falsehoods.

I will return to the *African Communist* below, but revert first to the interview in the *Independent*, in which Cde Slovo, once again stated the Communist Party's perspective:

We are engaged in a struggle in which socialism is not on the immediate agenda or should be a criteria (sic) of participation in the struggle.. For some while after apartheid falls there will be a mixed economy. There must be a certain redistribution of wealth and this will facilitate the drive towards socialism. But in a democratic framework the future could well be settled in debate rather than in the streets. There is no pole-vault into socialism.

In this Slovo was repeating his own pronouncements, and more significantly what Soviet politicians and academicians have been saying for several years. What was new in these statements was Slovo's contention that glasnost allowed him to criticize statements by Soviet academicians without being denounced as anti-Soviet. It might be asked why such criticism should ever be considered as anti-Soviet, but that question will not be pressed here. The issues at stake are too important to stop at such absurdities.

Soviet Politics and South Africa

South Africa has seldom been out of the international press through the 1980s, and it is only censorship that has stopped it filling even more columns every day. Yet, in all that time reviews of Soviet atti-

tudes to South Africa have been more noted by their absence than their presence. Nor can this be blamed entirely on the bourgeois press. Journals of the communist parties of Britain and South Africa have not provided much insight into Soviet thinking on the subject. How different from the early years of the Russian revolution, when there was an openness which went hand in hand with revolutionary policy, when secret diplomacy was condemned and bodies like the League of Nations dismissed by Lenin as 'thieves' kitchens'.

There was a logic in early Soviet policy that needs restatement. The new state was committed to international socialism, and secret diplomacy was renounced as acting to the detriment of the working class. Consequently, policy decisions of the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs were publicized and widely disseminated. There was a freshness which attracted workers and intellectuals, and the USSR was seen as a state which had opted out of the system that led to war and destruction. The policy did not last: partly because of the defeat of revolutionary movements in Europe, and with that the degeneration of the Soviet state. Instead a new state emerged, claiming the legitimacy of the revolution of 1917, but interested only in preserving its own institutions. The leading role of the proletariat in establishing socialism was negated and the Soviet state resorted to all the evils it had once denounced: secrecy, lies, and a turn to the discredited League of Nations. Critics of the new policy were denounced, and unlike Comrade Slovo who feels free to criticize today, were condemned as anti-Soviet and shot.

One of the results of that turn in Soviet policy was the concealment of news. Speaking of this period and the extermination of millions of people, Andrei Gromyko (who ignored the millions who died around him) told the editor of the *Observer* (2 April 1989) that 'Stalin had one amazing quality: the ability to keep things secret. He had an entire system to conceal the facts.' I do not believe it. This is little more than Gromyko's way of proclaiming his own innocence, but on one aspect he has a point: the masters of the Kremlin did resort to secret diplomacy, and Stalin's successors have maintained much of that system intact, despite the claims of openness or glasnost. Consequently, tracing contemporary Soviet views on South Africa has involved scrambling through interviews filed by foreign correspondents and Stellenbosch academics. But where possible I have relied on statements by Soviet officials, believing that they would not have become available if they conflicted with official thinking on the subject.

The key paper setting out Soviet thinking on South Africa was that presented to the 11th Soviet-African conference ('For Peace, Cooperation and Social Progress') in June 1986 by Gleb Starushenko of the Africa Institute. At the outset it was pointed out that USSR

policy was determined by the political report of the CPSU central committee to the 27th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union which (according to Starushenko) stated that

we are in favour of vitalising collective quests for ways of defusing conflict situations in the Middle East, Central America, South Africa, in all of the planet's turbulent points. This is imperatively demanded by the interests of general security.

The author had no doubt that the South African regime was 'evil and despicable' and condemned it for its 'superexploitation, militarism, contempt of any human being that does not belong to the elite.' He equated the 'regime of apartheid' with the parliamentary victory of the Nationalists in 1948, and in so doing showed a lack of understanding of the South African state, its capitalist structure, and the existence of segregation that extended back to the 19th century if not before. In fact he even uncovered a new economic category: 'the production relations based on the system of apartheid.' Remarkable. Gleb Starushenko has discovered a political economy that nobody ever saw before. No mineowners, no capitalists, not even a working class. Just an apartheid production relation. Consequently, all that is required is an anti-racist struggle...or as Comrade Starushenko would have it:

The anti-racist struggle in South Africa and the national-liberation movement of the Namibian people directed against the colonial oppression join in a single revolutionary torrent. The amalgamation tends to enhance the revolutionary potential of both liberation armies and expand the scope of [the] South African revolution.

Starushenko saw no hope of getting the international community to support the struggle of these liberation movements in 1986 because of the 'neo-globalist, i.e interventionist policy' of imperialism. 'Neo-globalists': here is a new word to tickle the fancy. Is Starushenko really trying to say something, or is he trying to confuse his readers? Is he being as meaningless now as when he spoke of 'apartheid production relation'? No matter. Having left the heavy field of theory Starushenko turned to practical politics. Here he found a role for the SACP, who, he said, were 'the recognized and experienced leader of the South African workers, and other anti-racist forces.' They played an important part 'in raising the level of the scientific guidance of the movement.' Quite what this means is also not clear. If the SACP does 'guide the movement' how does it raise the 'level of the scientific guidance'?

Starushenko hurried on. He did not believe that socialism was on the order of the day and gave pride of place to the two-stage theory:

Proceeding from the objective laws of social development, the communists do not advance at the present stage of social development any other slogans but general democratic ones. They believe that the restructuring of South African society along socialist lines is a matter of the future and will be possible only after the necessary conditions have ripened.

What are these mysterious 'objective laws of social development, and what conditions must ripen? Are the Soviet experts so befuddled with 'apartheid relations of production' that they do not recognize capitalism when they see it? Do they not know that the country has one of the most advanced capitalist economies in the world and that the social relations are rotten-ripe for transformation to socialism? No wonder Margaret Thatcher greeted the Soviet leader so warmly. She has international allies in her fight against socialism and, although I never expected to say so, she is at least more honest in her intentions and prefers to spell out her message without obscuring it with long words. In her eyes there can be no conditions for socialism. But strangely, although Starushenko had reverted back to Bukharin's position of 1928, he opposed a Black Republic as leading 'the masses away from the actual struggle for their independence and do[ing] irreparable damage to the liberation movement.' despite claims by the SACP theoreticians J.H and R.E Simons, that the slogan was a great advance on previous class analyses.

After praising the ANC and the UDF and proclaiming the former as the leader of the 'patriotic forces in South Africa', Starushenko laid down the basis for peace and progress in South Africa. He said he observed a split among the whites and he pinned his faith on the capitalists (Anglo American? Consolidated Gold Fields?) who, unlike the middle and lower strata of the white community, were 'not tied to the chariot of apartheid'. The capitalists are the ones with whom the ANC-SACP can negotiate, particularly, he said, because the latter 'do not advance plans for a broad nationalization of capitalist property as an indispensable condition and are ready to give the bourgeoisie the corresponding guarantees.'

Next, he believed that the ANC would work out comprehensive guarantees for the whites—and cited Kenya and Zimbabwe as possible models for a future state. Starushenko had started with the premiss that race was the central issue in South African politics, and therefore he had to provide an answer to racism in his model for a 'post-apartheid' society. He therefore proposed that an upper House

be established in which the four ethnic groups would be equally represented, and each group would have the right to veto legislation. That is, the present dominant race under apartheid would have the right to continue dominating the society by virtue of the veto rights it would have in this upper house.

Throughout the paper this Soviet savant stated that there was no possibility of the ANC negotiating with the government. The regime, he said, 'embodies what is the most evil and despicable in the capitalism of the imperialist stage'. This regime had to be eliminated, he thundered, 'not negotiated with.' Six pages on he proposed a national conference on the changes, 'its main participants being the government of the Republic of South Africa and the true representatives of the non-white population.' Is such a man to be taken seriously?

Victor Goncharov—Or More of the Same

Speaking in Harare in 1987, Victor Goncharov, Deputy Director of the Institute of African Studies of the USSR Academy of Science, said that Starushenko's proposals were not those of the Institute or the Soviet government. But this seems to have referred mainly to the proposal for the upper House with equal representation for all ethnic groups.

Most of what Goncharov had to say concerned his belief that the two super-powers, the US and the USSR, could work together to solve the problems of South Africa, because neither side had 'vital' interests in the region. The USA had 'no vital interests in South Africa'? That is a statement that should be inscribed on Goncharov's forehead for every marine to read. To return: on the issues of change in South Africa his position was almost identical to that of Starushenko. The USSR supported the ANC, and in securing a settlement, the two main parties would have to be the South African government and the 'forces of national liberation'. Goncharov also believed in the stages theory. The present struggle was for liberation, and although he thought that the ANC should not stop socialist propaganda, he also warned that an ANC victory would not be achieved in under ten years. As for socialism: that would come in the end, 'maybe not in 25 years but in a century...I am an optimist.'

Not an ounce of class analysis; no discussion of the country's political economy; no consideration of the capitalist nature of South Africa. Although there might have been some disagreement with Goncharov's 'optimism,' it is in line with this thinking that the *African Communist* (Fourth Quarter 1988, pp.126-8) printed a resume

of a meeting in Moscow. There it reported that on 27 April 1988 a delegation of the SACP led by Slovo met with E.K. Ligachev (member of the Politburo), A.F. Dobrynin (Secretary of the CPSU Central Committee) and A.Yu. Urnov of the International Department of the Central Committee). There was very little information on the proceedings except to say that Slovo 'described the courageous struggle of the SACP' and its work in the 'deep underground'...and so on. In the discussion it was said that 'as a result of the powerful thrust of the liberation movement,' the apartheid regime was 'in the throes of a deep and irrevocable crisis' and that the government had to 'agree to a political solution to the problem, accepting a just demand of the ANC and other patriotic forces to transform South Africa into a united, democratic and non-racial state.' This it was said

would be in the interests of all those who live in South Africa black and white alike. It would contribute to peace in the country and in the region, and to the improvement of the international situation as a whole.

Whom Can We Believe?

Through the 1920s and 1930s few leftists in the west would accept newspaper items on Russia without scepticism. This was capitalist propaganda, designed to spread lies on events in the 'worker's state'. There was justification for this suspicion. Many stories purporting to be about events in the USSR were indeed false. Unfortunately, the press in the USSR was no less reliable, and readers were left to pick their way through the press services of both east and west with circumspection. When horrific tales were told about Stalin, about forced collectivization, the purges of the 1930s, the Hitler-Stalin pact, anti-semitism or the suppression of nationalities, it was not always easy to determine where the truth lay. But members of the SACP like Slovo chose to accept all that they read in the Soviet press uncritically. Recent events in the USSR have made it obvious, for even the blindest, that there is less and less reason to dismiss critical accounts of the USSR as being mere propaganda, but in what follows I have been careful to quote from sources that could not be the product of right-wing fantasy.

I turn to Kate Clark's articles in the London *Morning Star* of 17 March 1989. Nobody can accuse this paper of presenting an anti-Soviet story. Clark said on the one hand that Soviet officials had condemned apartheid forthrightly and declared their support for the ANC. She also reported comments by members of the Africa In-

stitute in Moscow. Anatoly Gromyko, its director, spoke of the need for 'a programme of reforms submitted to nation-wide discussions at which all sections of society will be represented,' followed by negotiations for two, three, or more years if need be, to solve the problems of South Africa. The stress in the discussions reported by Clark was the need for dialogue with the government. She quoted USSR vice-president Anatoly Lukyanov as saying that: 'We would prefer a political settlement in South Africa and a political solution to end apartheid.'

All references were to the abolition of apartheid. Seemingly the removal of that system is the alpha and the omega of Soviet policy, and after all, who can oppose the removal of that obnoxious system. But if that is where the struggle stops there will be no comfort for the workers of South Africa, and no relief for the millions trapped in the rural areas, without land, and without means of existence. They will greet the end of race discrimination only to find that they are as mercilessly exploited as before.

I started this piece confessing to bouts of laughter. I end it with tears when I contemplate the enthusiasm that might greet the beginning of negotiations. Imagine the setting. The representatives of black South Africa (and for purposes of this piece I will assume that they are mostly from the ANC) will meet representatives of the governing class. Of course some will be from the government, but the ANC will insist that some of their white friends be present. Who will those be? Perhaps some Stellenbosch professors, and some members of the Democrats, say, Zac de Beer straight out of an Anglo American directorship, and Dennis Worrall who designed the present constitution and represented the South African government so competently in London. And of course Harry Oppenheimer will be sitting in the wings, offering advice. What a scenario.

The mere thought of such a gathering turns the stomach. I have no need to write of the government's record of repression, of torture, detention and deaths. What then of the mine owners, who have been in contact with the ANC. An article by Eddie Koch in the *Weekly Mail* of 13-19 January 1989 provides a picture of the way that body treats its labour force. Whether apartheid stays or goes, these are the masters of South Africa, and if they are to stay in control in the country if capital continues to rule all talk of freedom remains meaningless. With acknowledgments to the *Weekly Mail* and Eddie Koch, here is a picture of workers' conditions as arranged by these 'friends' of the ANC.

The Hell that is Mine Compound Labour

Little that comes out of South Africa can surprise me anymore. Labourers have been killed by farmers who go scot-free, and workers harassed and maltreated with little or no recompense. Trade unionists are detained and held on trumped-up charges and officials threatened, charged with treason and even assassinated. Is it not surprising then that there has been a tightening of control of mine workers in the compounds of the Anglo American Corporation. I doubt whether prisons have been more regimented than these notorious compounds.

Over half a million black workers in these compounds have always been closely guarded and closed to outsiders, but new measures seal them off even more tightly. According to Koch, the hostels are surrounded by high walls and rolls of razor wire; the areas are patrolled by mounted security men, armoured vehicles and dog squads, and in some mines white miners are active members of the security force. There is no entrance to the compounds except for workers in possession of electronic identity cards and inside the grounds the mine police set up surprise roadblocks, make video and tape recordings of union meetings and search rooms (particularly of shaft stewards) while the men are at work. The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) has claimed that these are all measures against the union and many of them have been stepped up since the mineworkers' strike in 1987.

There was some relaxation before 1987 when women were allowed to visit their husbands or relatives in the compounds. That this was considered a privilege is scandalous, but since 1987 there have been reports of these women facing harassment from mine officials. There are also restrictions on the movement of workers, on their right to visit other compounds, and NUM organizers have to get permission to enter the compounds. Workers have been divided ethnically in hostels, and strict residential segregation between unskilled workers and Black team leaders or clerical staff has been enforced.

In the campaign to undermine the NUM, meetings have been banned or restricted, union offices removed from mines, and anti-union propaganda relayed to workers on local radio programmes while working underground. The corporation has claimed that the new security measures are necessary because of increasing violence on the mines. The NUM has refuted these allegations. They say that violence on the mines had to be situated inside the apartheid system: or as they claim, 'The mining industry is defined by the migrant labour system which in itself is a form of institutionalized violence.'

Yet, the capitalists are the people on whom Starushenko pins his faith because they are 'not tied to the chariot of apartheid'. They were the ones with whom the ANC/SACP could negotiate, because the latter 'do not advance plans for a broad nationalization of capitalist property as an indispensable condition and are ready to give the bourgeoisie the corresponding guarantees.'

What the members of the NUM would say of this is not known. Do they believe that when apartheid is removed the capitalists (who are to be part of the negotiating team, no less) will emerge transformed? Will the lion lay down with the lamb?

Ugh!