

Review Article : Sobukwe and the PAC

Benjamin Pogrand, *How Can Man Die Better...Sobukwe and Apartheid*, Peter Halban, London, 1990, pp 406, £14.95, board.

Until April 1991 there seemed to be only two nationalist movements in South Africa outside the African National Congress that wielded any influence among the African people: Inkatha, the KwaZulu based movement and the Pan-Africanist Congress. Recently, the PAC, after a lengthy period of inactivity caught the headlines with its startling slogan: 'One Settler, one Bullet!'. This was only a gimmick. Even if it had been intended, the PAC had no means to mount a peaceful campaign, let alone a shooting war.

The PAC, which might have had a good measure of grass-root support, proved incapable of campaigning in the townships. Perhaps they had given up because of the township wars in which they suffered many casualties. They certainly lost a number of leading members in unexplained car accidents and suffered heavy losses at the hands of gangs claiming allegiance to the ANC. Not that they were innocent victims. The PAC was also involved in township violence, but whatever happened the leadership was tired. It was thus not surprising that their newly elected president, Clarence Makwetu, met with Nelson Mandela in Harare in mid-April. A joint statement stressed the need for continued sanctions and demanded an elected constituent assembly which would draft a new constitution. It was agreed that a conference of anti-apartheid groups would be held in August. This foreshadows the merger of the two organizations.

Ultimately the PAC has failed to develop any alternative strategy in the current situation. They had no answer to the needs of the vast majority of the population and, if they had, they had no means of mount any sustained campaign. In the light of that impasse, more than a few of the top leaders might have decided that there was no future for themselves outside the gray trail if they stayed out of the ANC. That is the cynical view, but until more is disclosed it is as good a guess as any. Yet, it is hard to believe that nothing more will be heard from the grassroot supporters of the PAC. If, as is possible, the talks and negotiations extend over a lengthy period with little to show for it all, the discontent must swell up and give rise to a new Africanist-type movement. That is not something I would necessarily welcome, but predictions and desires do not necessarily coincide.

To examine the possible fortunes of such a movement in the future I turned towards its past — a subject that has received scant attention from scholars, and even less (to date) from among its members.¹ Yet this was the movement that split dramatically from the ANC in 1958, called the anti-pass campaign in 1960 that led to the shooting at Sharpeville and Langa in the Cape; the march on the centre of Cape Town; the declaration of the state of emergency; the attempted murder of prime minister Hendrik Verwoerd; the burning of the hated pass and the banning of the PAC and ANC. The entire course of

nationalist politics in South Africa was forced into new paths as a result of that campaign and could have been expected to produce a host of scholarly theses and several books (if not in South Africa because of the political climate, then at least in the US or Britain).

Perhaps that is unrealistic. The PAC was only in existence for two years before it was banned. Its members and its committees published little during those years and not much more during the long years of exile. If there were internal documents they are not easily accessible and until police files become available, there is little on which to base a definitive account. It is in this light that the new book by Benjamin Pogrund must be assessed. Here at least is an account written by a well-informed journalist who occupied important posts in one of South Africa's more liberal newspapers and, who was moreover, a close personal friend of Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe, the acknowledged leader of the PAC. Who better to reveal those aspects of the story that might throw light on the origins of the movement, its leadership, and its subsequent fate. That would be the least of the readers expectations. There are also reasons to expect much from Pogrund's pen. He had spent years in South Africa collecting and filming documents, some of them unobtainable at present, and devoted his energies in the late 1950s to covering the townships and occupied a unique place, alongside the journalists associated with *New Age*. It was therefore not surprising to find that he had been present at the ANC conference in November 1958 at which the PAC split from the ANC, and that in the course of his duties he was present at Sharpeville when the police opened fire, killing 72 persons and injuring 186. Once again, grounds for believing that he had a unique story to tell.

The book that has now appeared does not meet all these expectations. However, it must be said at the outset that Pogrund did not set out to write the book that I was looking for. I had hoped that a book in which Sobukwe was the central figure would provide some of the answers that are needed for a fuller understanding of the movement for which he gave his life.

What then will the reader find in this book? Firstly there is an account of a young person in his parent's home, growing up, apparently unaware of the impact of segregation on his own life, or on that of the blacks in South Africa. He went through school, learning at the table of missionaries, absorbing many of their ideas and, brilliant as he was as a scholar, quite virginal in his understanding of the world around him. His school success demanded of his mentors that they find money to send the young man to college. By this time he was much older than the average white student — whom he could not, and had not, met in the segregated institutions of the country. He was soon to be a leader among the students, but not yet in the world of politics.

It was only when Sobukwe entered the South African Native College, Fort Hare, that he showed an interest in politics and entered the Congress Youth League. He attracted considerable interest first in 1948 and again in 1949 for his speeches at the annual 'Completers' Social'. On the latter occasion he spoke of 'financial and economic imperialism under the guise of a tempting slogan "the development of backward areas and peoples".' Opposed to this

he said was the 'uncompromising Nationalism of India, Malaya, Indonesia, Burma and Africa...The great revolution has started and Africa is the fields of operation...' These sentiments were part of the rhetoric of the day when revolution seemed to be flaring through Asia, through to the stirrings in west Africa, and the mineworkers' strike in South Africa. But the language came from George Padmore's book in the College library. Pogrund makes no mention of this influence, nor the fact, that was to prove so important, that after Padmore changed his language when he moved to Pan-Africanism, Sobukwe followed in his tracks.²

Yet, even though he was President of the Student's Representative Council, and revered as the political spokesman of the campus, he was drawn only reluctantly into taking a stand on behalf of the nurses at the adjoining hospital when they came out on strike. The rhetoric of 'revolution' and active intervention in politics did not converge easily for Sobukwe — and this was probably the key to the man even when he seemed to move precipitately into action in 1958–60.

After graduation Sobukwe retired to the sidelines. He considered himself a Congress radical, but as a school teacher in Standerton, where the ANC had no branch, he was not called upon to enter the political arena. Teachers were barred from overt political activity and even calling a meeting in support of the Defiance Campaign in 1952 led to his suspension. It was only when he moved to Johannesburg to take up a post as a language assistant at the University of the Witwatersrand that he re-emerged as a politician. But even then he seemed to be half-retired. He was not known on the campus as a politician because he was not heard in that role. His status as an assistant was an aspect of the segregation that he had once denounced, but which he accepted without apparent protest.³

It was only in 1958 that Sobukwe's name came to the fore again. There had been a simmering dispute inside the ANC that was to lead to a split at the end of the year and the formation of the movement that took the name, the Pan-Africanist Congress. Pogrund provides details from his own observations in November 1958 — and although these were printed in his reports in the *Rand Daily Mail* and *Contact*, at the time, they are not readily accessible. Having this (shortened) account is invaluable. However, the events leading up to the split had started long before. Little of that is discussed in the book, and as a sample of what happened — inside the Transvaal ANC in particular — I append the story cabled to *Contact* in March 1958 by James Fairbairn. The lack of democracy in the ANC through the last few decades, as described in *Searchlight South Africa*, Nos 5 and 6, is shown to be endemic in that organization, and not a temporary aberration. It was this kind of documentation that I sought in Pogrund's book.

The split in the ANC was the direct consequence (as Pogrund shows) of the arrogant disregard of Congress leadership for any dissenting voices. Its attitude characterised by Duma Nokwe, Secretary-General of the ANC, in the opening words to his response to an article by a member of the PAC executive, Peter Raboroko. Dismissively, he began his riposte:

It is a pity that one has to take the Africanists so seriously. Left to their prose, they inject an unconscious comedy into a political struggle that stays uniformly savage, very much as though a one-act Victorian melodrama was being performed in the middle of a battle.⁴

The shooting at Sharpeville took place on 21 March 1960. It was followed by shootings in Cape Town and the march on Cape Town, led by a young PAC student, Philip Kgosana. Even if the article by Nokwe was written before the event, it was no 'Victorian melodrama'. Pogrund was present at the site of the shooting and repeats part of what appeared (from his pen) in the Johannesburg press. What he does not even explain was the reason for the PAC's precipitate change of tactic from a 'status campaign', in which Africans were to demand equal treatment when served in shops, to an anti-pass campaign. Perhaps the nature of policy decisions in 1959/60 cannot be easily retrieved, but the reader does require some attempted explanation of so serious an event. It is possible, as some suggest, that the PAC embarked on this campaign, hopelessly unprepared, in order to pre-empt an ANC campaign. But the ANC was also totally unprepared for so enormous a task. Obviously, they were both unable to tackle this issue and, if that is all, there is little more to be said.

However, there are several suggestions that need investigation. Jordan Ngubane, a member of the Liberal Party, and also a supporter of the PAC, has said that the reason can be traced back to Ghana. In his unpublished autobiography, says Lodge, Ngubane claimed that the Ghanaian leadership, urging a showdown with the government, had promised the PAC financial and diplomatic support if they embarked on an anti-pass campaign.⁵

The promise of money would have been an attraction that could not be ignored. But there were other factors that would have led the PAC to listen to Ghana, and in particular to George Padmore's Africa Bureau in Accra. Sobukwe was an admirer of Padmore and his work, *Pan-Africanism or Communism? The Coming Struggle for Africa*, published in 1956, was required reading for the leading members of the PAC.⁶ It fitted neatly with the anti-Communist stand of the PAC, with its African Nationalism, and its radical stance. The logo adopted by the PAC had a star shining out of Ghana on a map of Africa, and the speeches of PAC leaders were redolent with phrases pointing to Ghana as the centre of the coming struggle for liberation. (See Gerhart for quotations from PAC leaders of the time)

In the same way as Patrice Lumumba of the (then) Belgian Congo left the All-African Peoples' Conference in Accra in 1958, intent on pursuing the struggle against the Belgian administration for independence, the message was taken up by the PAC. Their admiration (and gratitude?) was also shown by their adopting Padmore's and Nkrumah's Pan-Africanist message and incorporating it into their name.

Pogrund does mention the impact that events in west Africa were having on members of the PAC, but there he leaves the matter, neither confirming

nor dismissing Ngubane's claim, and not exploring in sufficient detail the influence of Accra on the shaping of the PAC policies.

The events of 1960 need one further comment. When the PAC embarked on their campaign their thinking was simplistic. Within three months the movement, which claimed a membership of 30,000, but whose monthly income of £40 belied this claim, launched a campaign in which it was hoped that tens of thousands of men and women would surrender at police stations with the demand that they be arrested for not carrying their passes. This would clog the courts and the prisons, stop the shops and the factories, and lead to the repeal of legislation that was universally detested. From that it would be a short step to defeating the entire system of segregation and discrimination.

It was a campaign that could not succeed. It also confirmed that besides being carried away by successes elsewhere in Africa, the PAC had no understanding of the power of the state. Pogrund recounts a retrospective judgment by A P Mda, one of their mentors, in which he outlines the many problems that confronted the PAC in embarking on the campaign. Among these he mentioned the existence of an all-white army. But the PAC discounted the army as a threat. For reasons still unknown to me a visit was arranged at my home at which I met the National Committee of the PAC. At some stage I asked how the PAC, if it hoped to overthrow the government, could win over, or at least neutralize, the army. It was an issue that had not occurred to them and which they dismissed as unimportant. I took the matter further and spoke of the role of the army in any revolutionary situation, citing the books I had read on the problem. They were not moved. The same matter was raised elsewhere by others, but the message never got through. Within six months the police at Sharpeville and Langa clarified the issue.

The PAC and the ANC were banned, thousands were arrested and interned over a three month period, and the leaders of the PAC were jailed. Sobukwe was given a three year sentence, and then, under special legislation, was kept jailed and isolated for nine years. Pogrund was allowed to visit Sobukwe on six occasions after this prisoner, who was no longer a 'prisoner', was kept on Robben Island, away from society and away from the other prisoners. His presence was known to the Islanders and he was greeted, particularly by PAC men, with affection. There were few comforts, but Sobukwe was treated better than other prisoners. In fact, conditions on the Island were bad, and members of the PAC were treated worst of all. Strangely, Pogrund has little to say about the conditions, despite the appearance of two books, written by members of the PAC, who served time in that grim jail.

Nonetheless, the accounts in the book of this period are new and are rich. Some of Sobukwe's ideas become available through accounts of their correspondence and discussions. What emerges are the thoughts of a well read man with very unformed political ideas. Where else could one find a 'revolutionary' who believed that John Kennedy, Harold Wilson and Lyndon Johnson were progressive politicians. Wilson he thought had 'the well thought out ideas of a critical, limpid intelligence' (and was to be applauded for his

victory in 1964); Johnson's domestic policies in the US were enlightened, and the roots of their enlightenment could be traced to Kennedy.

In reading the book the question that arises again and again concerns the basis of Sobukwe's belief in black nationalism. What did he mean when he propagated his Africanism? Why did he join the PAC rather than remain within the folds of the ANC? Why did he, and his organization, reject whites as members, while seeking white sympathizers (and eventually one white member)? And why did he originally lambast white liberals, but say after 1960 that the PAC could form an alliance with the Liberal Party?

The story of the PAC is seen almost entirely through the life of this one man and the subsequent story of the PAC is treated lightly. That is, perhaps, understandable. This set out to be a biography and after 1960 Sobukwe was never free to engage in political work. Such was the consequence of failing to realize the power of the state. Nonetheless, the story of Sobukwe is also the story of the PAC and more could have been expected. That the reader will have to find elsewhere.

Pogrud was not the only white to admire and befriend Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe, but he certainly offered more assistance, rallied more support, and was the most steadfast of those who became Sobukwe's admirers. This book stands testimony to that relationship and, even if it leads to some very uncritical appraisals of the PAC leader and some rather naive thoughts on future relationships inside South Africa, the story of the association between the two men rings true.

Footnotes

1. One book, written by a leading member of the PAC who resigned, apparently in disgust, was ready for publication when a threatened lawsuit led to all copies being pulped. I do not know if it included an account of the origins of the PAC. A second account, written by Zolile Hamilton Keke, one time PAC representative in the UK, has yet to be published. There is one unpublished MA thesis, by Nana Mohomo, on the origins of the PAC; Tom Lodge provides a short account in *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945*, Longman, 1983, but the fullest treatment to date can be found in Gale Gerhart's *Black Power in South Africa*, University of California Press, 1978.

2. This is discussed in B Hirson, *Year of Fire, Year of Ash*, Zed, 1979.

3. Open dissent would have achieved little, but he had to be persuaded (by myself) to use the staff canteen lest he be rejected.

4. *Africa South*, Vol 4, No 3, Apr-June 1960. Raboroko's article, printed in the same issue, is indeed incomprehensible. But the tone of the reply is reprehensible.

5. See *Black Politics*, p 203. This story was current in Johannesburg in 1960. Although Ngubane's story cannot be verified, I can vouch for the fact that the Ghanaian government gave a substantial sum of money to a group of Liberals in 1961/2 when they were about to embark on a campaign of sabotage.

6. This was the only work referred to by Sobukwe in his opening address to the inaugural conference of the PAC in April 1959.