

How do the Russians see SA?

In spite of long-standing ties, the people of South Africa and the Soviet Union still scarcely know each other, says Soviet academic Dr Irina Filatova.



Dr Filatova... SA's experience of race and ethnic relations important to the world

news that their fellow workers were living and fighting on the other side of the world was received with enthusiasm, but did not become a major issue in the eyes of the Soviet people.

During World War II the Soviet Union and the Union of South Africa were allies. However, it was the fight against Nazism that sharpened Soviet rejection of racism in general and the system of racial segregation in South Africa in particular. Right after the establishment of the United Nations, at the very first session of this organisation, the Soviet Union vehemently denounced racism and racial discrimination.

On 1 February 1956, the acting consul-general of the Soviet Union in Pretoria, L.V. Ivanov, received a note from the South African Government ordering the closure of the consulate within a month. The note said that the reasons for its establishment had ceased to exist after the war. The consul-general was charged with cultivating and maintaining contacts with "subversive elements in South Africa, particularly among the Bantu and Indian population" and with using this channel for the "diffusion of Communist propaganda directed particularly at the Bantu population".

For our country this total break of ties was an expression of political protest against racial discrimination. But when speaking about Soviet perceptions of South Africa, we have to take into account the fact that the breaking off of diplomatic relations had a serious effect on our understanding of developments in South Africa. Virtually nothing that was written about South Africa in our country henceforth was written on the basis of personal impressions.

During the last 30 years the formation of Soviet perceptions of South Africa has also been influenced by the victorious anti-colonial movements in other African countries. On the other, South Africa was to some extent relegated to the background as the bulk of Soviet attention was given to the continent's young independent states. It is only recently that academic interest in South Africa has started to grow again.

The 1960s and 1970s saw the establishment of a Soviet "African Studies" structure and the development of its chief trends and schools of thought. African departments were established at Moscow and Leningrad universities.

Moscow University pioneered the teaching of South African languages, history and culture. South Africa was also studied at the Institute of World History and at other research institutes under the USSR Academy of Sciences.

Over the last 30 years popular Soviet publications about South Africa have assumed a truly mass character. Each new upsurge of the struggle against the South African regime has caused a new growth of interest in it. The violent clashes and related events of the mid-1970s and mid-1980s hit the front pages. Official documents are published, particularly those of the UN and other international

The October Revolution in 1917 put on the agenda the task of the investigation of the revolutionary potential of all countries and nations. It was believed at that time that a world revolution on the Russian model would take place in the immediate future.

The Union of South Africa had the largest proletariat and the most developed workers' movement in Africa. That is why it attracted much more attention than any other of the African countries.

Up to the mid-1920s the typical South African proletarian was seen as a white worker.

'Russian volunteers' disillusionment was mostly provoked by Afrikaners' cruelty to the blacks'

However, the Comintern leadership soon realised that South Africa's workers were mainly black and that it was black Africans who formed the majority of the exploited in South Africa. In 1927 the ANC's general president Josiah Gumede visited Moscow. Soon after him came James la Guma, one of the leaders of the Coloureds' movement and of the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union; in the early 1930s there were A. Nzula, M. Kotane and J. Marks. Ten or twelve other South Africans came to study.

Many books and pamphlets about the African labour situation began to come out, and the 1930s saw the beginning of studies on South Africa's African languages.

The new range of subjects and the change in the perception of the South African situation in our country certainly excited a new interest in southern Africa. But our country was living in difficult times. The

FOR centuries Russian perceptions of South Africa have been influenced by the nature of our sources of information about this region so remote from us, by the specific features of our country's history and political culture and by the changing political situation in the world.

Today's images and concepts have been moulded and influenced by those previous periods. There is of course a great difference between the pre-revolutionary legacy and that of the Soviet period. However, the different periods were themselves far from being homogeneous. For example, in pre-revolutionary Russia the common people and the educated classes held different views on South Africa. In the same way, nowadays, the public perception of South Africa is not quite identical with scholars' views.

Information about South Africa got through to a relatively narrow segment of the educated public, and only a small fraction of that was interested. At grassroots level, among the broad mass of the Russian people, there was no image of South Africa up to the very end of the 19th century.

Such an image emerged during the Anglo Boer War when the words "South Africa" were associated with the struggle of Afrikaners against the British. Black Africans were still scarcely considered. Even travellers wrote next to nothing about the struggle of the blacks, focusing on the description of their customs that seemed so exotic to a Euro-centric observer. As for the Anglo Boer War, it was an event that was believed to be of vast importance to the whole world.

The Russian public sided wholeheartedly with the Afrikaners. They were perceived as being somewhat like Russian peasants, and the Russian intelligentsia of the period took a great interest in the peasantry and largely idealised them. It was fashionable to change to simpler ways, to live among "the common people" and to search for genuine national values in the peasantry.

This sympathy was fuelled by anti-British sentiments. At this time the British Empire covered $\frac{1}{4}$ of the world. Anti-British sentiments were running high throughout the world. In Russia, however, they were fuelled by the increasing rivalry of the two nations in the East throughout the latter half of the 19th century.

On the other hand, it was during those years of the Anglo Boer War that Russian literature on South Africa, primarily through the notes, diaries and memoirs of eyewitnesses to the events, first developed another theme: dismay at the brutal mistreatment of the blacks, both free men and slaves. These works did not show blacks as participants in history, but as victims. The Russian volunteers who had seen Afrikaners in real life did not always describe them in admiring tones. Their disillusionment was mostly provoked by Afrikaners' cruelty to the blacks.

Such was the arsenal of its perceptions of South Africa Russia carried to the threshold of the October Revolution.

organisations. Political pamphlets and books are numerous and widely disseminated. Lectures on the subject of South Africa's political situation are delivered to different organisations and at industrial enterprises. Radio broadcasts and television programmes are regularly produced. In other words, the Soviet people are receiving far more information about South Africa now than they used to.

Part of this information is to some extent painted uncompromisingly in black-and-white. Some reporters and authors of popular pamphlets describe the events in South Africa in such a way that the readers may believe that all the blacks fight the ruling regime and all the whites support it. The mass media have often neglected to recognise the existence of shades of political opinion in South Africa until very recently.

Over the last 15 years Soviet literary scholars and translators have made what amounts to a breakthrough into every facet of South Africa's literature. Now Soviet readers have a chance to become acquainted with the works of many South African writers and poets, both those in exile and those still living inside the country, both those who write in English and those who write in Afrikaans.

One could hardly give a clear-cut answer to the question of how the Soviet people perceive South Africa and its people, and of how they see its problems now. These perceptions are diverse: not only do the various social strata and individuals hold different views of South Africa's realities but the views of scholars themselves are sometimes contradictory.

'They have never harboured hostility towards the white minority as such; they denounce the regime, but not the people'

But one can claim with assurance that, all these contradictions notwithstanding, there is a common element in Soviet perceptions of South Africa: Soviet people reject race discrimination and sympathise with the struggle the majority wage against the apartheid regime. They have never harboured hostility towards the white minority as such; they denounce the regime, but not the people.

We may be oversimplifying the South African problem or expecting too quick a decision. The Soviet image of South Africa may still not be fully adequate. The main reason is that, despite longstanding ties, we still scarcely know each other.

And we need this knowledge, not just out of plain curiosity. We are sure that South Africa's role in world politics will continue to grow. Its experience of race and ethnic relations is gaining an ever-greater importance in today's world, pervaded with racial and national clashes. And last but not least we need this knowledge for our common democratic and non-racial future.

□ Dr Filatova is a historian at the Moscow State University. This is an edited version of a paper she delivered at the Leverkusen meeting in West Germany last year. It may be ordered from IDASA.

NEWS

NP its own worst enemy?

By JOHN VILJOEN

THE National Party had become the victim of its own corrupt and racist system of government, Professor Sampie Terreblanche, economic adviser to the Democratic Party, said at an IDASA lecture series in Cape Town.

All governments were bad, some worse than others. The NP was a "very bad government" which had done "too much harm to too many people for too long". The political system, which it had constructed and maintained over the last 40 years, was corrupt. This had resulted in the breakdown of public morality.

The South African government was almost devoid of the ethical qualities of order, freedom, equity, justice, maintenance of human rights and truthfulness. South Africa was one of a handful of countries that had not signed the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights.

Order was maintained, but at the loss of freedoms of choice, entry and participation.

South Africa's distribution of income was the most unequal in all the world. It was a welfare state for whites, where for every one rand spent on welfare services for blacks, six rands were spent on whites.

By going overboard with reform rhetoric, the government was guilty of "word corruption". The NP had misused public funds to benefit a very small section of the population. By passing legislation, the government had increased the per capita earnings of Afrikaans-speakers from 50 per cent of that of English-speakers in 1964 to 75 per cent in 1989.

Afrikaners had become spoiled and corrupted members of the nouveau-riche, greedily accumulating status-symbols. They had a perjorative attitude towards coloureds and blacks, an indication of a sick and corrupt society.

The NP persisted in using economic favouritism to gain electoral support, while not concerning itself with black impoverishment. Corrupt attempts to make money were evidence of the "get-rich-quick cult" arising from a siege-economy mentality. This had necessitated the financial rand system.

Prof Terreblanche said he would like to know how many cents out of each rand meant for the poor escaped bureaucratic waste and corruption.

The "Pretoria-Johannesburg alliance" had seen large sections of the English business fraternity exchanging hostility toward the Afrikaans bureaucracy for the benefits of close co-operation with Pretoria. Growing isolation would lead to more businesses seeking protection and favours in a "vicious circle" of corruption.

The South African political system was deliberately designed to make it impossible to determine the common good for all 37 million people. Fifty-two per cent of the white electorate had voted in the last election, meaning that about eight per cent of the population decided on the common good.

A policy based on statutorily defined race groups meant there were no common values



Liesel Naudé

New IDASA team leader in Tvl

MS Liesel Naudé has been appointed as the regional director of the Transvaal region of IDASA.

She will succeed the Rev Steve Fourie who has decided to return to work in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa.

Ms Naudé was educated at Helpmekaar Meisieshoërskool in Johannesburg, and at the Universities of Stellenbosch and Cape Town. She holds a masters degree in town planning. She also studied social science in the Hague. Most of her working life has been spent as a professional town planner, but she has also worked in business.

Commenting on the appointment, the executive director of IDASA, Dr Alex Boraine, said that an IDASA search and appointments committee — consisting of trustees and staff members — had been unanimous in reaching their decision.

"We believe that she has all the professional skills, maturity and leadership to help fulfil IDASA's brief of convincing South Africans that there is an alternative to apartheid. We recognise that the Transvaal, which is the hub of the country's economic activity, is a crucial area of our work."

IDASA's Transvaal office, which is situated in Braamfontein, employs three regional co-ordinators. A separate office has been opened in Pretoria for the Northern Transvaal.

IDASA's director of policy and planning, Dr Van Zyl Slabbert, is also located in the Transvaal.

or causes, only conflicting group interests. This destabilised the good order and undermined public morality.

The only way to rid the country of this structural corruption would be to get rid of the corrupt system. This was impossible for the NP to do because they depended on it for their very existence, said Prof Terreblanche.

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