

THE RUSSIAN CONNECTION

In this issue of *Searchlight South Africa* the relationship between the USSR and South Africa is explored at two crucial moments in the history of the socialist movement: in the formulation of the 'Native Republic' slogan in 1928, when the 'two-stage theory' was first introduced to South Africa; and during the past few years when the USSR has intervened to alter the course of events in Namibia, Angola and South Africa. Although 1928 was a critical year in the development of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), the events of that year only highlight a relationship that commenced in 1917 with the Russian Revolution and has been present ever since, whether by commission or omission.

When the Third Communist International (or Comintern) was launched in 1919 it was greeted by small groups of socialists in South Africa as the beginning of a fruitful period of co-operation in which the proletariat would receive the assistance of their comrades-in-arms in Europe and elsewhere. Unlike governments everywhere who measured success in money terms and raised the bogey of 'Moscow gold', this assistance was to come from a pooling of political ideas. By this means revolutionary strategy would be strengthened and the overthrow of capitalism made more certain. It was a grand perspective that was not implemented, or when applied, led to disaster after disaster. From 1921 through 1928 the CPSA received little or no assistance from the Communist International. Even when Communist Parties in Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa were involved in the British seamen's strike of 1925, as S.P. Bunting complained in his address to the Comintern conference in 1928, there were no communications between the Comintern and the South African party.

Then precipitously, in 1928, in the wake of severe factional struggles in the Bolshevik Party in the USSR, the CPSA was ordered to change course. The promise of political assistance, so warmly welcomed in 1921, had turned into a menace which all but destroyed the South African party. The leaders of the CPSA did not understand what was happening in the USSR, but they were not expected to understand: theirs was to do (and die) and follow the line as handed down from Moscow. To ensure compliance, constituent Communist Parties were instructed to accept all Comintern decisions without alteration.

In the inglorious years in which Comintern instructions were followed slavishly, there was one brief moment in which S.P. Bunting, the South African delegate to the Comintern conference of 1928, stood up and defied Bukharin, the representative of the party leadership. This was to be one of the last public declarations of Leninist positions in open debate on Soviet soil. In this, Bunting towered above the delegates who acceded so tamely to the demands of the Soviet leaders. He had attended the second conference of the Comintern in 1922 and had accepted the thesis on the question of colonial self-determination, which stressed the leading role of the proletariat. Then, in 1928, faced with the reversal that was being pressed on delegates, he reasserted a class analysis that cut across the populist message of the leadership. Although Bunting condemned the Soviet leadership for denying the primacy of the working class, and replacing it with an amorphous conception of the 'masses', he did not comprehend the profound decay of the revolution in the USSR. Bunting had no connection with Trotsky and the left opposition, and no inclination to side with them against the new rulers of the Kremlin, nor could he be accused of having such inclinations. Yet the ideas he advanced came close to the left opposition's views on the colonial question.

Bunting's intervention at the Congress coincided with Trotsky's critique of the Comintern's new draft programme, which was allowed limited circulation at the conference. James Cannon and Maurice Spector, delegates from the US and Canada respectively, were persuaded of the correctness of the criticism and smuggled a copy out of the USSR. This marked the beginning of the international left opposition. That Bunting should have taken issue with Stalinism at this turning point of communism, independently of other opposition voices, is a mark of his world significance. Three years later he was slandered, humiliated and expelled from the party he had helped establish.

In the Gorbachev era, when the defamed are being posthumously 'rehabilitated', Bunting may yet be accorded such treatment. This would place him as a waxworks figure around which the party faithful could gather. The problem however is that his works would need to be republished, and his words would reflect badly on the crass phrases of the current leadership. This would upset the cosy relationship the SACP has established with Archbishop Tutu, Rev Boesak, Oliver Tambo, Zac de Beer and Mr Relly.

There is little purpose in rehearsing the series of turns executed by the CPSA in its course of compliance with the needs of the USSR, but the disastrous outcome was seen both in the failure of that party to meet the needs of the working class in South Africa and in the

bankruptcy of its theories. Like the Bourbon kings of France (whose demise two hundred years ago is celebrated this year), they learnt nothing and forgot nothing.

In order to understand the nature of USSR intervention in South Africa, there must be a reappraisal of the nature of the USSR, and towards this end we print an article by Hillel Ticktin (a member of our editorial board, and of the journal *Critique*) on the nature of the USSR under Gorbachev. In the late 1980s few observers can remain sanguine about the nature of this so-called 'workers' state.' The disaster of Chernobyl, the disorganization after the earthquake in Armenia, the disclosures of criminality and corruption, the use of poison gas in Georgia, the shortage of consumer goods and the bread riots in its Asian domain demand new answers about the country that was once held up as a living example of socialism in practice.

Ticktin's article provides a picture of the Soviet state as it is, and not as wishful thinkers would have it be. This is a state, formed by revolutionaries who believed that together with other states in Europe it would be possible to advance together towards socialism. For Lenin and Trotsky there could be no success unless socialism existed in the most advanced regions of the world, and it was inconceivable that socialism could be built in one country, certainly not in the most backward country in all Europe. It is a measure of the backwardness of socialist theory that so many people could believe otherwise, particularly after the many reports from visiting communists of corruption, nepotism and gangsterism in the USSR. Now there can be no more excuses that 'We were not told.'

This account by Ticktin was delivered at a workshop in Hawaii and contains a comparison of events in the USSR under Gorbachev and Mrs Thatcher in Britain. There are many obvious reasons for including this comparison in *Searchlight South Africa*, not least because of the popularity of Thatcher in South African government circles, the talk of her intervening to find a 'solution' to the problems in the country, and because Helen Suzman (the Progressive MP) expressed her admiration of the British Prime Minister and stated that in Britain she would be a member of the Tory Party. The interpretation of Thatcherite Britain is new, but that of the USSR, which will be known to readers of *Critique*, must be read in conjunction with the events of 1924-28 and also against the account of what has been happening in the current period of Soviet disengagement from the Third World. Baruch Hirson (also on the editorial board of *Critique*), who set out to write on this latter topic, found that the farcical and cynical approach to world politics detected in the pirouetting Mrs Thatcher, the gyrating Mikhail Gorbachev, the compromising Cuban and Angolan leaders and the confusion in the ranks of the South African

Communist Party (SACP), could not be written as a straight piece. Where events are farcical the only way of addressing them is through satire, and this is what he has attempted. But his account has a sting in its tail. The supine approach of USSR officials and of SACP leaders tells only one part of the story. This has to be seen alongside governmental tyranny in South Africa and the inhuman conditions under which the mine owners hold their workers. If these are the friends of the people, then their enemies can do little worse.

Farcical or not, and altered or not, there has been a consistency in Soviet policy since 1924 towards countries like South Africa. The USSR did not relish the idea of independent socialist activity in countries too far away to be under Soviet direct control. The stage theory (insisted on after 1928), which calls for an interim period of capitalist democracy takes socialism off the agenda. Whatever changes Gorbachev has introduced, Soviet policy has not altered radically. South Africa is not a candidate for socialism because it is too far from Moscow to be controlled, and because Moscow has decided that it is an American sphere of interest.

The leaders of the SACP, and undoubtedly of the ANC, have been told to change their tactics and their appraisal of victory in South Africa. This instruction will be followed by a lessening of strategic and economic assistance. These reductions are part and parcel of the deals that the big powers have made behind the backs of the people of the region, complemented by the decision that ANC bases in Angola will close when the fighting in Namibia ceases. The existence of these bases might, or might not be, valuable to the people of South Africa but that is not the issue as seen from the eyes of Soviet policy makers. They have taken the decisions and their client bodies will be required to acquiesce.

The Soviet union has dictated and some SACP leaders have accepted the decision. Others, less happy, have distanced themselves from the Gorbachev policy of glasnost. They complain that criticism has gone too far; and that they cannot support the denigration of Stalin the man or of Stalinist policies in the USSR. Consequently the SACP is being pulled in two directions. Joe Slovo (the leader, no less) beats his breast and says that Stalin might have to be tried posthumously; the editors of *African Communist* reprint Gus Hall, the USA leader, who say just the opposite. The only guilty people, he says, were those naughty Kulaks who wanted to...who wanted to restore market forces?

For those readers who are not in the CPSA, who do not have to take sides in this factional in-fighting, there are other lessons. First and foremost, the problems facing South Africa cannot be solved by internal forces alone. In the struggles that must take place, there are

external forces prepared to intervene to stop the South African working class carrying through the revolution and instituting political changes. At every step there will be attempts to get sections of the ANC/SACP, and possibly others like Buthelezi, to negotiate some political settlement behind the backs of the people who still trust these leaders. For such a deal to go through would be the ultimate betrayal of all those men, women and children who have been maimed, detained or killed in the struggles for freedom. It is to prevent this that we have called for a National Assembly, as Lenin did in Russia in 1912, and Trotsky did for China in the 1930s. Not because they believed that such an Assembly could solve the pressing problems of those countries, or because they wanted to engage in parliamentary games, but because it was a period of downturn and defeat in which the the working class had to be remobilized. In the coming months, when South Africa once again engages in a so-called general election, a counter call for a National Assembly can allow the people to seize the time and regain the momentum of the struggle.

When we decided on the contents of this issue we had an article by Mick Cox on Comintern policy towards national liberation movements, in which he traces continuities in Comintern policy on this question that extend from 1922 onwards. This is a subject that requires some rethinking, but we doubted whether our readers would have welcomed an issue of the journal that was devoted entirely to the USSR and the Comintern. Therefore, this piece has been held over for our next issue. Our decision was not entirely negative. There were also pressing reasons for our carrying an article on *The Satanic Verses*. We knew some months back that protests against the book were of international importance. The banning of the book in South Africa, and the split over Rushdie among intellectuals and academics, gave notice that this was an issue that had to be tackled. There are other journals that should have undertaken this task. Yet, we found that most journals skirted the problem of religion and only repeated the old liberal cry: Freedom of expression. The problem has now gone far beyond that elemental call. The Rushdie affair makes it quite obvious that it is the thought process of persons in the twenty-first century that is at stake. Either the cobwebs will be cleared from the brain, or the spiders will take over and bind humanity in coils of ignorance.

We complete this issue with three items: a letter from Dr Gavin Williams in answer to our criticism (in an editorial) of his article in the journal *Transformation*. We believe that our position is made clearer in the articles that appear within, but, so urgent is the debate on the future course of socialism that we would welcome further contribu-

tions on the subject. There is also an item taken from documents lent to us on the question of trade union organization in the early 1980s. These are essential reading for those interested in the history of trade unionism – providing further information on the hi-jacking of the workers' movement by the SACP. Finally, our first book review. We hope to make this a regular feature.

STOP PRESS:

As we prepared this issue for the printer the news from China was omnipresent. This was not 'peace breaking out' (to quote from Hiron's article), but a stirring of millions in protest against the regime in China. If the system there is 'communist' as its apologists proclaim, then it has failed to satisfy the most basic aspirations of its people. After 40 years of rule the leaders of the party in control has been given the thumbs down sign by the men and women who should be its warmest protagonists.

First, it must be noted that there have been experiments (limited maybe) in introducing a market economy in China. Over several weeks last year Chinese made films were shown on British TV glorifying the return to capitalist farming and extolling the entrepreneurial spirit of 'progressive' farmers. This was the new formula for regaining economic initiative. What was not shown was the corruption that accompanied these success stories, nor the misery of men and women who could not, or would not, participate in this 'economic miracle.'

Our information over the past weeks comes from western journalists, and we cannot be certain that the opinions of the men and women they interview are representative of the general public. The speakers (in English) are mainly students, and although they seem to provide the leadership of the demonstrations, we do not know whether there are alternative views, but being students they are probably among the more articulate, and have been chosen by the newscasters for presentation. What seems obvious is that the lack of serious political debate, and the absence of political groupings, has not allowed them to develop the perspective necessary for reshaping their society. Their demands were important but simplistic: The old leaders (or most of them) must go. There must be more direct participation in decision making by the people (the workers?). With these we agree. They sang the *Internationale*. We can only applaud.

But is that all? Have they no ideas on the nature of the society they wish to see reconstructed? Do they only want a reshuffle at the top? Do they really believe that western style democracy will solve their problems? Do they think that the American Statue of Liberty (with two hands holding the torch aloft) offers hope for the future? Or is there information that the journalists are concealing?

But even if other voices were heard they did not seem to point to any profound ideas about revolutionary change. The workers played at most a secondary role; soldiers did not cross over to the rebels (at least not in any appreciable numbers) and the students did not disarm them; alternative councils that could challenge the government were not established; there was no appeal to the vast rural population and the slogans around which to rally the urban population were poorly formulated.

Yet, the bubble has burst. What was most obvious to the students and workers of Beijing was the flowering of nepotism and the emergence of ruling families among the party tops. We do not know how long these old men of Beijing can command the support of the army and suppress the rebellion. Our reading at the moment is that the generals have taken the initiative. The moment for demonstrations is over and the initiative has passed to the army. Precisely what the generals will do is still not clear, but they are the abiders of events in China today..

We repeat. We do not have all the facts. However, it does mean that the myths of the past are being stripped away, in the USSR, in eastern Europe, and in China.

In the first issue of our journal we stressed the importance of the history of the revolutionary movement in China for an understanding of current political developments in South Africa. The debate in the Comintern in 1928 (see this issue) was related directly to events in China and the defeat of the Chinese revolution. The criticism of Comintern policy by S.P. Bunting is as relevant to events today, in both China and South Africa, as they were 60 years ago.