

A QUESTION OF TRUTHFULNESS

Paul Trehwela

Victoria Brittain, *Hidden Lives, Hidden Deaths: South Africa's Crippling of a Continent*, Faber and Faber, new edition, 1990.

The Zhdanov/Vyshinsky Prize for truthfulness in the media must go to Victoria Brittain for this book, which includes up-dated material after having first appeared in 1988. Ms Brittain is editor of the Third World Review page of the British newspaper, the *Guardian*.

The most recent historical material in her book is dated 16 July 1989 (p.178). This date is important for appraisal of the reliability of Ms Brittain as a journalist and historian, because on 4 July a planeload of 153 ex-Swapo detainees arrived back in Windhoek from prison camps in which they had been held in southern Angola. They had earlier been interviewed by the international press in Angola after having been released by Swapo, but after 4 July they were easily accessible to any serious journalist, including Ms Brittain, had she wished to find out the truth about them.

Their return was well publicized. They were met at J.G. Strijdom Airport by a large and vocal demonstration in their support, including relatives, the Committee of Parents and two left-wing groups, each with banners. It was the front-page lead story in the *Times of Namibia* (5 July). Several of the returned detainees spoke at a press conference in Windhoek on 7 July. Their organization, the Political Consultative Council of Ex-Swapo Detainees (PCC), within days issued a list of over 300 prisoners who had not yet returned, a list of prisoners who had died or been killed, and a list of their torturers. In the same period, the present foreign minister of Namibia, Theo-Ben Gurirab, announced in Rehoboth that 'if SWAPO officials had tortured dissidents, they [the SWAPO leadership] were obligated to bring such officers to justice' (quoted in a press statement by R.A.Kaakunga, chairman of the PCC, 20 July 1989). Yet Ms Brittain states that the ex-Swapo prisoners were 'mostly fictitious people allegedly held by the liberation movement' (p.128).

In her book of 200 pages she gives a total of five references. One of these five is the report on the Angolan civil war and the South African invasion of 1975-76 by John Stockwell, the chief of the CIA task force in Angola, who coordinated the US war effort in the region. Stockwell's book, *In Search of Enemies: A CIA Story* (1978), is one of the most important factual sources on this crucial period, by a leading participant with unrivalled access to its secret and public currents. Stockwell resigned from the CIA in December 1976 after

the end of his mission. I am not aware of any query as to the integrity of his account. In an important passage in the book, Stockwell writes:

The South Africans had some encouragement to go into Angola. Savimbi invited them, after conferring with Mobutu [of Zaire], Kaunda, Felix Houphouët-Boigny of the Ivory Coast, and Leopold Senghor of Senegal, all of whom favoured a moderate, pro-West government in Angola (p.186).

The book could not be plainer: the Zambian government, headed by Dr Kenneth Kaunda, actively supported Unita and the South African army throughout the whole of this phase of the war. Nobody who cared to write anything serious about this period in the war could miss this book, and nobody who did read it could miss Stockwell's references to the role of Kaunda's government.

Stockwell's account is supported by Fred Bridgland, former Reuters correspondent in Lusaka, who in November 1975 broke the story of the South African invasion. Bridgland's enthusiasm for Savimbi in his book, *Jonas Savimbi: A Key to Africa* (1986), is less an obstacle to his merit as a historian than Ms Brittain's enthusiasm for Savimbi's opponents. He gives extensive evidence of Zambian government support for Unita, and for the South African invasion, including details of an attempted Zambian air strike on an MPLA/Cuban base on the Benguela Railway on the eve of the South African withdrawal. Yet Ms Brittain writes of the 'Zambian leader, Dr Kenneth Kaunda, a supporter of Savimbi in the days *before* [my stress - P.T.] the UNITA leader had entered his open alliance with the South Africans' (p.170). Ms Brittain reverses Stockwell's testimony, in order to present Kaunda in a more flattering light. There is no reference at all to Bridgland's book.

She states that when the South African army invaded Angola, 'old UNITA allies...soon wanted to sever relations.' She writes that

SWAPO, like the governments of Zambia and Tanzania, withdrew from cooperation with UNITA, although communications difficulties in the bush and inevitable shortages of information, made the cut-off a confused and protracted business (p.83).

In their study of Zambian foreign policy, Anglin and Shaw conclude that while 'most American supplies were funneled through Zaire' during the war in Angola, 'at a later stage some undoubtedly reached Unita through Zambia' (p.331). In any case, the then US secretary of state Henry Kissinger told a hearing of the Subcommittee on African Affairs of the US Senate on 6 February 1976 that 'Zambia, along with Zaire, asked the US to provide assistance to Unita and FNLA' (quoted in *ibid*, p.348). This indicates a completely different relationship between the Zambian government and Unita during the war from that suggested by Ms Brittain.

Her statement is further belied by the autobiography of the former Swapo leader Andreas Shipanga, published in 1989, for which Bridgland wrote an introduction. Bridgland states there that

President Kaunda of Zambia, together with Gerald Ford, president of the USA, had encouraged the South Africans to invade Angola...Kaunda complied with Vorster's request to restrain SWAPO...Proinsias Mac Aonghusa, a former senior official of the United Nations Commission for Namibia, has written of that period: 'For reasons best known to himself, Sam Nujoma (the President of SWAPO) for a time backed UNITA and Dr. Savimbi...SWAPO guerrillas found themselves engaged on the same side as the South African troops...' (Sue Armstrong, *In Search of Freedom: The Andreas Shipanga Story*, p.ii).

Documents published in 1987 in Windhoek in a pamphlet under the title, 'SWAPO: The 1976 Anti-Corruption Rebellion', sustain the interpretation of the events of 1974-76 by Bridgland and Shipanga. These documents consist of letters, statements and minutes of a meeting with the Swapo Executive Committee drawn up by Swapo members in Zambia in 1975-76, indicating extensive collaboration between Swapo leaders and Unita, plus military action by Swapo alongside the South African army. This collaboration, together with lack of democracy in the organization, produced a mutiny within it in the early months of 1976, which the Zambian regime suppressed with mass arrests, eagerly helped by Swapo leaders.

Uncritically identifying herself with the Swapo leaders, Brittain dismisses the substantive issues posed within Swapo at this time as a mere 'power struggle', and asserts that 'Behind the power struggle was South Africa' (pp.82-83). She makes no attempt to prove her assertion. The demand for democracy by the Swapo Youth League and the military wing, which together opposed Swapo's collaboration with the South African army and Unita, is airily dismissed. For her it is the work of 'apparent new SWAPO recruits later revealed as South African agents - the classic trick of the *agent provocateur* exposing an ill-prepared movement to an unequal trial of strength' (p.83).

Swapo's victims of this period are slandered as 'Shipanga and his group of assorted South African agents and manipulable youths' (p.85). Concerning the subsequent purges, a hundred Swapo members held in prisons in Angola by the organization in 1986 are referred to as '100 South African collaborators' (*ibid*). The International Society for Human Rights had campaigned on the issue 'Save the Swapo 100.' Ms Brittain's remark might very well be considered libellous in a British court.

Those who tried to save members of their families from the internal purges in Swapo in exile in the 1980s are sneered at as the authors of 'dubious telexes from Windhoek purporting to be from the families of the 'disappeared' victims of SWAPO' (*ibid*). Many of these appeals have been published: in *Namibia: A Struggle Betrayed*, by Hewat Beukes, Erica Beukes and Attie

Beukes, Rehoboth, Namibia (n.d., c.1986), and in the more complete book of documents edited by Nico Basson and Ben Motinga (himself an ex-detainee), *Call Them Spies*, Windhoek and Johannesburg, 1989.

One needs only read these appeals, which received almost no response, to know how little they were 'dubious'. Photocopies and print-outs are freely available in Windhoek. Ms Brittain did not even bother to interview those who wrote them.

The tone of her remarks gives an adequate impression of her concerns as a writer on southern Africa. For a journalist who has edited the *Guardian's* Third World Review page since 1982, and who has been a correspondent for *The Times*, *New Statesman*, *Afrique Asie*, *Le Monde Diplomatique* and the BBC, such prejudice raises serious problems. Political animus prevents her from coping with elementary journalistic requirements. She disapproves, for instance, of the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) because it is hostile to the ANC and the SACP. This is the only possible explanation for the fact that she gives its name incorrectly as the 'Pan African Congress' (pp.xiv, 159), despite the fact that the PAC has been in existence under the same name for over thirty years and its status as the second of South Africa's two main nationalist organizations. Similarly, there is no reference at all in the book to the Azanian People's Organization (Azapo), although Azapo played a prominent (if secondary) part in the early phase of the 1984-86 township revolt. One may as well excise Laertes from *Hamlet*.

Ms Brittain's comments like her omissions merely promote confusion. Despite the great importance of her major topic (the destruction of human life and resources throughout southern Africa by the South African regime), and despite some informative material, her project is vitiated by an overt method of political censorship and falsification. Any unfounded assertion will do. Readers are not permitted to reach their own conclusions. Material presented by her as fact, without supporting evidence, cannot be taken on trust, for example this classic statement on South Africa:

The promotion of far-left divisive splinter groups was also a CIA tactic (p.157).

What can one say? The real question is not Ms Brittain. Rather, the concern is the quality of the media organs which publish her work. This kind of journalism informs the mainstream of left/liberal opinion. It is hard to imagine that there is any other region on earth, outside of southern Africa, towards which the orthodoxy of 1990 upholds so devoutly the sentiments and methodology of the Moscow Trials. Ms Brittain is its faithful exponent.

O brave new world, that has such people in't...