

The “secret” relations of the GDR with the apartheid regime

Ulrich van der Heyden, *Zwischen Solidarität und Wirtschaftsinteressen. Die “geheimen” Beziehungen der DDR zum südafrikanischen Apartheidsregime*

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With the film *Goodbye Lenin*, audiences the world over were enchanted by the humoristic depiction of citizens of the former German Democratic Republic entering the post-Cold War world. With a more recent production, *The lives of others*, many filmgoers were left with an impression of East Germany as a starkly sinister place. With his book *Zwischen Solidarität und Wirtschaftsinteressen*, Ulrich van der Heyden offers South Africans a thoroughly alternative way to reflect upon the German Democratic Republic (hereafter GDR) past: by looking into the way the people and the government of their own country interacted with the GDR throughout its existence in the last half of the twentieth century, he illustrates the tug-of-war between

principles and economic realities for two states which upheld highly conflicting ideologies, but, ironically, due to the weight of those very ideologies, shared a culture of centralised control, censorship and public surveillance. The title of the book translates as follows: “Between solidarity and economic interests: The ‘secret’ relations of the GDR with the South African apartheid regime”.

Van der Heyden is a prolific writer, editor and publisher of historical topics affecting Europe and Africa, particularly Germany and South Africa, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The book under discussion is the seventh volume in a series on the GDR and the Third World. In the introduction to this volume, Van der Heyden explains that this probe into the GDR’s dealings with the apartheid government is indeed a by-product of a much larger investigation into the GDR’s engagement in development politics. It is thus an initiating rather than a concluding text – partially also because some crucial sources are not yet accessible for historians’ scrutiny. He explains that, while working on his actual project, it was hard to ignore the reproach that appeared every now and then, particularly in the popular media, that – despite their public rhetoric to the contrary – the GDR had circumvented the United Nations’ sanctions against South Africa during the apartheid years. He considers his study a part of the history of the GDR, as well as a chapter in the history of German-South African relations. South African readers would agree that it should also be approached as a topic that is part of apartheid studies.

The chapter following the introduction begins with an exposition of probably the most provocative and shocking of the accusations alluding to trading links between the GDR and South Africa’s National Party government: although it remains to be proven, during the course of 2001 and 2002, a number of German journalists claimed that the apartheid government’s “Doctor Death”, Wouter Basson, had conducted his experiments in chemical and biological warfare in a laboratory he had bought in the East German city of Leipzig.

In the subsequent chapters, Van der Heyden sketches the reasons why the possibility of secret economic relations between the GDR and the apartheid government seems highly unlikely – and thereby also confirms why accusations in that direction have been received with so much dismay. He looks into the GDR’s policy of solidarity with the Third World and explains the substantial effort it had been for the GDR to take a leading role in the United Nations’ decade of resistance against racism and racial discrimination. He also sketches the continuing appreciation of ANC cadres who had been hosted and assisted by the GDR, for the generosity and sincerity of their East German patrons. Other aspects that are mentioned, are the role of the West German anti-apartheid movement, and objections to the German Federal Republic for its eager economic exchange with apartheid South Africa.

In the final chapter, Van der Heyden summarises the relations between the GDR and South Africa in four stages:

- the initiation of trade relations until the end of the 1950s and early 1960s;
- an official announcement of participation in the boycott against South Africa in the first half of the 1960s (after which certain existing contracts ran their course before they were terminated and certain direct trade relations apparently continued to exist);

- almost complete silence in the relations between the GDR and South Africa from the middle of the 1960s until the beginning of the 1980s. Contact, if at all, took place via the ANC or the SACP;
- attempts, from the South African side, to resume trade links with the GDR as from the late 1980s, coinciding with the general thaw in the world political climate at the time.

The author concludes that, in the absence of damning evidence, the stance of the ANC and the SACP towards the GDR provides most important measurement of whether the GDR had colluded with South Africa's apartheid government or not, and there is solid evidence that the ANC had appreciated the GDR's solidarity with their struggle until the end of its existence.

In *Zwischen Solidarität und Wirtschaftsinteressen* Van der Heyden responds to alarmist and perhaps even sensational journalism. He casts his net wide and hauls deeply to provide a historical context and thereby sets up more accountable parameters for what could have been possible in the relations between the GDR and South Africa during the Cold War/apartheid years. With some evidence still outstanding, the verdict is pending, but he has certainly provided his readers – even those who remain more sceptical than Van der Heyden – with the information that will enable them to debate the issue more intelligibly.

Lize Kriel

University of Pretoria