

Fresh insights into the life and death of a struggle icon

Hugh Macmillan, *Chris Hani: A Jacana Pocket Biography*

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Hugh Macmillan begins this pocket biography of the life of Thembisile Martin Hani, better known as Chris Hani, with his subject's death. For those familiar with the history of South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy in the early 1990s, this choice is not surprising. Hani's assassination on 10 April 1993 outside his home in Boksburg was one of the most significant events of the period and as Macmillan notes, had the potential to derail the negotiation process and trigger a bloody civil war. Mandela's public address on primetime television that evening – in which he called for calm – emphasised Hani's remarkable ability to unify the nation in troubled times. His death also marked a major turning point in the negotiation process. Mandela, along with other key negotiators, such as Cyril Ramaphosa and Joe Slovo, urged the government to act with greater urgency and pushed for the date of the first democratic elections to be finalised in the aftermath of Hani's murder.

One of the highlights of Macmillan's biography is his account of Hani's earlier life, including his childhood years, which is less well known. Hani was introduced to politics from a young age, due largely to the influence of his father and uncle who were members of the Communist Party of South Africa. He was further influenced by his teachers at Lovedale School, who were opposed to the apartheid state's introduction of Bantu Education in the early 1950s. His years at Lovedale, an institution also attended by the likes of Steve Biko and Thabo Mbeki, were highly formative and his political activism led to his joining the ANC Youth League at the tender age of 15 years. Hani then went to Fort Hare University, where he studied English and Latin. He graduated in 1961, the same year in which the ANC decided to initiate the armed struggle.

Macmillan then proceeds with an examination of Hani's involvement in the armed struggle, in particular his activities as a member of the ANC's armed wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK). Hani's military training in the Soviet Union, his exile in Lesotho, his rise through the ranks of MK, and the prominent role he played in organising guerrilla operations in South Africa, all feature in the following chapters. However, Macmillan is primarily concerned with trying to understand how Hani was able to overcome the disadvantages of his humble origins in the Transkei to become one of the most important and charismatic figures in South Africa's struggle history. Making wide use of archival sources, interviews and his own personal knowledge of the ANC in exile in Lusaka, Zambia, Macmillan explores the ideas and influences that shaped Hani and the leadership qualities and characteristics that resulted in his achievement of hero status towards the latter years of his life.

Macmillan concludes the book with an eloquent discussion of Hani's vision for a new South Africa, one that was free, non-racial and governed by the black majority. Hani advocated a strong civil society, with viable trade unions and religious organisations. Macmillan notes that Hani appreciated the unusual position he was in, as the leader of the South African Communist Party, which was growing in strength and influence at a time when communist organisations in other parts of the world were in turmoil and a serious state of decline. Generally, this is a sympathetic biography, which adds fresh insights into the life and death of a struggle icon. However, as with other historical and biographical works on Hani, the reader is left with several lingering questions: what if Hani had not been assassinated? What influence would he have had on post-apartheid politics? Indeed, Hani's memory is often invoked by disgruntled elements in the Tripartite Alliance when bemoaning the current state of politics in South Africa.

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