

Soviet Biography of Rhodes now Locally Available

Apollon Davidson, *Cecil Rhodes and his Time*

Protea Book House, Pretoria, 2003

391 pp

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This book originally appeared in Russian in 1984 and after translation into English by Christopher English, was published by Progress Publishers in Moscow in 1988. At the time, Davidson was a respected Soviet historian and Head of the Department of African History at the Institute of General History, Moscow State University. Although the work was not freely available in South Africa and copies had to be ordered from Moscow, it was reviewed in-depth, and positively, by Rodney Davenport and At van Wyk in the *South African Historical Journal* of November 1989. Both reviewers found Davidson's work to be of enormous interest on account of it having been written by a senior Soviet historian. In 1988, a striking aspect of the book was its non-conformity to traditional Soviet approaches. Davidson ignored class analysis and instead focused on the personality of Rhodes.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, *Cecil Rhodes and his Time* lost its novelty. In a post-Cold War environment the shortcomings of the work are glaring. The fact that it is mainly based on secondary research and was originally written for the Soviet reader

Resensies

with little or no knowledge of Southern African history, ensures that the work does not rise above the level of superficial anecdotage. Moreover, it is a pity that apart from the correction of some historical errors, the book has not been revised since 1984. It is therefore badly dated, as can be seen from Davidson's comments on the role of the Broederbond in South Africa (p 13).

Without doubt Davidson's enthusiasm for his subject, his anecdotal approach and jaunty style will attract many readers. He does have the ability to turn a phrase, for example, that Rhodes in his early life dreamt of world domination, but at the end of his life dreamt only of a mouthful of air. The work is competently translated, although one can only smile on reading that the "Afrikaners' home guard" defeated Jameson in 1895.

Although academic historians will have serious reservations about *Cecil Rhodes and his Time*, Davidson does succeed in reflecting what a complex and larger than life character Rhodes was. One has to agree with David Cannadine that Rhodes's achievements were so controversial that it has proven no easier to write a definitive biography than it has been to complete the railway he dreamt of building from the Cape to Cairo.

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