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**Filatova, Irina and Davidson, Apollon, *The Hidden Thread: Russia and South Africa in the Soviet Era*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball 2013, 568 pp.**

This is an important book that weaves together diverse strands of South African and Russian history, focusing on the ideological era in which Russia became a pivotal and global political player. The vast historical account begins in the pre-colonial era and cuts through some of the big themes in history, including among others the Anglo-Boer War, the revolutionary triumph of the Bolsheviks, the two world wars and the fall of *apartheid*.

Filatova and Davidson begin their ambitious study with the arrival of the first Russian *émigré*, Johannes Swellengrebel, who set foot on the Cape shores a few decades after the arrival of Jan Van Riebeeck. Then follows a detailed treatment of Russian expeditions to the Cape of Good Hope under the orders of Catherine the Great, who reigned from 1762 to 1796. Historical accounts indicate that there was Russian scholarly interest in the affairs of the Cape from a very early stage, with travellers making astute observations about social and cultural life in the colony, including the practice of slavery and per-

vasive laziness among the propertied classes.

Some of the fascinating historical details recounted include highlights of correspondence in 1886 between the Russian Czar and a Pondoland Paramount Chief, who solicited sympathies in the face of dispossession. There are many other notable incidents underlying the nascent but growing relations between the two countries, such as the surge of Russian Jews in South Africa in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as a result of the rise of anti-Semitism in Russia during the reign of Alexander III; the establishment of the first Jewish synagogue in Johannesburg, officially opened in 1892 by President Paul Kruger; the exchange of technical expertise in the mining sector; and the keen interest Russia took in the Anglo-Boer War, mostly siding with the Boers.

Respected politicians such as General JBM Herzog initially spoke fondly of the Bolshevik Revolution, seeing in its impulse flickers of hope for the Afrikaners who were economically disadvantaged in relation to the English. This flirtation with Bolshevism would soon wane as Russia took a stand on the side of the black natives and unequivocally avowed its support for the black-nationalist struggles, initially through the medium of the South African Communist Party (SACP) that came into existence in 1921.

Yet still in the early phases of the Bolshevik rule there were various attempts at forging trade relations between Russia and South Africa. Under the Pact Government in 1925, the two-way trade exchange entailed South Africa exporting wool to Russia, and in turn importing oil. This continued up to the mid-1930s, with a number of commodities beyond oil and wool exchanged between the two countries.

This was a pragmatic arrangement that was accompanied by tentative exploration of solidifying diplomatic relations. However, there is little discussion of the stress-points that could have led to the collapse of this arrangement, and whether South Africa managed to find alternative export destinations for its goods or identified new import sources, especially for oil. It is also not clear whether some goods continued to be traded even in the absence of a formal trading agreement.

For political reasons, formal economic relations between the two countries were unsustainable at the time, especially given the strong hold that Britain had on South Africa's external relations, and the clear gravitation of Russia towards supporting revolutionary nationalist movements — a posture that was inimical to the newly established Pact Government and later the National Party Government that came into

power in 1948 and subsequently institutionalised *apartheid*.

The bulk of the book focuses on the role of the Communist International founded by Vladimir Lenin — a movement popularly known as Comintern — in particular its relationship with communist parties from different parts of the world, its indoctrinating practices through political education institutions in Russia, and crucially the gigantic shadow of Stalin's political image and its influence on the various communist parties, including that of South Africa. It is very clear through discussions in the book that Russia had a strong ideological grip on the SACP, and influenced much of the policy that the latter would develop in due course. That, by implication, also extended to the African National Congress (ANC) given how intricately linked the two parties were, while in exile.

The two key areas where this influence would be evident are in the conceptualisation of the Leninist 'two-stage' theory of seeking to first support a nationalist movement to reclaim power from the colonialists and establish parliamentary-democracy, which would then establish a bridge to the second stage, namely a socialist revolution. In the case of South Africa a different characterisation of the social relations between the oppressor and the oppressed groups was conceived as "colonialism of a special type" denoting the coexistence of the oppressor and oppressed group within one national territory as opposed to arms-length colonial relations.

These concepts became propaganda stock phrases of both the SACP and the ANC. Reading through Filatova and Davidson, there is no doubt that Moscow had deep influence on the thinking of the SACP and the ANC, especially after the latter had established the external mission and the military wing *Umkhonto We Sizwe* (MK) was initiated by the SACP. It is also clear that the leadership of both the SACP and the ANC was not exposed to a diverse range of ideas and as such fed on one-dimensional dogma. The implications of these are yet to be fully borne out in South Africa, a thread that Filatova and Davidson do not sufficiently cast a critical spotlight on. Although the authors do not make any connection between this reality and the state of preparedness of the ANC to assume power when the transition to democracy eventually materialised, one cannot rule out the impact of this close-mindedness on the lack of readiness overall on the part of the ANC at the cusp of transition.

There is also a brief, but inconclusive discussion of Nelson Mandela's membership of the SACP. Filatova and Davidson suggest

that within the core group that started *Umkhonto We Sizwe*, there was no one who was not a member of the SACP, including Nelson Mandela. While they point to Walter Sisulu's admission that he had himself joined the SACP underground in 1958, the two authors do not put forward solid evidence confirming Mandela's membership. The whole dispute about Mandela's membership is important, as the authors themselves underscore, especially to clarify whether there was a nationalist who was a member of the ANC but not of the SACP among the core group that started MK. This is also a dispute about the legacy of *Umkhonto We Sizwe* and its proprietorship, as well as of course about Mandela's own intellectual make-up before he was arrested.

Based on the accounts of a number of senior politicians from the ANC and the SACP that the authors interacted with, it seems apparent that Mandela flirted with membership of the SACP. From the anecdotal evidence that the authors marshal, the possibility is strong that Mandela may have indeed been a member. He may have changed his mind later. In the absence of any documentary evidence pointing firmly to his membership, however, this will remain a matter of speculation.

What at times is lacking in the book is a singular narrative that connects the various historical points beyond recounting the events. The absence of focus on individual actors such as Thabo Mbeki (who had passed through the Lenin School and also worked closely with the controversial intelligence spy Bheki Jacobs) deprives the reader of an understanding of the extent to which Russia had an influence on such a leader's politics or style of leadership. While the book may not have been about individual actors as such, some became larger than others in defining the terms of transition in South Africa as well as affecting the direction of the ANC post-*apartheid*.

Finally, the authors mention that the ANC and SACP leadership first solicited support from the Chinese for carrying the armed struggle, but in the end chose to opt for Soviet support. There is, however, no explanation as to why in the first place the Chinese were an option, or why the MK leadership leaned towards Russia. Were they not convinced ideologically by the Chinese position on the Soviet policy or was it a case of them already being too deeply embedded in the Soviet ideological frame?

Notwithstanding the occasionally inconclusive discussion, the book makes an important contribution by revealing aspects of our history that have not yet fully come to light. It is a well-researched study

that relies on first-hand accounts, interviews with those who participated in the struggle, archival material that has now become declassified, as well as a range of literature and memoirs of the liberation movement activists. Importantly, it is the first historical account of its kind that dissects the relationship between Russia and South Africa spanning different historical phases, from the pre-colonial to the post-*apartheid*.

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**Engel, Ulf (ed), *New Mediation Practices in African Conflicts*. Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag 2012, 266 pp.**

This volume is the result of the editor's fellowship at the Wallenberg Research Centre of the Stellenbosch Institute of Advanced Studies, which ended with an international workshop on the subject, held in September 2011. The contributions engage from different angles and perspectives with a wider range of case studies and thematic issues observing trends and ongoing shifts in African security architecture and subsequent approaches to and practices of intervention by mediation. As the editor observes: "These efforts are related to a larger process of norm change, including a new preference for non-indifference as opposed to non-interference in each other's affairs and an emphasis on human security as opposed to traditional regime security" (p 2).

Sceptics might argue that this is not coherently the case, as the example of Zimbabwe suggests. But even in that case a (Southern African Development Community) SADC mediator did at least to some extent flag a regional involvement. This could have been mainly guided by concern about further spill-over of the domestic situation — it had already generated a massive influx of (mostly illegal) immigrants (who strictly speaking could also be considered as refugees) — into neighbouring countries. But mediation efforts were these nonetheless, in which SADC was continuously involved over many years, where in earlier times much more open partisan policies might have been the order of the day. The editor therefore can credibly claim that the contributions to the volume address "new mediation practices ... emerging in an institutional context in which new actors are in the process of arising and