



The Lasting Legacy: The Soviet Theory of the National-Democratic Revolution and South Africa

Irina Filatova

To cite this article: Irina Filatova (2012) The Lasting Legacy: The Soviet Theory of the National-Democratic Revolution and South Africa, South African Historical Journal, 64:3, 507-537, DOI: [10.1080/02582473.2012.665077](https://doi.org/10.1080/02582473.2012.665077)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02582473.2012.665077>



Published online: 23 Apr 2012.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 398



View related articles [↗](#)

The Lasting Legacy: The Soviet Theory of the National-Democratic Revolution and South Africa

IRINA FILATOVA*

Professor, National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia and Professor Emeritus, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa

Abstract

In this article I look into the Soviet roots of the official policy and ideology of the African National Congress (ANC) – the National Democratic Revolution. The article deals with the evolution of the Soviet theory of the national liberation movement, with the history of its adoption first by the South African Communist Party (SACP) and then by the ANC and with the way this theory has been playing itself out in South African politics after the ANC's coming to power. It offers a historical perspective which helps to understand the ANC's present policy and politics and the thinking of its leadership. The article is based on documents from both the South African and Russian archives, interviews with participants of events, Russian contemporary publications and a wide range of other published material.

Key words: African National Congress; communism; National Democratic Revolution; South African Communist Party

For three decades, from 1960 until 1991, the Soviet Union was the closest and the most important ally of the African National Congress (ANC). The USSR supplied the ANC's military wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe, with arms, ammunition, military and other equipment, transport and food, it trained Umkhonto and ANC cadres, rendered logistical, financial and political support and assisted in creating and maintaining the international anti-apartheid movement. Taken together, all this meant that for three decades the Soviet Union provided the ANC and the South African Communist Party (SACP) with a safety net which could not, of course, protect their cadres from the hardship and dangers of exile and struggle, but helped both organisations to survive and triumph – a fact that was widely recognised by the ANC leaders at the time.

But the Soviet Union was much more than simply a friend and a donor. Looking back, Jeremy Cronin, the SACP's deputy general secretary, wrote in 2011:

*Email: ifil@mweb.co.za

In the 20th century we were not alone . . . We had a sense of being a part of shaping world history. Individually, many of us might not survive, but, so it seemed, we were on the side of history in the struggle for a better future.¹

Although Cronin had some reservations about ‘communists in power’, at the time for many parties on the left, the SACP and the ANC among them, it was the USSR that created the feeling that they ‘were not alone’. The Soviet Union was at the head of that struggle for the better future, and for the older generation of the SACP and the ANC leadership and cadres – just as for the leadership of many other communist and national liberation organisations all over the world – it was the embodiment of progress and justice, a symbol of the bright future of humanity and the model for a future South Africa – South Africa after the ANC’s victory.

It was not surprising therefore that there was a lot of admiration for the Soviet Union – its achievements, its ideology and its policy. Its experience was perceived as a clear pointer to a better future and as a measure of the correctness of South Africa’s liberation movement route to it. Garth Strachan, a communist and an MK veteran said in one interview:

Although it has become popular not to admit this now, at the time – at least in the circles where I moved and up to the mid or late 1980s – the reality was that in ANC . . . there was a kind of pro-Soviet hysteria.²

‘Hysteria’ may be too strong a word, but songs were sung and poetry composed about the Soviet people, support was expressed for Soviet initiatives and policy moves. Messages of appreciation and gratitude were read at various Soviet gatherings where ANC and SACP delegations were invariably present. Lenin was a household name among the leadership of both organisations, and the experience of the CPSU was thoroughly and passionately studied and discussed.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union – the event that was perceived as the greatest historical and personal tragedy by many ANC cadres – much of this influence became merely a historical memory. However, one aspect of it is still very much alive and is playing itself out in the South African political arena in the second decade of the twenty-first century. This aspect is the Soviet theory of the national democratic revolution (NDR).

The legacy of the classics

The Soviet theory of the national liberation revolution was first formulated by V. I. Lenin in his *Draft Theses on the National and the Colonial Question* for the Second Congress of the Communist International (the Comintern) in 1920 and in the *Report of the Commission on the National and Colonial Question* to that Congress. It was later developed in his article, “‘Left-Wing’ Communism – an Infantile Disorder”, in his speech to the Second All-Union

1. *The Sunday Times*, Johannesburg, 31 July 2011.

2. <http://www.liberationafrica.se/intervstories/interviews/strachan/?by-name=1>, accessed 3 February 2012.

Congress of Communist Organisations and Peoples of the East, and in his speeches and reports to the Third and Fourth Congresses of the Comintern.

Lenin's theory as expressed in the *Report of the Commission on the National and the Colonial Questions* (written on the basis of Lenin's *Draft Thesis*) to the Second Congress of the Comintern contained five main points.

1. The world consists of oppressing and oppressed nations [i.e. not just classes – I.F.]; the former are a small minority; the latter, a huge majority.
2. After the First World War 'relations between nations . . . are defined by the struggle of a small group of imperialist nations against the Soviet movement and Soviet states with Soviet Russia at their head'.
3. 'Any national movement can only be bourgeois-democratic by nature, for the main mass of the population of backward countries consists of the peasantry . . .'. The Commission on the National and Colonial Question to which the *Draft Theses* were presented, substituted the term 'national-revolutionary' for 'bourgeois-democratic' and added that communists could support 'bourgeois liberation movements in colonial countries' only when these movements were 'truly revolutionary, when their representatives will not prevent us from educating and organizing the peasantry and the broad exploited masses in the spirit of revolution'.
4. In pre-capitalist conditions, in the absence of a proletariat, the experience of peasant 'soviets' – councils which emerged during the Russian revolution – should be applied. It was thought that peasants would understand this 'form of communist tactics', but that 'the proletariat of the advanced countries' 'should help the backward toiling masses'.
5. The capitalist stage of development was not inevitable for 'the backward people who get their freedom now', for 'the victorious proletariat' will wage propaganda among them, and Soviet governments³ 'will render them assistance with all means at their disposal'.⁴

All these points seem clear enough, except the second one: what did Russia's position in the international arena have to do with the colonial question? In fact, this was the crux of Lenin's approach: although Russia did not fit into the category of oppressed nations, it was a victim of the same few but powerful oppressing nations. The main idea of the *Theses* was that socialist Russia and anti-colonial movements were natural allies (despite the bourgeois nature of anti-colonial movements), and as such they should act together in a united front against imperialism. This was because (a) bourgeois movements in the colonies could be national-revolutionary if they allowed communists 'to educate' the masses and lead them; and (b) under the leadership of communists in the colonies and communist parties in the metropolitan powers and, first and foremost, of the communists of Soviet Russia, the most

3. Before the creation of the Soviet Union in 1924, several independent states with Soviets at their head emerged on the territory of the former Russian Empire, as well as e.g. in Hungary and Bavaria.

4. V.I. Lenin, 'Doklad komissii po natsionalnomu i kolonialnomu voprosam, 26 iulija [Report of the Commission on the National and the Colonial Questions, 26 July]', in V.I. Lenin, *Sobranie sochinenii [Collected Works]*, 4th ed., vol. 31 (Moscow: State Publishers of Political Literature, 1950), 215–220.

‘backward’ colonial peoples, i.e. those that had not reached the capitalist stage of development, might avoid having to go through it.

By the mid-1920s Lenin’s theses had undergone substantial change. While Lenin stressed the possibility and even the desirability of an alliance with the local bourgeoisie, as long as it did not hamper communist propaganda, the Fifth Congress of the Comintern in 1924 rejected the idea that this bourgeoisie could have any anti-colonial potential. Moreover, even socialists who agreed to support colonial reform rather than an outright revolution in the colonies, were now called ‘national reformists’. Soon those who wholeheartedly supported anti-colonial revolutions but not under the banners of the Comintern were to be denounced as the worst enemies of all – ‘Trotskyists’.

These changes were initiated at the very top. After Lenin’s death the Party’s nationality policy was defined by J.V. Stalin who had begun his ascent to the Party leadership by authoring an article on this very topic. Stalin did distinguish between the bourgeoisie of the metropolitan powers and the ‘national bourgeoisie’ of colonial and dependent countries – as did Lenin. The latter, Stalin wrote, ‘could support a revolutionary movement against imperialism in their countries at a certain stage and for a certain time’.⁵ However, as a matter of principle he did not trust any alliances with bourgeois parties and movements, even temporary ones, and even in the colonies. Already in his first article on the national question, *Marxism and the National Question* published in 1913, Stalin declared that ‘generally the proletariat does not support the so-called “national-liberation” movements because until now all such movements have acted in the interests of the bourgeoisie and have corrupted and confused the class consciousness of the proletariat’.⁶

Unlike Lenin, Stalin also did not believe that in the course of anti-colonial struggle pre-capitalist colonial societies could transfer to socialism, by-passing the capitalist stage of development. In 1927, for example, he told Chinese revolutionaries that it was ‘a mistake to speak about the possibility of the peaceful development of a bourgeois-democratic revolution into a proletarian one’.⁷

As national revolutions were capitalist by nature, only capitalist societies could emerge out of them, particularly if they were led by the bourgeoisie. So Stalin thought that the only way avoid this would be ‘to achieve the hegemony of the proletariat in the bourgeois-democratic revolution’ – which was the main task of communist parties in anti-colonial and national-liberation revolutions. In 1927, on Stalin’s insistence (criticised by many in the Party, Leon Trotsky among them) the young Chinese Communist Party attempted to act against the ‘right-wing forces’ within the Kuomintang, Sun Yat-sen’s nationalist movement. Stalin insisted that the right-wingers should be ‘isolated inside the Kuomintang and

5. J.V. Stalin, ‘Mezhdunarodnoie polozheniie i oborona SSSR. Rech, 1 avgusta. Ob’edinennyj Plenum TsK i TsKK VKP(b) 29 iul’ia–9 avgusta 1927 g. [The International Situation and the Defence of the USSR. Speech of 1 August. Combined Plenary Session of the Central Committee and the Central Control Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolshevik)]’, in Stalin, *Sochineniia (Works)*, vol. 10 (Moscow: State Publishers of Political Literature, 1949), 11.
6. J.V. Stalin, ‘Kak ponimaet sotsial–democratiiia natsionalnyi vopros? [How Does Social Democracy Understand the Nationality Question?]', in Stalin, *Sochineniia (Works)*, vol. 1 (Moscow: State Publishers of Political Literature, 1946), 49.
7. J.V. Stalin, ‘Beseda so studentami Universiteta imeni Sun’ Yatsena [A Conversation with the Students of the Sun Yat-sen University]’, in Stalin, *Sochineniia (Works)*, vol. 9 (Moscow: State Publishers of Political Literature, 1948), 252.

used for the purposes of the revolution' and then 'decisively evicted from the Kuomintang and decisively fought against until they are completely politically destroyed.'⁸ 'What is required now of the Chinese Communist Party if it really wants to be independent', he explained, 'is not to leave the Koumintang, but to achieve the leading role of the Communist Party both in the Koumintang, and outside it'.⁹

In fact, it was the Nationalists under Chiang Kai-shek, Sun Yat-sen's successor, who turned against the Communists, nearly annihilating them. Stalin, however, never changed his approach. In the 1930s he still insisted on the idea of the hegemony of the proletariat in the national-liberation struggle. In his article, *The International Character of the October Revolution*, he wrote: 'The era of liberation revolutions in colonies and dependent countries has come – the era of the awakening of the proletariat of these countries, the era of its hegemony in the revolution.'¹⁰

Whatever further convolutions the Soviet theory of the national-liberation revolution went through, the idea of the hegemony of the proletariat (i.e. the leading role of communists) in such a revolution remained its permanent and crucially important aspect.

The rise and fall of 'the independent native republic'

The Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), the predecessor of the SACP, joined the Comintern in 1921, but it was only in 1927 that this international communist organisation centred in Moscow became directly involved in South African affairs. James La Guma, one of the leaders of the CPSA, visited Moscow twice during that year. The first time he came in March and then returned in November, together with Josiah Gumede, president of the then small and ineffective ANC, to participate in the celebrations of the tenth anniversary of the Russian revolution. During these visits La Guma met Comintern leaders and discussed the general political line of the CPSA with them.

After several meetings with La Guma, the Comintern's Executive offered its own vision of the line, first formulated by its chairman, Nikolai Bukharin. The final version of this proposal was adopted by the Comintern's Sixth Congress in late 1928. It was decreed that,

the Communist Party of South Africa must combine the fight against all anti-native laws with the general political slogan in the fight against British domination, the slogan of an independent native South African Republic as a stage towards a workers' and peasants' republic with full rights for all races, black, coloured and white.¹¹

8. J.V. Stalin, 'Voprosy kitaiskoï revoliutsii [Questions of the Chinese Revolution]', in Stalin, *Sochineniia (Works)*, vol. 9, 226–227.
9. Stalin, 'Beseda', 266.
10. J.V. Stalin, 'Mezhdunarodnyi kharakter Oktiabr'skoi revoliutsii [The International Character of the October Revolution Sochineniia]', in Stalin, *Sochineniia (Works)*, vol. 10, 245.
11. A. Davidson, I. Filatova, V. Gorodnov and S. Johns, eds, *South Africa and the Communist International: A Documentary History (1919–1939)*, vol. I (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2003), 155, 194.

The idea of a two-stage revolution, the first stage for democracy and the second one for socialism, was first formulated by Lenin in 1905.¹² For South Africa the first stage was adapted to include the national liberation of Africans. The second stage remained unchanged, though the ‘full rights’ of ‘all races’ were stressed. The definition of the ‘independent native republic’ was far from clear (for example, it did not explain its class nature) and the new line met steep opposition within the CPSA. The Party finally accepted it under huge pressure from the Comintern, which simply imposed the slogan on its South African branch,¹³ but only after prolonged and vicious infighting which nearly obliterated the organisation.

Despite this the slogan of the independent native republic was to have a profound and lasting effect on theoretical thinking and debate within the Party and the ANC. Even decades later much of the dissent in the liberation movement centred on the interpretation of the two stages of the revolution and the correlation between race and class in each of them. The historical importance of this slogan is fully realised by South African communists today. Dominic Tweedie, host of the SACP’s ‘Communist University’ site, wrote:

It is possible to make out a clear list of texts from the 1920s, approximately one per decade, and to demonstrate that the argument built up through these texts has determined South Africa’s history ... This list could start with the Comintern’s “Black Republic Resolution of 1928”.¹⁴

In 1935 the Seventh Comintern Congress cancelled the slogan of the independent native republic as abruptly and as harshly as it had introduced it. The advance of fascism and Nazism forced the Soviet leaders to look for allies, and the creation of a united people’s front was proclaimed as the immediate task of every communist party. This did not mean that either the idea of national liberation itself, or of the two-stage struggle were put on the backburner. The draft resolution that the Comintern’s Executive prepared for adoption by the Ninth Congress of the CPSA in February 1936 specifically mentioned that the changing situation ‘has made it inexpedient ... to further advance the slogan of the “Independent Native Republic”’, because ‘for the fascists ... it facilitates their work in igniting nationalism and race hatred, primarily between the Natives and the whites’. But at the same time the resolution also stated ‘the erroneousness of mechanically identifying the task of the national liberation struggle with the tasks of the revolutionary-democratic dictatorship of the workers and farmers’,¹⁵ since

the Native peoples can today be mobilised against imperialism but the mass of Native toilers have not yet matured to the point of raising the struggle against the chiefs of their tribes. They will mature for the solution of this second task first and foremost in the struggle against imperialism.¹⁶

12. V.I. Lenin, ‘Dve taktiki sotsial–democratii v demokraticeskoi revoliutsii [Two Tactics of Social Democracy in a Democratic Revolution]’, in Lenin, *Sobranie sochinenii (Collected Works)*, 4th ed., vol. 9 (Moscow: State Publishers of Political Literature, 1947), 3–119.
13. The official name of the CPSA was ‘Communist Party of South Africa – Branch of the Communist International’.
14. DomzaNet, Communist University, <http://groups.google.com/group/Communist-University>, accessed 27 March 2007.
15. Presumably ‘farmers’ here meant ‘peasants’. The authors of the document obviously had little, if any, knowledge of South Africa’s realities.
16. Davidson, Filatova, Gorodnov and Johns, *South Africa*, vol. II, 173–175.

The CPSA was also told that the Boers were one of the oppressed nations who had also fought against the British. The Party was accused of not paying enough attention to them, as well as to such ‘non-revolutionary’ organisations as the ANC and the Industrial and Commercial Workers’ Union (ICU) – South Africa’s first black trade union. This, in the view of the authors, prevented the creation of a wide people’s front in the country. The new slogan offered to the Party was ‘For Independent South African Republics!’, i.e. one republic for each of the oppressed peoples.¹⁷ Apartheid’s creators would have been stunned had they realised that the idea of separate states for separate nations in South Africa had first occurred to the strategists of the Communist International.

From 1935 on the Comintern’s leadership demanded that the Party concentrate on the struggle for workers’ everyday needs and on the work with and within trade unions. The struggle for the interests of the oppressed ‘native masses’ became a part of the struggle for the everyday needs of the working class as a whole.¹⁸ The close connection between the Communist Party and the trade unions in South Africa was there to stay as part of the Soviet theoretical legacy. The somewhat diminished role of the struggle for national liberation was soon to be reversed and to occupy centre stage in Soviet theoretical thinking.

The shifting perspective

The changes in the international situation in the wake of the Second World War transformed the Soviet approach towards anti-colonialism. But the new perspective did not emerge overnight. So much so that during the peace negotiations with its wartime allies the USSR demanded some of the former Italian colonies for itself, so as to show the world what ‘a socialist colony’ could be.¹⁹ This did not work out, and a new approach to the ‘colonial issue’ had to be found.

In the first post-war years there were no official documents on this subject: the Comintern was dissolved in 1943, and Party congresses were not convened. In his Report to the Meeting of several communist parties in 1947 in Poland A.A. Zhdanov, Secretary of the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party, mentioned only that ‘attempts to suppress the national-liberation movement by force . . . meet the growing armed resistance of colonial peoples’. And the Declaration, passed by the Meeting, instructed communists ‘to lead resistance to plans for imperialist expansion and aggression’.²⁰

17. *Ibid.*

18. See, for example, Davidson, Filatova, Gorodnov and Johns, *South Africa*, vol. II, 186–187, 200–210.

19. A. Davidson and S. Mazov, eds, *Rossia i Afrika. Dokumenty i materialy. XVIIIv. –1960. [Russia and Africa. Documents and Materials. Vol. II (Moscow: Institute of General History, Russian Academy of Sciences, 1999), 135–138; A. Davidson, S. Mazov and G. Tsyppin, SSSR i Afrika. Dokumentirovannaia istoriia vzaimootnoshenij [The USSR and Africa: Documentary History of Relations] (Moscow: Institute of General History, Russian Academy of Sciences 2002), 117–124; S. Mazov. ‘The USSR and the Former Italian Colonies, 1945–1950’, *Cold War History*, 3, 3 (2003), 49–78.*

20. *Informatsionnoie soveshchaniie predstavitelei nekotorykh kompartii v Pol’she v kontse sentiabriia1947 [Information Meeting of Representatives of Some Communist Parties in Poland in Late September 1947] (Moscow: State Publishers of Political Literature, 1948), 10, 17.*

But from the late 1940s, when one colony after another became free, it became necessary to interpret this new phenomenon and to integrate it into existing theoretical constructions, as well as to define the nature of Soviet relations with the new countries. China's experience once again had a decisive influence on Soviet thinking. In 1949 the Chinese Communists, having defeated the Kuomintang, emerged victorious from the civil war, as if to confirm that Stalin's 1927 line on communist leadership in a revolution for national liberation was, after all, correct. Stalin greeted these developments and encouraged his Chinese colleagues to work in other Asian colonies. The Chinese way was, then, the correct one: only an armed revolutionary struggle led by communists could bring real independence. The Chinese communists' victory was the only reference made to the national-liberation movement at the 1949 Meeting of the Communist and Workers' Parties in Hungary in 1949.²¹

But the anti-colonial struggle did not always follow the Chinese example or Soviet theoretical scenarios. It was impossible to admit that something was wrong with the theory – something had to be wrong with the newly independent countries themselves. If a bourgeois party, and not the working class, had led a colony towards its independence, such independence was proclaimed 'formal' or 'illusory'. And independence granted to colonies by former colonial powers was described as a 'manoeuvre' aimed at 'perpetuating' their colonial status or at least keeping them within the sphere of influence of the former colonial powers. 'Colonial status, i.e. above all the economic enslavement of a country by imperialism', wrote the historian Ye. M. Zhukov 'is fully compatible with its formal equality and even with 'independence'.²² Burma and India were given as examples of such 'illusory' independence. The independence of Indonesia and Vietnam, on the contrary, were both considered genuine, because they had been won by armed struggle.

The armed struggle was the preferred form of anti-colonialism because it was thought to be more 'revolutionary' and ultimately to lead the newly independent countries into the socialist camp.²³ Despite many examples of the opposite, this belief remained a part of Soviet thinking up to the mid 1980s. In 1976 Georgi Mirski, a Soviet academic and one of the top advisers of the CPSU's Central Committee on problems of the national-liberation movement was quoted as saying that while the radicalisation of Third World regimes did not necessarily depend on their coming to power through armed struggle, 'the majority of radical countries' have nevertheless gone through 'a protracted period of armed struggle'. According to him, in the process revolutionary parties became stronger, and 'bourgeois elements' departed from the field of action.²⁴

From the mid-1950s on some of these underlying principles had to be reconsidered and reinterpreted in the context of the new political situation. The pace, and in some countries

21. *Soveshchaniie Informatsionnogo biuro kommunisticheskix partii v Vengrii vo vtoroi polovine noiabria 1949 g.* [Meeting of the Information Bureau of Communist Parties in Hungary in late November 1949] (Moscow: State Publishers of Political Literature, 1949), 46, 48.

22. Ye.M. Zhukov. 'Obostreniie krizisa kolonialnoi sistemy posle vtoroi mirovoi voiny [The Aggravation of the Crisis of the Colonial System after the Second World War]', in Ye.M. Zhukov, ed., *Krizis kolonialnoi sistemy [The Crisis of the Colonial System]* (Leningrad: Publishing House of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, 1949), 21.

23. See, for example, I.M. Lemin, *Obostreniie krizisa Britanskoi imperii posle vtoroi mirovoi voiny [The Aggravation of the Crisis of the British Empire after the Second World War]* (Moscow: Publishing House of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, 1951), 9.

24. *The International Herald Tribune*, 30 September 1976.

the radical nature of decolonisation, the fact that many politicians of the newly independent countries were captivated by communist ideology, the founding of the non-aligned movement, the success of Khrushchev's visit to India, Burma and Afghanistan in 1955 – all these factors combined led the Soviet leadership to the conclusion that the anti-colonial process as a whole, irrespective of its character in each country, could become an important ally of the Soviet Union in its struggle against imperialism. In essence this was a return to Lenin's idea that national-liberation movements were natural allies of socialist countries and that the newly independent countries could move to socialism straight from pre-capitalist modes of production, bypassing the capitalist stage.

Moreover, in the situation of the Cold War Moscow began to see the decolonisation process as a precursor of the collapse of the capitalist system – the beginning of the same world revolution that had failed to materialise in the developed countries of Europe and America, but was now advancing from the East and South. At the CPSU's 20th Congress in 1956 Khrushchev for the first time spoke about the collapse of the colonial system and of the emergence of newly independent countries as one of the manifestations of the general crisis of capitalism. He also said, for the first time too, that with the emergence of the socialist camp, civil wars and violent upheavals were no longer a necessary stage of struggle for socialism and that now 'conditions could be created for radical political and economic transformation by peaceful means'.²⁵

As far as Africa was concerned, the new line found its clear expression in a secret decree *On the Broadening of Cultural and Public Ties with Negro Peoples of Africa and Strengthening of Soviet Influence on these Peoples*, issued by the CPSU's Central Committee on 20 January 1960.²⁶

The NDR and socialist orientation

In the late 1950s the CPSU's Central Committee formed a special group of advisers to work on the theoretical problems of national liberation movements. It was ultimately led by Karen N. Brutents, one of the deputy heads of the CC's International Department, and it was under him, in the 1970s, that the theory was fully developed. The group produced drafts of official party documents and speeches for the party leaders on national liberation. The drafts were sent to the CC's Secretariat and edited there. The texts that emerged as a result became the official party line and were reproduced as its official documents. Several academic research institutes worked on the interpretation of Soviet national liberation theory and studied the ways it was applied and worked in practice. Hundreds of books, thousands of theses and innumerable articles were written on various aspects of this topic.

The theory ran as follows. In the new international dispensation, when socialism had become the most important political factor, young independent states could bypass capitalism, moving straight from pre-capitalist modes of production to socialism. The authors of the theory thought that although in some countries the socioeconomic base was

25. Otchetnyi doklad of the TsK KPSS XX s'ezdu KPSS (Report of the CPSU's CC to the 20th Congress of the CPSU. 14 February, 1956, http://www.hrono.ru/dokum/195_dok/1956sez20.php, accessed 3 February 2012.

26. Davidson and Mazov, *Rossia i Afrika*, 165.

not ripe for socialism, the revolutionary super-structure (i.e. the state), directed by the local working class and assisted by the ‘world proletariat’ could ‘pull the base up’ to the necessary level by a certain set of measures. After such a preparatory period a peaceful transition to socialism could follow. The theory operated with several interconnected notions: the national democratic revolution; the national democratic state; revolutionary democracy; and the non-capitalist way of development or socialist orientation.

The notion of the national democratic revolution was the cornerstone of the theory. It emerged in the Soviet political vocabulary of the late 1950s. According to Brutents, it was first put forward by the CPSU and was then ‘widely accepted’ by the international communist movement, used in the documents and platforms of communist parties, and was ‘extensively used at the 1969 International Meeting of Communist and Workers’ Parties’.²⁷

Brutents explained that:

the introduction by the Communist parties ... of the category of “national democratic revolution” into their militant political vocabulary, and – what is most important – the use of its socio-economic and political content as an important starting point for elaborating strategy and tactics resulted from the generalisation of the new features of national liberation revolutions in our day. What are the distinctive features of national democratic revolutions? These revolutions which lead to the elimination of colonial and semi-colonial oppression and are also latent with anti-capitalist tendency ... They not only weaken the imperialist system ... When [their] leadership comes from political forces representing the interests of the proletariat, these revolutions ... grow directly into socialist revolutions. When leadership comes from non-proletarian democratic forces ... these revolutions produce, alongside important anti-imperialist and anti-feudal changes, anti-capitalist transformations, paving the way for the transition to socialist reconstruction ... The national democratic tendency of development in the revolution can gain the upper hand either at the first or at the second phase of the revolution.²⁸

So, according to the Soviet theory, there was only one possible outcome of the NDR – socialism, which could emerge in one of two ways, either directly from anti-colonialism, or through transformation during a transition period. Such a period was called ‘non-capitalist development’.

The idea of ‘non-capitalist development’ was first formulated by the authoritative International Meeting of Communist and Workers’ Parties held in Moscow in 1960, in which 81 parties participated. It was then affirmed in the Programme of the CPSU, adopted by the 22nd Congress of the CPSU in 1961, and used at another International Meeting of Communist and Workers’ Parties in 1969. From 1967 the term ‘socialist orientation’ was introduced, as a ‘more precise’ alternative to ‘non-capitalist’ development. The documents of the 1969 International Meeting of the Communist and Workers’ parties used both terms interchangeably. Official party documents never provided a definition of socialist orientation, but all interpretations described it as a transitional stage which pre-capitalist societies had to go through if they wanted to move to socialism. The *Africa Encyclopaedia*, for example, gave the following definition:

27. K.N. Brutents, *National Liberation Revolutions Today. Some Questions of Theory*. Part I (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), 146–147.

28. Brutents, *National Liberation*, 148–149.

The socialist orientation or non-capitalist way of development is the initial stage of social progress towards socialism in the countries where the people reject capitalism as a system, but conditions for a socialist revolution do not yet exist.²⁹

The 1960 Meeting of Communist and Workers' Parties defined the class basis of the non-capitalist path as 'the united national democratic front of all patriotic forces of the nation', based on the union between the working class and peasants.³⁰ This front, or 'bloc' was called 'revolutionary democracy'. The authors of the collective monograph, *Africa: Problems of Socialist Orientation*, defined revolutionary democracy as a social group that expressed 'anti-imperialist, anti-feudal, democratic and socialist ideals and the aspirations of different strata of the working people' in countries which found themselves 'at the pre-capitalist and early-capitalist stages of development'.³¹

The 1960 Meeting of Communist and Workers' parties declared that the 'political form of the activity of the revolutionary democracy is the national democratic state'. This was

the state that consistently upholds its political and economic independence, fights against imperialism and its military blocs, against military bases on its territory; fights against the new forms of colonialism and the penetration of imperialist capital; rejects dictatorial and despotic methods of government; ensures the people's broad democratic rights and freedoms (freedom of the press, speech, assembly, demonstration, establishment of political parties and social organisations) and the opportunity of working for the enactment of agrarian reform and other domestic and social changes, and for participation of the people in shaping government policy.³²

The authors of *Africa: Problems of Socialist Orientation* gave a shorter definition: 'the national democratic state is the transitional state towards the state of the socialist type'.³³

Long or short, these definitions were so vague that they could be stretched in any direction. Clearly, there were no tangible criteria for a government to be recognised as a revolutionary democracy, and for a country to be considered a national democratic state. But the slogans were attractive and this was what mattered.

29. *Afrika. Entsiklopedicheskii spravochnik [Africa. Encyclopaedia]*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Sovetskaia Entsiklopediia, 1987), 389.

30. *Dokumenty Soveshchaniia predstavitelej kommunisticheskikh i rabochikh partii [Documents of the Meeting of Representatives of Communist and Workers' Parties]* (Moscow: State Publishers of Political Literature, 1960), 37.

31. G.B. Starushenko, ed., *Africa: problemy sotsialisticheskoi orïentatsii [Africa: Problems of Socialist Orientation]* (Moscow: Nauka, 1976), 27.

32. *Programmnye dokumenty borby za mir, demokratiu i sotsializm. Dokumenty Soveshchaniï predstavitelei kommunisticheskikh i rabochikh partii, sostoiavshikhsia v Moskve v noiabre 1957 g., v Bukhareste v iune 1960 g., v Moskve v noiabre 1960 g [Programme Documents of the Struggle for Peace, Democracy and Socialism. Documents of the Meetings of Representatives of Communist and Workers' Parties, which took place in Moscow in November 1957, in Bucharest in June 1960, and in Moscow in November 1960]* (Moscow: State Publishers of Political Literature, 1961), 67–68. The English translation of this definition comes from the 1962 Programme of the SACP (see below). It was most probably copied from the original Soviet translation handed to the delegates.

33. Starushenko, *Africa: problemy*, 38.

A fluid theory – and its downfall

Soviet theoreticians did not agree on the class composition of revolutionary democracy. Thus, *Africa: Problems of Socialist Orientation* listed ‘the revolutionary elements of the national bourgeoisie’ among the forces that constituted the class base of the national democratic state, together with the proletariat and the peasantry.³⁴ R.A. Ulianovski, a Soviet theoretician of the national liberation movement and another deputy head of the Central Committee’s International Department, held a similar view. ‘It is correct to define the national-democratic state’, he wrote,

as the political power of a broad social bloc of the working people, among whom are the growing proletariat, the urban and rural petty bourgeois strata and the elements of the national bourgeoisie that come out in favour of a progressive social development from an anti-imperialist position.³⁵

Brutents, however, wrote that having introduced ‘representatives of national entrepreneurship’ into their ‘social coalition base’, revolutionary democrats often began to pursue a policy in the interests of the bourgeoisie.³⁶ Official documents did not help to clarify the issue. The 1969 International Meeting of Communist and Worker’s Parties mentioned the process of ‘internal social stratification’ in the former colonies, characterised by contradictions between the ‘toiling masses’ and the ‘upper layers of the national bourgeoisie’. The rest of the bourgeoisie was simply not mentioned.³⁷

The list of concrete reforms which were thought necessary in order to achieve socialism was also the object of a lively debate.³⁸ ‘A speedy, revolutionary creation of the material, technical, scientific, social and political prerequisites for socialist construction constitutes the essence of non-capitalist development’, *Africa: Problems of Socialist Orientation* explained.³⁹ The authors of the Soviet encyclopaedia of Africa thought that countries of socialist orientation

take the course toward the elimination of the economic and political domination of imperialist monopolies and trans-national corporations, as well as of internal reaction – feudal landlords, tribal nobility and the pro-imperialist bourgeoisie; strengthen the state sector – the economic basis of socialist orientation; encourage co-operative movements in the rural areas; implement progressive agricultural reforms, aimed at the elimination of feudal property and at the creation of a rural public sector.

34. Starushenko, *Africa: problemy*, 31–32.

35. R.A. Ulianovskii, *Sotsializm i osvobodivshiesia strany [Socialism and the Liberated Countries]* (Moscow: State Publishers of Political Literature, 1972), 484.

36. K.N. Brutents, *Sovremennye natsionalno-osvoboditelnye revoliutsii [Contemporary National-Liberation Revolutions]* (Moscow: State Publishers of Political Literature, 1974), 333–334.

37. *Mezhdunarodnoie soveshchaniie kommunisticheskikh i rabochikh partij. Dokumenty i materialy. Moskva, 5–17 iunია 1969 g [International Meeting of Communist and Worker’s Parties. Documents and Materials. Moscow, 5–17 June 1969]* (Moscow: State Publishers of Political Literature, 1969), 61–62.

38. Such debates about interpretations of concrete issues within the theory were, of course, possible, particularly as the authors themselves disagreed on some points. However, the core of the theory, as formulated in the official documents, was never under discussion.

39. Starushenko, *Africa: problemy*, 18.

‘The state sector which emerges as a result of the nationalisation of the property of the former colonial administration, foreign monopolies and the big local bourgeoisie’, they wrote,

is the basis for the struggle against the domination of foreign capital and for the development of productive forces and the industrialisation of the economy. In the interests of the development of the productive forces the private sector of the economy (both national and foreign) is also widely used, together with the public sector, under the control of the state and to the extent and in the forms which are defined for every concrete period of social development. Gradually state planning is introduced, as well as the other institutions of a socialist economy.⁴⁰

Other authors added the ‘systematic improvement of the standards of life of working people’, or ‘the creation of a reliable mechanism of defence of revolutionary achievements from external and internal enemies’ to the list.⁴¹ An ‘independent foreign policy’ and simultaneously ‘economic, political and cultural cooperation with socialist countries’ were among the most important characteristics of a socialist orientation.⁴² All theoretical works and official party documents on socialist orientation stressed the importance of the ‘leading role of the proletariat’ in it, as well as the cooperation with socialist countries.⁴³

In reality the reforms (if any) undertaken in each country of socialist orientation were far removed from the wish lists of Soviet theoreticians. It seems that what mattered for these countries to be recognised as non-capitalist by the Soviet bloc was their willingness to proclaim socialism as their goal, to introduce some form of state control over their economy and to support the Soviet Union in the international arena. According to the disingenuous admission of the authors of *Africa: Problems of Socialist Orientation*, the recognition of a state as a country of socialist orientation was similar to diplomatic recognition of a country.⁴⁴ In other words, in practice such recognition was a matter of political expediency, rather than theory. The most important factor defining the Soviet policy towards each newly independent country was the degree of its closeness to the Soviet Union, and not its revolutionary history or the quality of its reforms.

Soviet academics looked into every possible theoretical aspect of the transition of former colonies to socialism through socialist orientation, but attempts to verify theory against reality each time resulted either in adjustments of the reality to make it fit the theory, or in ignoring the reality altogether. Ever more sophisticated works on the theory of socialist orientation were published up till the late 1980s, but some were disenchanted with it as early as the late 1970s. Even those who created the theory could not fail to notice that, having come to power, ‘national democrats’ were often not in any hurry to build socialism in their countries, and that they often got rid of their communist allies. Other attempted to follow the theory but in such a way that could only compromise Soviet propaganda about their ‘achievements’ (Mengistu Haile Mariam’s Ethiopia being only one example). Besides this, by the late 1970s it became clear that Soviet military interventions in support of the

40. *Africa. Encyclopaedia*, 389.

41. P.I. Manchka. *Aktualnyie problemy sovremennoi Afriki [Current Problems of Contemporary Africa]* (Moscow: State Publishers of Political Literature, 1979), 32–33.

42. For example, Starushenko, *Africa: problemy*, 18–19.

43. For example, *Mezhdunarodnoie soveshchaniie*, 62–63; Razvivaiushchiiesia strany, 28, 141, *et al.*

44. Starushenko, *Africa: problemy*.

national-liberation movements seriously threatened détente and the possibility of peaceful coexistence with the West – and the USSR was not ready for a big war.

Doubts about the theory came earliest to its main creators. According to O.A. Westad, author of a definitive history of the cold war in the Third World, in 1979 Karen Brutents sent many a ‘devastating memoranda’ to B.N. Ponomarev, head of the International Department of the CPSU’s Central Committee. He wrote that the building of socialism in the Third World had become too much of a Soviet project, and that the local contribution remained minimal. The reason for this he saw in the petit-bourgeois nature of ‘national democrats’.⁴⁵ There were sceptics among communists from developing countries and liberation movements too. Among them was one of the leaders of the South African Communist Party, Joe Slovo, who did not believe in the socialist potential of national democracy.⁴⁶ But these doubts did not bring any major changes in Soviet policy and they were not made known to the broader public.

The collapse of the Soviet Union brought the theory to an abrupt end. Today it is neither discussed, nor even mentioned, and even those of its authors who survived it were among the most disillusioned about it. G.I. Mirski wrote in his memoirs:

In 1963–64 we were at the Staraia Ploshchad⁴⁷ for months, working on the *Theses of the CPSU’s CC on Problems of the National Liberation Movement* . . . Enormous time was spent on working out subtle nuances and definitions, such as “people’s democratic” and “national democratic” forces and parties, revolutionary democracy and people’s democracy, etc. Now, re-reading the surviving drafts of these materials, I am amazed at how much time and energy was wasted on compiling these at best banal, and more often simply false texts, which nobody needed and which bore no relevance to what was going on in Asia, Africa and Latin America! All our prognoses proved wrong, everything happened not as we thought it would . . . Very few among the local Marxists could read all that and believe that our recommendations were correct (and if they followed them, it was to the detriment of their countries). Our Soviet public? It was indifferent to these problems. Whole institutes with huge staffs wasted a lot of money on a completely useless cause.⁴⁸

But Mirski was wrong. Soviet theoreticians found more than a few followers, and South African communists and the African National Congress have been, perhaps, the most consistent among them. In the later years of the anti-apartheid struggle the leaders of the SACP and the ANC thought that the national-democratic stage of their revolution could evolve straight into the socialist stage (one of the two possibilities, mentioned by Brutents). The *Africa. Encyclopaedia* noted that

45. O.A. Westad, *The Global Cold War. Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 284–285.

46. See, for example, J. Slovo. ‘A Critical Appraisal of the Noncapitalist Path and the National Democratic State in Africa’, *Marxism Today*, 18, 6 (1974), 181, 186. This did not mean that Slovo argued against the two-stage revolution. His idea was that the first stage, the national-democratic revolution, could only succeed if led by the working class, not the ‘national democrats’. In his important work, *South Africa – No Middle Road*, he referred to Lenin in this connection: ‘Lenin’s theoretical commitment to a bourgeois democratic phase in pre-February Russia was bound up with the slogan of a ‘revolutionary democratic dictatorship of workers and peasants’ and not that of bourgeoisie’. (J. Slovo, *South Africa – No Middle Road* (N.p., n.d. [1976]), 45.

47. Staraia Ploshchad – the square where the building of the CPSU’s Central Committee was situated.

48. G.I. Mirski, *Zhizn v trekh epokhakh [Life in Three Eras]* (Moscow: Letnii Sad, 2001), 179–182.

of all countries on the continent [Africa] the transition to socialism directly through a socialist revolution, by-passing or shortening to the minimum the stage of the national democratic revolution and socialist orientation (according to African communists) is only possible in South Africa, where employed labour constitutes more than half of the economically active population . . . and where the proletariat led by the SACP numbers more than 2 million. But even here a transitional period is not excluded.⁴⁹

It should be stressed that despite this sentiment, nowhere in their official documents or writing did South African communists mention the possibility of deliberately skipping the first stage and thus starting a socialist revolution right away. The idea was that apartheid and capitalism were so inextricably connected that once the former was gone, the latter would, more or less, collapse on its own.

Many in South Africa think that the socialist revolution did not take place only because the ANC came to power as a result of a negotiated settlement, not a military victory. But the NDR goes marching on in South Africa today, long after the theory was abandoned by its authors. It constitutes the basis of the ANC's official policy, and from the mid-1990s the debate on the left of South Africa's political spectrum is defined by the questions of how it should be implemented and at what pace, not about whether it should or should not be implemented at all.

But how did the NDR get to South Africa in the first place?

For radical reorganisation and racial equality

The Programme of the SACP's predecessor, the CPSA, adopted in 1944 and supplemented in 1947 and 1949, did not mention either the national democratic revolution, or even the national liberation struggle. The party proclaimed its goal as 'the establishment of a Socialist Republic, based on common ownership of the means of production and the rule of the working class and providing equal rights and opportunities for all racial and national groups'. The Programme stated that the reason for the poverty of millions of South Africans was the fact that the 'mines, factories and farms are owned by a small minority which controls the State in their own interests', but it did not so much as mention the race of either the poor or of the minority controlling the mines and farms. The Programme also demanded equal political and economic rights for all groups of the population, although simultaneously it mentioned the need for the 'industrial development of African reserves'. Among its political goals was

the establishment of an independent, democratic Republic in which all adults, regardless of race, colour or sex, shall have the right to vote for and be elected to Parliamentary, Provincial, Municipal and other representative bodies.⁵⁰

Having buried the slogan of the independent native republic, the Comintern instead directed the party towards the every-day problems of workers of all races. National liberation had to be tackled not as a separate issue but within the parameters of workers'

49. *Africa. Encyclopaedia*, 389.

50. *Constitution and Programme. Communist Party of South Africa* (N.p., n.d. [1949]), 26–29.

rights in general. The CPSA followed this line until its dissolution in 1950 – long after the dissolution of the Comintern.

The Manifesto of the ANC Youth League written in the same year as the CPSA programme, 1944, on the contrary, had a lot to say about the colonial invasion of Africa, about land occupation, racial oppression and of the need for Africans to unite on the basis of race for the purpose of ‘racial liberation’. The document spoke of the ANC as ‘the national liberation movement’, although it criticised the organisation for its lack of activity. However, the document did not give any details of what it understood as ‘national’ or ‘racial’ liberation. Neither capitalism, nor socialism were mentioned in it. Moreover, clearly hinting at communists, the authors stated that they rejected ‘foreign leadership of Africa’ and ‘the wholesale importation of foreign ideologies into Africa’, although they had no objection to borrowing useful elements from these ideologies.⁵¹

The radical Programme of Action, adopted by the ANC under the influence of its Youth League in 1949 contained the demand for self-determination and proclaimed ‘national freedom’ as its main principle. ‘By national freedom’, continued the document, ‘we mean freedom from White domination and the attainment of political independence’. However, when the document turned to what ‘freedom’ and other radical demands implied, it became clear that in effect it was the incorporation of Africans into the existing state structure on the basis of full equality, the improvement of their system of education, the creation of institutions for their cultural self-expression, the economic development of the reserves and other African areas, etc.⁵² ‘Liberation’ for the authors meant granting the Africans the same rights as the whites enjoyed, without any major transformation of the socioeconomic or political structure of South African society.

In 1955 the Congress of the People, organised by the ANC and its allies, adopted the Freedom Charter, which later became the over-arching official programme of the ANC and has not lost this status to this day. Political debate and major political cleavages in today’s South Africa develop around different interpretations of the Freedom Charter, not around its validity as a programme of action for a ruling political party.

The Charter was a manifesto for a radical political and socioeconomic transformation of the country by means of the nationalisation and redistribution of the main means of production and of establishing state control over other spheres of the economy. It ran:

The mineral wealth beneath the soil, the Banks and monopoly industry shall be transferred to the ownership of the people as a whole; All other industry and trade shall be controlled to assist the well-being of the people; . . . and all the land re-divided amongst those who work it to banish famine and land hunger; The state shall help the peasants with implements, seed, tractors and dams . . . All shall have the right to occupy land wherever they choose; . . . Unused housing space to be made available to the people; Rent and prices shall be lowered; Free medical service and hospitalisation will be available to all.⁵³

51. *ANC Youth League Manifesto, 1944*, <http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=4439&t=The%20Early%20Years>, accessed 3 February 2012.
52. *Programme of Action: Statement of Policy Adopted at the ANC Annual Conference 17 December 1949*, <http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=4472&t=The%20Early%20Years>, accessed 3 February 2012.
53. *The Freedom Charter. Adopted at the Congress of the People, Kliptown, on 26 June 1955*, www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=72, accessed 3 February 2012.

In effect the Charter demanded full equality for all racial groups – not just political and social equality, but economic equality too, defined and managed by the state. This, of course, could come only *after* the nationalisation of all big property, redistribution of land and the establishment of state control over the rest of industry and trade.

When the organisers of the conference were charged in the Treason Trial, the State built its case on the assertion that the Charter was a communist document and thus breached the Suppression of Communism Act of 1950. The defendants insisted that although the Charter did mention some socialist measures, it did not call for the nationalisation of the whole economy, and thus was not a communist document.⁵⁴ Nelson Mandela, one of the defendants, argued that: ‘Under socialism the workers hold state power. They and the peasants own the means of production, the land, the factories and the mills. All production is for use and not for profit.’ The Charter, he continued,

visualises the transfer of power not to any single social class but to all the people of this country be they workers, peasants, professional men or petty-bourgeoisie. It is true that in demanding the nationalisation of the banks, the gold mines and the land the Charter strikes a fatal blow at the financial and gold-mining monopolies and farming interests that have for centuries plundered the country and condemned its people to servitude. But such a step is absolutely imperative and necessary because the realisation of the Charter is inconceivable, in fact impossible, unless and until these monopolies are first smashed up and the national wealth of the country turned over to the people . . . For the first time in the history of this country the Non-European bourgeoisie will have the opportunity to own in their own name and right mills and factories, and trade and private enterprise will boom and flourish as never before.⁵⁵

It is difficult to imagine that Mandela did not know that workers, peasants, professionals and petty bourgeoisie did not constitute ‘all the people’ of the country (particularly since according to Marxist definitions ‘petty bourgeoisie’ actually means peasants⁵⁶) and even in the USSR there was some small private property. We shall never know whether he wrote the article with all these ideas out of conviction or with conspiratorial purposes. But the court, which doubtless knew much less about socialist theory and practice than Mandela, accepted his logic, and the defendants walked free.

Many later publications both by the ANC and SACP pointed to the fact the programme outlined in the Charter far exceeded the framework not only of ‘bourgeois democracy’, but

54. See, for example, *The New Age*, 17 November 1957.

55. N. Mandela, ‘In our Lifetime’, *Liberation*, 19 June 1956.

56. This point surprised several pre-publication readers of this article. Here is the definition of ‘petit bourgeoisie’ from the Great Soviet Encyclopaedia (Marxist to the core): ‘Petit Bourgeoisie, the class of small urban and rural property owners who live exclusively or mainly by their labour. Under capitalism they occupy an intermediary position between two main classes, the proletariat and the bourgeoisie . . . Irrespective of the material conditions of a petit bourgeois he differs from a proletarian by virtue of having the means of production in his private ownership. However negligible in size this property may be, it constitutes the main source of income of a petit bourgeois. The class position of a petit bourgeois is defined by the fact that in the capitalist market he sells not his labour but his services or the goods that he had produced . . . The rural petit bourgeoisie comprises the overwhelming majority of agricultural producers – small and middle peasants and farmers. The urban petit bourgeoisie is represented by artisans, small traders, etc., owners of small urban enterprises. *Bolshaia Sovetskaia Entsiklopedia [Great Soviet Encyclopaedia]*, 3rd ed., vol. 16 (Moscow: Sovetskaia entsiklopedia, 1974), 47.

also of 'national democracy'. One Sisa Majola (obviously, a pseudonym) wrote in the *African Communist* in 1987:

the Freedom Charter is a programme of people's democracy . . . ⁵⁷ a democratic republic founded on its basis will extend beyond the framework of the classical understanding of 'bourgeois democracy' . . . There are two basic reasons for this. Firstly, it is the working class that will be the leading force in the new state, and will use its strategic position so that the revolution will be to its advantage, rather than that of the bourgeoisie. Already the Freedom Charter expresses this notion when it promises to control all other industries for the benefit of the people. In this way, the Freedom Charter curtails the right of the bourgeoisie to manufacturing and trade in whatever manner they choose, it puts a condition to this right, and that clearly expresses the political will of those who till now have been victims of bourgeois exploitation. Secondly, the successful implementation of the whole democratic programme and the stability of the new republic will depend on the skilful combination of pressure by the armed working class on the government both from above and from below, with the aim of putting further revolutionary transformation into effect. ⁵⁸

A prominent SACP leader, Ben Turok, admitted that he was the author of the economic part of the Charter. ⁵⁹ But even if one believes in the correctness of the apartheid court's verdict that the Charter was, indeed, not a communist document, one would have to believe the *African Communist* too and to recognise the fact that it was not quite a capitalist document either. Mandela may have sincerely imagined that black private enterprise would blossom under the conditions of state ownership of the commanding heights of the economy, state control of the rest of it and the lack of security of private property, but no businessman, black or white, would find such an environment conducive to success.

In fact, the contents of the Charter are closer to the 1944 programme of the CPSA than to any other (earlier or later) document of the ANC. Neither of the two programmes mentioned the national liberation struggle or national liberation; neither spoke of South Africa as a colony or of the ANC as a national-liberation movement, but both declared that full equality of all racial groups could only be achieved on the basis of a radical and revolutionary reconstruction of South African society. The difference was that the CPSA programme envisaged a radical reorganisation that would be socialist in character, and the Charter demanded a radical reorganisation that would lead to the state ownership of a major part of the economy and the state control of the other part – whatever such a reorganisation might be called.

Colonialism of a special type and the South African National Democratic Revolution

The new programme of the SACP – the underground successor of the banned CPSA – appeared in 1962. Both in character and contents this document drastically differed from

57. Within the framework of Soviet theory the term 'people's democracy' referred to the governments that based their policy on 'scientific Marxism'. It was usually applied to the countries of the East European socialist bloc, and sometimes to the governments of the countries of 'socialist orientation of the second generation'.
58. S. Majola, 'The Two Stages of our Revolution', *The African Communist*, 110 (1987), 46.
59. B. Turok, 'Calm Down. The ANC Is Not About to Seize Mines', *The Times*, 18 July 2009. See also: B. Turok, *From the Freedom Charter to Polokwane: The Evolution of ANC Economic Policy* (Johannesburg: Institute for African Alternatives and the Africa Institute, 2008).

all previous programme documents of both the CPSA and the ANC. Already its title was indicative – ‘the Road to South African Freedom’, and the very first sentence declared that South Africa was a colony, although of a ‘special kind’. ‘As its immediate and foremost task’, continued the document, ‘the South African Communist Party works for a united front of national liberation.’⁶⁰

The authors stressed that Africans’ struggle against colonialism and imperialism was the basis of the African national democratic revolution. The document suggested that ‘in most parts of Africa, the needs of the people will best be met at the present time by the formation of the states of the national democracy,⁶¹ as a transitional stage to socialism’. The programme stated that ‘The minimum essentials for the state of national democracy as indicated in the declaration of 81 Marxist Parties in December 1960’, are that it ‘consistently upholds its political and economic independence, fights against imperialism and its military blocs,’ etc. The authors continued to reproduce the definition of the national democratic state as adopted by the 1960 International Meeting of Communist and Workers’ Parties quoted earlier. ‘Such a state’, they concluded, ‘will provide the most favourable condition for advance, along non-capitalist lines, to socialism’.⁶²

South Africa’s place in the African revolution was specific, because its colonialism was also special. The notion of ‘colonialism of a special type’ appeared in this programme for the first time. In such a state, the programme ran, ‘the oppressing White nation occupied the same territory as the oppressed people themselves and lived side by side with them’.⁶³ However, the struggle against this special colonialism, was to be the same: the national democratic revolution that will end the white rule and establish the national democratic state. ‘The main content of this Revolution’, the programme stated,

will be the national liberation of the African people ... The revolution will restore the land and the wealth of the country to the people, and guarantee democracy, freedom and equality of rights, and opportunities to all ... The destruction of colonialism and the winning of national freedom is the essential condition and the key for future advance to the supreme aim of the Communist Party: the establishment of a socialist South Africa, laying the foundations of a classless, communist society.⁶⁴

The authors of the document thought that only ‘the class of African workers alone’ which ‘constitutes the core of the African National Congress and the Communist Party is capable, in alliance with the masses of rural people, of leading a victorious struggle to end White domination and exploitation’.⁶⁵

The programme declared that ‘the Communist Party considers that the slogan of ‘non-violence’ is harmful to the cause of the democratic national revolution’ and that ‘patriots and democrats will take up arms to defend themselves, organise guerrilla armies and

60. ‘The Road to South African Freedom. Programme of the South African Communist Party’, *The African Communist*, 2, 2 (1963), 24.

61. ‘States of national democracy’ should have been ‘national democratic states’ (a Russoism in the original).

62. ‘The Road to South African Freedom’, 37–38.

63. *Ibid.*, 43.

64. *Ibid.*, 24, 26–27.

65. *Ibid.*, 52, 62.

undertake various acts of armed resistance, culminating in a mass insurrection against White domination'. 'Individual' terror, however, was denounced.⁶⁶

The document stated that the ANC was a national-liberation organisation and that, together with the SACP, it was part of the national-liberation alliance. It also pledged the party's 'unqualified support for the Freedom Charter' which it considered to be 'suitable as a general statement of the aims of a state of national democracy'. The Charter, the document ran, 'is not a programme for socialism', but it

necessarily and realistically calls for profound economic changes . . . which will answer the pressing and immediate needs of the people and lay the indispensable basis for the advance of our country along non-capitalist lines to a communist and socialist future.⁶⁷

Many statements in this programme were either quotations from, or a verbatim rendition of, the documents of the 1960 Meeting of Communist and Workers' Parties. Some repeat well-known Soviet approaches to various political phenomena, for example, to the armed struggle. The only exception was the idea of 'colonialism of a special type'.

The origins of this thesis are not entirely clear. The South African historian David Everatt traced this idea to the debates within the South African left in the early 1950s and attributed its emergence to the leading communists, Michael Harmel, Rusty Bernstein and Jack Simons.⁶⁸ But Jack Simons himself traced it back to the slogan of the independent native republic. In his correspondence with another communist, John Pule Motshabi, the connection between these two notions was taken for granted.⁶⁹ Eddy Maloka, the only South African historian to work with the SACP's London archives before they disappeared, also connected the idea of 'colonialism of a special kind' directly with the 'native republic'. He wrote, however, that this idea was not simply an elaboration of the Comintern resolution, but also 'a response to the relationship that the Party, especially in the Transvaal, had developed with the nationalist movement during the course of the struggles of the 1940s and 1950s'. Maloka also mentioned Harmel and Rusty Bernstein as the most prominent protagonists of this theory.⁷⁰

But the idea of colonialism of a special kind could have more than one origin. In his sensational book, *The Black Man's Burden*, published in 1944, Leopold Marquard, South Africa's prominent liberal and president of the Council of the South African Institute of Race Relations, described 'white' South Africa as a colonial power, and South Africa's African reserves as colonies.⁷¹ This idea may well have contributed to the Communist thinking.

The Report of the CPSA's Central Committee to the last legal national conference of the Party in January 1950 also stated that 'the distinguishing feature of South Africa is that it combines the characteristics of both an imperialist state and a colony within a single,

66. *Ibid.*, 63.

67. *Ibid.*, 62, 64.

68. D. Everatt, 'Alliance Politics of a Special Type: The Roots of the ANC/SACP Alliance, 1950–1954', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 18, 1 (March 1991), 19–39.

69. UCT Archives and Manuscripts Department. The Simons Collection. BC 1081/5.1

70. E. Maloka. *The South African Communist Party. 1963-1990* (Pretoria: Africa Institute of South Africa. Research Paper No. 65, 2002), 3.

71. J. Burger (L. Marquard), *The Black Man's Burden* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1944), 250–252.

indivisible, geographical, political and economic entity'. But the conclusion from this point was different: as 'in South Africa, the Non-European population, while reduced to the status of a colonial people, has no territory of its own, no independent existence, but is almost wholly integrated in the political and economic institutions of the ruling class', its liberation could be achieved only through socialist revolution – not the national one. And the authors of the Report never used the term 'colonialism of a special type'.⁷²

It was only in the 1962 programme of the SACP that the thesis of colonialism of a special type was formulated in its entirety and connected to the NDR, thus presuming the revolutionary overthrow of the coloniser. The seemingly insignificant modification of the thesis was to have profound consequences. Linking the notion of South Africa being a colony of a special type with the national democratic revolution was of crucial importance. Before this link was established South Africa was perceived as a 'common society'; after this the struggle was not for equality within such a common society – whether socialist or capitalist; it was not for getting rid of the colour bar, but for vanquishing one part of that society, the 'colonisers' who were defined by their skin colour only.

The introduction of the thesis of the 'colonialism of a special type' and the adoption of the Charter as the programme for the national democratic revolution connected the SACP and the ANC into a simple scheme: the ANC, as a national liberation movement, implements the national-democratic revolution, and the SACP supports and directs it from the vantage position of the 'vanguard' of the working class. It does so by the power of its ideology and by virtue of its members playing the leading role in the NDR, i.e. occupying the leading positions in the liberation movement. After the ideals of the NDR, as formulated in the Charter, are implemented, the SACP builds socialism. Ever since then the notion of the NDR has remained indissolubly connected with the socialist perspective in the minds not only of the SACP and many ANC members but of even broader circles on the left.

In practical terms this thesis meant that the UN Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples could in principle be applied to South Africa. In March 1966 in his letter to U Thant, the UN secretary-general, the Soviet permanent representative to the UN, Nikolai Fedorenko, wrote that

the Soviet Union supports the use of the most determined measures, including force, against the South African government in order to compel it to apply the principles of the UN Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples to South-West Africa.⁷³

If South Africa was not only a colonial power but also a colony, the Declaration could be applied not just to South-West Africa, but to South Africa itself too.

The theory's road to South Africa

South African communists and the CPSU did not have direct relations with one another after the late 1930s, when the Comintern's commission of enquiry into the affairs of the

72. *South African Communists Speak. Documents from the History of the South African Communist Party. 1915–1980* (London: Inkululeko, 1981), 201, *et al.*

73. *The Soviet News*, 25 March 1966.

CPSA decreed that the small and troublesome South African party should be supervised by the larger and more experienced Communist Party of Great Britain. The closure, in 1956, of the Soviet consulates in South Africa opened during the Second World War, cut whatever unofficial or covert ties there had been. Several South African communists visited the Soviet Union after the war, but they were invited by various cultural organisations and seem to have had no official meetings with CPSU representatives.

The situation started to change only in 1960. The first official delegation of the underground SACP – its chairman, Yusuf Dadoo, and its representative in Europe, Vella Pillay – visited the USSR in July 1960. They presented a report on the South African situation to their hosts, appealed for financial assistance and received it.⁷⁴ The second delegation came later in the same year. It participated both in the celebrations of the Anniversary of the October 1917 Revolution and took part in the International Meeting of Communist and Workers' Parties. This time Dadoo and Pillay were accompanied by Michael Harmel and Joe Matthews, members of the SACP's Central Committee, who, unlike Dadoo and Pillay, came straight from South Africa. From the point of view of theoretical discussions, this was certainly a very important visit. The group first travelled to China, spent a long time in the USSR and was received by N.A. Mukhiddinov, secretary and Presidium member of the CPSU's Central Committee. V.G. Shubin, author of the most authoritative study of the ties between the SACP and CPSU in the 1960s–1980s, mentions a few problems that the delegation discussed in Moscow: the trade boycott of South Africa by the USSR, the opening of Radio Moscow broadcasting to South Africa, the purchase and distribution of the *African Communist* in the USSR, etc.⁷⁵ However, Joe Matthews later recalled 'putting forward the policy of armed struggle' and discussing it with representatives of other communist parties.⁷⁶

According to Matthews, he and Harmel spent 'several months' in the USSR. They visited Kiev and Leningrad, but spent most of the time in Moscow, mostly at what had been Stalin's 'nearby dacha',⁷⁷ where from the late 1950s on the CPSU received representatives of 'fraternal parties', particularly those that were illegal in their own countries. Matthews recalled that the South Africans met representatives of several other parties at the dacha, and that they all talked all the time about the theory, practice and forms of struggle. He also remembered that sometimes officials of the CPSU's Central Committee and representatives of the Soviet military were present at such discussions. At their hosts' request the South Africans wrote memoranda on the situation in their country, historical essays and memoirs.⁷⁸

Theoretical issues were also discussed during the visit to Moscow of Dadoo and Moses Kotane, the party's general secretary, in late 1961. They came to participate in the CPSU's 22nd Congress, and on 18 November met B.N. Ponomarev, a secretary of the Central Committee and head of its International Department. According to Shubin, the three most

74. V. Shubin, *ANC. A View from Moscow* (Cape Town: Mayibuye Books–UWC, 1999), 34–37.

75. *Ibid.*, 37–40.

76. B. Magubane, P. Bonner, J. Sithole, P. Delius, J. Cherry, P. Gibbs and T. April. 'The Turn to Armed Struggle', in *The Road to Democracy in South Africa. Vol. 1 (1960–1970)* (Cape Town: South African Democracy Education Trust, 2004), 81.

77. Stalin's country house in Volynskoe close to Moscow.

78. B. Magubane, *et al.*, 'The Turn', 81; I. Filatova, Interview with Joe Matthews, Cape Town, 4 November 2004.

important problems discussed at this meeting were: how open the activity of the SACP should be; the correlation between different forms of struggle; and what – which kind of state – should be the goal of the struggle at the time. Ponomarev thought that people of South Africa should know about the existence of the Party, but that it would be possible to turn it into a mass organisation only at the next stage of the struggle – for socialism. The goal of the first stage, the national democratic revolution, was to be the creation of a ‘national democratic state’ – according to the scenario offered by the 1960 International Meeting of Communist and Workers’ Parties. As for the armed struggle, Ponomarev reported this question to the CPSU’s leadership. He wrote that the representatives of the SACP asked the opinion of the CPSU Central Committee on whether this course was correct and, if so, requested assistance with the training of ‘several military instructors’. The answer to both questions was positive.⁷⁹

According to Shubin, before the project of the 1962 programme was adopted South African communists discussed it with the CPSU’s Central Committee.⁸⁰ The archives, on which Shubin’s information was based, were later closed, so for the time being there is no possibility to verifying this. It is obvious, however, that the main ideas of the programme could only emerge within the context of the Soviet NDR theory.⁸¹ It is also obvious that the programme emerged after the renewal of direct contact between the CPSU and the SACP in 1960–1961 and after the SACP’s delegation participated in the 1960 Moscow Meeting of Communist and Workers’ Parties and in the protracted discussions with other participating communists and representatives of the CPSU.

This does not mean that any of these ideas were imposed on the SACP. Without exception, all memoirs or books published by the ANC and SACP leaders in the last two decades stress that the Soviet Communist Party never dictated a particular political line to the ANC or to the SACP. This was, obviously, true, at least in the 1960s to 1980s (the situation was different during the Comintern era). There was no need to dictate: the CPSU, the SACP and the ANC were all led by like-minded people, and their vision of the world and of their course in it were extremely close. South African and Soviet communists saw themselves as colleagues and comrades, fighting for a common cause. Harold Strachan, a veteran of Umkhonto we Sizwe, the ANC’s military wing, said, correctly: ‘Your [Soviet] leadership and ours had the same ideas. They were the same bunch of people’.⁸²

South African communists were not told what to think. They made their own choices and drew their own conclusions. Moreover, they themselves contributed to the creation of the NDR theory. After the 1960 Meeting of the Communist and Workers’ Parties the South African delegation proudly reported to its party that it ‘played a not unimportant part . . . It addressed the plenary session twice, first on general questions . . . and the second time on the special question of factional activities, basing itself on our own experiences’.⁸³ In *Marxism Today* Joe Slovo discussed – critically – the particulars of the notion of non-capitalist development and the criteria for defining a country (in this case, Ghana) as a

79. Shubin, *ANC. A View*, 40–43.

80. Conversation with V.G. Shubin, Cape Town, 6 September 2008.

81. *The African Communist* called colonialism of a special type ‘a revolutionary theory rooted in Marxism-Leninism’: *The African Communist*, 113 (1988), 60.

82. I. Filatova, Interview with Harold Strachan, Durban, 23 December 1998.

83. Shubin, *ANC. A View*, 39.

national democratic state.⁸⁴ He was later quoted by Soviet academics as an expert,⁸⁵ but, according to Shubin, his critique was at first badly received by powerful promoters of the theory of ‘socialist orientation’ in Moscow.⁸⁶

But, of course, the relationship of the SACP and the ANC with the CPSU was not that of equal partners. The scope for debate was limited and strictly defined, and while Soviet assistance was a lifeline for the SACP and the ANC, South Africa was not in any way a priority for Soviet policymakers. Besides that for those, who saw the socialist system as their ideal, Soviet authority in all questions of theory and practice, strategy and tactics, international relations and everything else, was enormous. And the historical experience of the Soviet Party and the scale of Soviet support for national liberation movements certainly increased the weight of its theoretical arguments.

The 1962 SACP programme became the foundation of all theoretical constructions which guided the SACP and to a very large extent the ANC during nearly three decades of struggle against apartheid, and which guide these organisations even today. The next SACP programme, adopted 27 years later, noted that

the 1962 programme has made an indelible contribution to the scientific analysis of the situation in South Africa, and to practical revolutionary work for national liberation. It has proved to be a major guiding light over more than a quarter of a century of struggle, inspiring the work of party and non-party militants alike.⁸⁷

The meaning of this document did not escape the South African government. In February 1964 South Africa’s Foreign Affairs Department received a summary of the programme from the country’s ambassador in Washington, to whom it had been leaked by the CIA. The summary was sent as a ‘secret’ document, although by then it had, of course, been published by the SACP itself. The Department recommended that selected parts of this summary be published, stressing in particular the document’s arguments in favour of the creation of ‘people’s armed forces’ and its proclaimed goal of ‘the formation of national democracy as a transitional stage’ to socialism.⁸⁸

The NDR and the ANC

In June 1969 the next International Meeting of Communist and Workers’ Parties took place in Moscow. It affirmed and strengthened the main points of the Soviet theory. The SACP was represented by Dadoo, Harmel, J.B. Marks (the party’s chairman) and

84. J. Slovo, ‘A Critique of the Non-capitalist Path and the National Democratic State in Africa’, *Marxism Today*, 18, 6 (June 1974), 178–186.

85. See, for example, *Razvivaiushchiiesia strany v sovremnom mire. Puti revoliutsionnogo protsessa [Developing Countries in the Contemporary World. The Ways of the Revolutionary Process]* (Moscow: Nauka, 1986), 142, 148.

86. Conversation with V.G. Shubin, Cape Town, 6 September 2008. See also V.G. Shubin, *Afrikanskij natsionalnyj kongress v gody podpolia i vooruzhennoj borby [The African National Congress during the Years of Underground and the Armed Struggle]* (Moscow: Africa Institute, 1999), 301.

87. ‘The Path to Power. Programme of the South African Communist Party adopted at the 7th Congress, 1989’, *The African Communist*, 118 (1989), 73–74.

88. Department of Foreign Affairs Archives, 123/1, vol. 10.

‘J. Jabulani’, that is, the party’s rising star, Thabo Mbeki.⁸⁹ After the Meeting its materials were published in full in a special supplement to the *African Communist*,⁹⁰ but the draft documents were circulated among the leadership of participating parties many months before then and discussed and commented on.⁹¹ So the contents of these documents were known to at least some members of the ANC leadership by the time when the South African version of the NDR theory had been adopted by the ANC at its conference in Morogoro, in Tanzania.

The conference – the first one in exile – was held, in April–May 1969. It passed a resolution, in fact, a programme, *Strategy and Tactics of the ANC*. The document opened with the following words:

The struggle of the oppressed people of South Africa is taking place within an international context of transition to the Socialist system, of the breakdown of the colonial system as a result of national liberation and socialist revolutions, and the fight for social and economic progress by the people of the whole world. We in South Africa are part of the zone⁹² in which national liberation is the chief content of the struggle.⁹³

The influence of the SACP’s thinking and documents on this first *Strategy and Tactics* was there for everyone to see. ‘South Africa’s social and economic structure and the relationships which it generates’, the document went on,

are perhaps unique. It is not a colony, yet it has, in regard to the overwhelming majority of its people, most of the features of the classical colonial structures. Conquest and domination by an alien people, a system of discrimination and exploitation based on race, technique of indirect rule; these and more are the traditional trappings of the classical colonial framework . . . What makes the structure unique and adds to its complexity is that the exploiting nation is not, as in the classical imperialist relationships, situated in a geographically distinct mother country, but is settled within the borders.

The Morogoro resolution stated that ‘the main content of the present stage of the South African revolution is the national liberation of the largest and most oppressed group – the African people’, but that this national struggle was

happening in a new kind of world – a world which is no longer monopolised by the imperialist world system; a world in which the existence of the powerful socialist system and a significant sector of newly liberated areas has altered the balance of forces; a world in which the horizons liberated from foreign oppression extend beyond mere formal political control and encompass the element which makes such control meaningful – economic emancipation.

89. M. Gevisser. *Thabo Mbeki. The Dream Deferred* (Johannesburg & Cape Town: Jonathan Ball, 2007), 277.

90. ‘Materials from the International Communist Meeting. Moscow, June 5–17, 1969’, *The African Communist*, (38) 1969, Special Supplement.

91. Mayibuye Centre, Yusuf Dadoo Collection, 2.3.6.

92. This odd expression, ‘the zone of national liberation’, was used in the English edition of Brutents’s book. See, for example, Brutents, *National Liberation*, 146.

93. ‘Strategy and Tactics of the ANC, adopted by the Morogoro Conference of the ANC, Tanzania, 25 April – 1 May 1969’, <http://www.marxists.org/subject/africa/anc/1969/strategy-tactics.htm>, accessed 3 February 2012. The long quotations in the next few paragraphs are also taken from this document, as indicated in the text.

‘In the last resort’, concluded the resolution,

it is only the success of the national democratic revolution which – destroying the existing social and economic relationship – will bring with it a correction of the historical injustices perpetrated against the indigenous majority and thus lay the basis for a new – and deeper internationalist – approach.

The document further states:

It is ... a fundamental feature of our strategy that victory must embrace more than formal political democracy ... This perspective of a speedy progression from formal liberation to genuine and lasting emancipation is made more real by the existence in our country of a large and growing working class whose class consciousness complements national consciousness.

Those who are familiar with Marxist terminology know that ‘economic emancipation’ or ‘genuine and lasting emancipation’ can never be achieved under capitalism. And this is exactly how the ANC cadres, even those who were not communists, saw it. Tambo openly came out in favour of socialism in his address to the 24th CPSU’s congress in 1971, when he said that the ANC was leading the masses towards revolution for the overthrow of the fascist regime, the seizure of power and the building of a ‘socialist society’.⁹⁴ In his article in *World Marxist Review* Tambo wrote:

It is important that the world opinion should understand the true nature of the people’s movement in our country. Some people are still inclined to think that the struggle of the black population is a struggle for civil rights. But this obscures the national liberation character of our movement. Perhaps this is partly due to the over-emphasis at certain times on the struggle against apartheid, instead of the struggle against the entire system of national and class oppression ...⁹⁵

According to Shubin, ‘on several other occasions’ Tambo

made his Moscow interlocutors understand that his intentions went beyond the eradication of apartheid. During his last visit to the Kremlin in March 1989 Tambo spoke about the struggle for a national democratic revolution, the goal of which was political power, non-racialism and an end to exploitation.

‘There are long-term goals as well’, he said, but added: ‘we are not pushing them’.⁹⁶ If this was the message of the non-communist leader of the ANC, it is not difficult to imagine the perceptions of the rank and file in the organisation. In fact, one does not need to imagine. This is what, in 1976, Tokyo Sexwale, at that time an Umkhonto operative, was telling three SASO-inclined youths, whom he was teaching the basics of armed struggle, as well as the ANC’s ideology:

I told them that the ANC works hand in hand with the South African Communist Party, and that some members of the ANC are also members of the SAC Party. [And] that the ANC and the SAC

94. 24 s’ezd KPSS (*SPCU’s 24th Congress*). *Bulletin no 10* (Moscow: Pravda, 1971), 54.

95. *World Marxist Review*, December 1975.

96. Shubin, *ANC. A View*, 361–362.

Party are ideological allies, since they both believe in the nationalisation of the means of production.⁹⁷

The Morogoro resolution asserted that the armed struggle was ‘the only method left open to us’ and that the goal of this struggle ‘in the first phase’ was ‘the complete political and economic emancipation of all our people and the constitution of a society which accords with the basic provisions of our programme – the Freedom Charter’.⁹⁸

Essentially the Morogoro resolution was a re-wording of the main elements of the 1962 SACP programme: the national democratic revolution with the goal of achieving more than just a ‘formal’ political independence; the two-stage revolution; economic emancipation as a result of a radical restructuring of the socioeconomic system and the redistribution of the country’s wealth; racial equality promised after this has been achieved; the Freedom Charter as the programme of the national democratic revolution; and the black proletariat as its leading force.

There were some differences between the two programmes. It seems that the Morogoro resolution offered racial equality only to a portion of the white proletariat, while the *Road to Freedom* envisaged that a slightly broader spectrum of white society could benefit from it. And since it was a programme for the first, national democratic stage of the revolution, the Morogoro document never mentions socialism or communism as such as its ultimate or direct goal – which the SACP programme does. However, interestingly enough, the Morogoro resolution insisted on ‘economic emancipation’ already during the first stage, which *The Road to Freedom* did not. The reason for this could be that by 1969 the theoreticians of South Africa’s NDR had come to the conclusion that, in the concrete conditions of their country, this transitional stage could only be very short or, indeed, non-existent, and that South Africa would move to the second stage almost right away. This belief was widely discussed in left academic circles, close to the ANC, and it found its way into the Soviet *Africa. Encyclopaedia*, quoted earlier.

The next programme of the SACP was adopted 27 years later, in 1989, but neither the essence, nor the wording of the theory changed. It offered a more nuanced characterisation of some of its aspects, particularly of the class content of colonialism of a special type, and introduced a section on the crisis of this sort of colonialism. It confidently spoke of the ‘seizure of power’ – this at a time when some of the party’s top leaders were already deeply involved in ‘negotiations about negotiations’ with various representatives of the Nationalist government. It also discussed in detail the moves that the party and the working class as a whole would have to undertake in order to achieve the transition to socialism after the seizure of power.⁹⁹

The NDR theory with ‘colonialism of a special type’ was transplanted virtually whole into the ANC’s Morogoro programme and then repeated without change in the new SACP programme. It ran through every aspect of ANC thinking. This is, for example, how, in the shortest possible form, it was incorporated in the Umkhonto confidential training pamphlet which circulated illegally (it was not supposed to be written) in various versions

97. T.M. Sexwale, ‘Legal Deposition Made to South African Police. December 1976’, Rhodes House Library, Oxford, Research Papers of Howard Barrell. MSS Afr. s. 2151, A 14.

98. ‘Strategy and Tactics of the ANC, adopted by the Morogoro’.

99. ‘The Path to Power’.

since the late 1970s, and was finally standardised by several ANC military leaders in the late 1980s. The definition of the NDR was the very first, opening paragraph of the document. It ran:

- The National Democratic Revolution unites all classes among the oppressed – all the progressive, patriotic forces – behind the pursuit of democracy and self-determination.
- National democracy in South Africa will mean: a united S.A. which is run – politically, economically & socially – by the will of the majority, exercised on the basis of one person, one vote – i.e. – power will be in the hands of the masses.
- The back of White Monopoly Capitalism will be broken.
- The redistribution of wealth, of land and other means of production – which will dramatically improve the living and working standards of the oppressed.
- The implementation of the Freedom Charter with its programme of profound agrarian transformation & socialisation of those sectors of the economy in the grip of Monopoly Capitalism – i.e. – the destruction of the Colonial State.¹⁰⁰

In this shortened and crystallised form the NDR remained entrenched in the mass consciousness of the ANC and survived intact all the way into the new democratic South Africa.

‘... But his soul goes marching on’

The negotiated settlement of 1990–1994 meant that there has been no seizure of power, that nationalisation had to be forfeited at least for some time, and that the socialist perspective had to be postponed. The collapse of the Soviet Union and of the socialist order in Eastern Europe and Russia have certainly contributed to these developments. But was this a complete change of heart?

Some in South Africa believe that it was. with the Cold War’s end liberation movements in that region dropped their socialist rhetoric of the Soviet kind and adopted the principles of mixed economy and liberal democracy.

It is difficult to agree with this. The NDR has certainly not gone away. It remains the official policy of the ANC, it survives in the perceptions and expectations of its rank and file and it continues to shape and define South Africa’s public debate. What is debated is the pace and ways of implementing it, the interpretation, not the principles and the expected results – these, for the ANC and its allies, remain indisputable truths.

The 1997 ANC National Conference, which elected Thabo Mbeki to the presidency of the party, adopted a new *Strategy and Tactics of the ANC*. Once again the document referred to the ANC as a national liberation movement and affirmed the need for it to continue the national democratic revolution – this after more than three years of the party being in power. It stated, that

100. [R. Kasrils, W. Anderson and Others], ‘MCW (ANC confidential training leaflet). Circa 1988–89, Lusaka’, Rhodes House Library, Oxford. Research Papers of Howard Barrell. MSS Afr. s. 2151, A 21.

the symbiotic link between capitalism and national oppression in our country, and the stupendous concentration of wealth in the hands of a few monopolies ... render trite the vainglorious declaration that national oppression and its social consequences can be resolved by formal democracy underpinned by market forces ...¹⁰¹

However, this document mentioned neither the Freedom Charter nor nationalisation, nor state control. Not only the African middle class, but even the black bourgeoisie appeared among the 'forces of transformation'. Moreover, the authors declared the development of the African bourgeoisie as one of the tasks of the national-democratic revolution. The explanation given was that this would help to separate the notions of race and class.¹⁰²

So there was no nationalisation for the time being – but the government went on with other forms of redistribution. Such understandable measures as the Africanisation of the public sector, black economic empowerment in the private sector and social grants for the poorest sections of the population were just the beginning of this process. Mbeki's leadership saw the centralisation of the presidency's grip on power, the tightening of government control over all spheres of the economy and the greatly increased regulation of the private sector. In fact, the new mining legislation was challenged in court, for it was perceived that it undermined property rights entrenched in South Africa's constitution. And the drive for the privatisation of the parastatals, started by Mandela's government of national unity, soon ran out of steam: indeed, it was obvious from the start that this idea was not popular among the ANC leadership and particularly among the ANC's allies – the SACP and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). Control by encroachment, not by seizure, seemed to be the core of Mbeki's policy, and the purpose of this control lay in the government's power and ability to redistribute as it saw fit. But socialism was no longer on the agenda in the foreseeable future – at least not socialism of the Soviet type.

The new version of the *Strategy and Tactics*, adopted by the ANC in 2007, stated this openly. The aim of the NDR was now a 'national democratic society', which was to be 'social democratic' in nature. The 'revolution' – an ongoing process – was this time to have not just the black bourgeoisie, but also some sections of the white population among its 'motive forces'. The contents of the revolution also changed. 'The liberation of Africans in particular and Blacks in general from political and socio-economic bondage' remained its main goal, but the document for the first time mentioned 'uplifting the quality of life of all South Africans' – although 'especially the poor, the majority of whom are African and female'.

'Colonialism of a special type' was mentioned only in the past, as was 'the apartheid capitalist system'. The need for redistribution, however, remained. The document still insisted that 'such was the symbiosis between political oppression and the apartheid capitalist system that, if decisive action is not taken to deal with economic subjugation and exclusion, the essence of apartheid will remain'. And in this line it was this document that mentioned 'nationalisation of land' as official policy for the first time. However, 'The

101. 'Strategy and Tactics As amended at the 50th National Conference, December 1997', <http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=2424>, accessed 3 February 2012.

102. *Ibid.*

relationship between the national democratic state and private capital in general' was defined as 'one of 'unity and struggle', co-operation and contestation' – a far cry from the NDR as it was seen in the past. Moreover, the document pledged as one of the goals of the ANC the encouragement of a common 'national identity' and the use of the state 'as an instrument of social cohesion'.¹⁰³ It would seem that at least in theory the ANC was returning to the notion of South Africa as a common society, although in practice its policy remained deeply racially divisive. But one thing was certain: the 2007 *Strategy and Tactics* was the death knell for the NDR of the kind that was conceived in the USSR at the height of its power and influence.

However, that socialist-orientated NDR was not allowed to die. The ANC documents, adopted by its conferences during the decade of 1997–2007 were mainly associated with the section of its leadership close to Thabo Mbeki, its president at the time, and in 1999–2008, the president of the country. Many in the SACP and COSATU sharply criticised these documents because, the critics said, not only was the pace of reforms too slow, but the country was generally heading in the wrong direction. Their rallying cry was the return of the ANC to the ideals of the Freedom Charter and 'the spirit of Morogoro'. According to Blade Nzimande, the SACP's Secretary General, at its November 2006 Augmented meeting the party's Central Committee came to the conclusion that 'the NDR requires some serious socialist type measures . . . with a state that decisively intervenes in the economy and seeks to re-direct the massive resources in the hands of the capitalist class towards significant developmental projects'.¹⁰⁴ At its 9th Congress in September 2006 COSATU was even more outspoken. Its political resolution defined 'the political economy of the NDR in the current epoch as articulated in the Freedom Charter' and adopted 'an official position that rejects the separation of the NDR from socialism and asserts that the dictatorship of the proletariat is the only guarantee that there will be a transition from NDR to socialism'.¹⁰⁵

The left's attack on the 2007 *Strategy and Tactics* was particularly vehement. The leaders of both the SACP and COSATU denounced it in the media, and a popular SACP *Communist University* site called it 'fascist' and entitled an article about it 'No Passaran'.¹⁰⁶ In the end the document was passed by the 2007 ANC's National Conference in Polokwane, but Mbeki and his followers – the document's authors and main movers – suffered a severe defeat at the hands of the team headed by his deputy, Jacob Zuma. This could not have been achieved without the support, rendered to him by the left, who were hoping that Zuma would correct Mbeki's 'deviations'.

It is impossible to say why Mbeki, a former communist and, for many years, a member of the SACP's Central Committee, chose a course which seemed to lead the country away

103. 'Strategy and Tactics of the ANC. Building A National Democratic Society. As adopted by the 52nd National Conference of the African National Congress, 16–20 December 2007, Polokwane, Limpopo', <http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=2535>, accessed 3 February 2012.

104. B. Nzimande, 'The Motive Forces of the National Democratic Revolution', *Umsebenzi Online*, 6, 4 (7 March 2007). The wording of the declaration of the CC meeting is more cogent than that of Nzimande's report about it. See: SACP, *Statement of the Augmented Central Committee*. South African Communist Party, Media Release, 26 November 2006.

105. *Resolutions of the 9th COSATU National Congress*, 1.4 The National Democratic Revolution (NDR) and Socialism. N.d. [September 2006]. Besides other things, the resolution was an open recognition of the fact that the Charter *was* a socialist document, at least in the eyes of trade unionists.

106. DomzaNet, Communist-University@googlegro.com, accessed 6 April 2007.

from the prospect of socialism. Perhaps he had a change of heart, as happened to many of his Soviet colleagues. It may also have been that Mbeki – in the late 1960s a star student of Moscow’s Lenin School – understood better than the SACP’s present leadership, that without massive infusions of Soviet aid the socialist-orientated NDR could only be achieved through major economic and social upheavals. He certainly knew that the Soviet theoreticians of the NDR had unanimously and continuously stressed that the existence of the USSR was the main pre-condition and basis of building socialism through the NDR. And Mbeki’s reading of the NDR in general and in the new global situation in particular may have been different from that of the SACP leaders: he may have believed that the NDR should first create a ‘normal’ racially mixed capitalist society, where race would not coincide with class, and later, when the conditions were ripe, move to a socialist transition. There is, after all, no doubt, that both nationally and internationally Mbeki followed an ‘anti-imperialist’ line, aligning his government with anti-Western forces, wherever and in whichever way possible.

After the 2009 national elections Zuma became the president of the country and rewarded the SACP and COSATU leadership with cabinet positions and the creation of a Planning Commission, whose main task was to redefine the country’s economic policy. A new land bill began to make its way slowly through the legislature. But four years after the left’s epochal victory at Polokwane, there was no real sign of dramatic change – and certainly not of a new, socialist NDR. Zuma had stressed that he just wanted business as usual – and thus it was.

It was at this stage that Julius Malema, the firebrand head of the ANC Youth League, which in 2007 was Zuma’s most ardent supporter, demanded that the government nationalise the mines, banks and land. Malema constantly referred to the Freedom Charter, reminding the mother body that nationalisation was the underlying principle of this main policy document of the organisation. Malema ‘stole’ the drive for nationalisation from the SACP and COSATU, accusing them of unwillingness and an inability to act, and even suggested that the Youth League would from now on lead the struggles of the working class. This greatly upset the SACP and COSATU, and even the ANC leadership under Zuma and provoked indignation among those who had traditionally considered the demand for nationalisation and socialism as their political domain.

Malema was expelled from the ANC for indiscipline. But the slogan of nationalisation could not but seem appealing to the impoverished, unemployed and unemployable, mostly young population of South Africa. Malema may have been defeated but he has put the socialist-orientated NDR back on the South African political agenda, and the ANC leadership had to react.

Thus the conflict between the two visions of the NDR is still playing itself out on South African soil. The Soviet theoretical legacy is not going away.