

Stephen Ellis, *External mission. The ANC in exile*. Jeppestown: Jonathan Ball Publishers: 2012. ISBN 978-1-86842-530-3. xii, 384 pages.

The above book by Stephen Ellis was praised by publishers as “meticulously researched”. Indeed, if to compare it with his (and his co-author, so called Tsepo Sechaba) previous book on this theme, *Comrades against apartheid*, that hardly contained any references, it is well documented. Unfortunately, it does not save it from being biased.

That bias (or at least inaccuracy) is seen from the very beginning – from the front page, a picture of Mao Tsetung with Yusuf Dadoo and Vella Pillayi in Beijing in November 1960, just below the words “The ANC in exile”. But the matter is that neither Dadoo nor Pillayi were ANC members at that time. Dadoo officially joined it only nine years later, when the ANC Morogoro Conference opened membership to non-Africans outside South Africa, and Pillayi apparently even much later.

This “inaccuracy” is a product of the “predetermination” of the research conclusions. The book gives the impression that the author does his best to prove what he decided from the very beginning, before he had studied the materials.

The structure of the book looks by and large logical. Its eight chapters are based on a chronological principle, followed by “Appendix: A note on method”. However, this very appendix deserves to be considered first, because it shows the flawed nature of Ellis’s research.

It looks like the author himself is aware of the biased nature of his writing. He admits that “the book contains a good deal of information about the history of factionalism in the ANC” and tries to explain why he did not choose “a more uplifting subject”.¹ However, only those who did not study the history of other liberation movements in Southern Africa can emphasise this issue. As distinct from the ANC. There were real splits there involving the second or even first persons in leadership: Uria Simango in FRELIMO, Ndabaningi Sithole in ZANU, James Chikerema in ZAPU, Mishake Mujongo in SWAPO and Daniel Chipenda in MPLA. Meanwhile during three decades of the *External mission*, nothing of this sort happened in the ANC. The only serious factionalist group in the early and mid-1970, that became known as a “Gang of eight”, included just two or three former members of the National Executive.

Fortunately for Ellis, he had many opportunities to properly study the issue; in particular, he was lucky to be invited as a researcher for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and to be granted a visiting fellowship to do archival research in South Africa. However, his choice of sources is rather specific. Too often the author refers to “Confidential source”, without even hinting on the nature of such a “source”, while information provided is at least dubious and the issues are very sensitive.

1 Stephen Ellis, *External mission. The ANC in exile*. (Jeppestown: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2012), p. 305.

For example, such “reference” is given to his claim that “smuggling convoys were escorted by regular MK troops”.²

As to the witness-participants, he often refers to the words of the persons who deserted from the liberation movement or felt “offended” by the leadership. More than once it is Paul Trehwela, whose level of knowledge and integrity is well seen by his phrase about ANC fighters’ participation in the struggle for liberation in Zimbabwe:

“Umkhonto we Sizwe functioned as an extension in Africa of the KGB ... According to the ex-detainees, the KGB-apparatus in the ANC even sent its troops to Rhodesia in 1979 to fight against the guerrillas of the Zimbabwe African National Union, ZANU, which was not a Soviet client.”³

Ellis also regularly quotes late Mwezi Twala, the person, who, after deserting the ANC camp in Tanzania, reported himself to the South African (old regime) Embassy in Malawi and then found his way to the ANC’s foes in the Inkatha Freedom Party and finally to the Democratic Alliance. Even more questionable are Ellis’s references to the paper authored by the “Gang of eight”.

Quite a different person is of course a prominent ANC member, John Pule Motshabi, but Ellis quotes his writings in the late period of his life when he became an embittered man, having been dropped from the SACP Central Committee and not elected to the ANC Executive Committee at the conference in Kabwe in 1985.

A chronological approach to the book’s chapters is justified, but often not their content. Thus, in the first chapter, “Call for arms”, Ellis proceeds from the idea of foreign influence on the SACP’s decision “to launch the armed struggle” at the meeting in December 1960. He claims that it did so, having “discussed with senior officials of two major partners” [Moscow and Beijing]⁴.

But the “evidence” of such discussion with the CPSU “senior officials” is rather fragile. Ellis mentions Yusuf Dadoo and Vela Pillayi’s trips to Moscow in July and later in November 1960 (they then came together with Michael Harmel and Joe Mathews to take part in the international meeting of communist parties).

Ellis refers to Joe Mathews’ interview with Prof. Irina Filatova where he said that “he and Harmel had extensive talks with Soviet officials and military officers at Stalin’s former dacha outside Moscow, used by the Soviets to receive representatives of ‘fraternal parties’, particularly clandestine ones”.⁵ Mathews, however, did not mention the plans of the launch of armed struggle in South Africa.

Nevertheless, chatting with officials does not mean receiving support. Such matters had to be decided on a much higher level, and when the discussion of the armed struggle really took place in November 1961 even Boris Ponomarev, CPSU

2 *Ibid.*, p. 163.

3 Paul Trehwela, *Inside Quatro. Uncovering the exile history of the ANC and SWAPO* (Auckland Park: Jacana Media, 2009), pp. 4-5.

4 Ellis, p. 20.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

International Secretary Committee, had to ask the top leadership for an official reply to the SACP.

The meetings at the Stalin's dacha took place on the eve and perhaps during the International Communist Meeting where a visible rift between Moscow and Beijing on the strategy, including the issue of a "peaceful way to socialism", appeared. The Soviets, who came to that dacha, probably wanted to explain Moscow's position on the forms of struggle, because they were facing criticism (though not yet public) from China.

Unfortunately, most of the relevant Soviet documents are either inaccessible or perished.⁶ But I had the opportunity to read a transcript of Dadoo and Pillayi's discussion with Vitaly Korionov, the then First Deputy Head of the CPSU International Department in July 1960 and of the SACP delegation's discussion with Nuretdin Muhitdinov, a member of the CPSU Presidium (Politbureau) and the Secretary of the Central Committee. I described this meeting in my book, published 15 years ago, and this description proves that the armed struggle was not an issue during these discussions.⁷

Even a year later, when Moses Kotane, the SACP General Secretary, and Dadoo met Korionov and then Ponomarev, they used a very cautious approach. I again refer to my book that contains quotations from the Soviet official archive documents as well as documents written by the SACP leader.⁸

It will also be proper to see Dadoo and Pillayi's discussion with Mao Tsetung in the light of the strategic debates; it took place some days before the opening of the Moscow Meeting. Ellis complains that he could not "find an account of this meeting in Chinese state archives".⁹ It is also strange that this meeting is not mentioned at all in the SADET chapter on China's support for South Africa's liberation struggle written by prominent Chinese historians, Zhong Weiyun and Xu Sujiang.¹⁰ Anyhow, the military training of South Africans in China began a year later.

There is no space in this review to analyse all the chapters and flaws of the book. I share the opinion expressed by Hugh MacMillan that "the underlining thesis" of the book is about "the SACP's hijack of the ANC, and the sinister and controlling influence of Moscow".¹¹

6 Fortunately, two important papers, written by Y Dadoo and V Pillayi – "The political situation in the Union of South Africa; The situation in the South Africa Communist Party" survived. I "donated" them not only to the SACP and ANC, but to the National Heritage Council as well.

7 Vladimir Shubin, *ANC: a view from Moscow* (Second revised edition, Auckland Park: Jacana Media, 2008), pp. 25, 27-28.

8 *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

9 Ellis, p. 317.

10 Zhong Weiyun and Xu Sujiang, "China's support and solidarity with South Africa's liberation struggle", in *The road to democracy in South Africa* (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2008), pp. 1213-1252.

11 Hugh MacMillan, *The Lusaka years. The ANC in exile in Zambia, 1963-1994* (Auckland Park: Jacana Media, 2013), p. 10.

There is no doubt that Prof. Stephen Ellis is a serious researcher, who has authored several solid books on a range of issues – from a revolt in Madagascar over a hundred years ago to a recent civil war in Liberia. The question thus inevitably arises: why is this very book biased? Perhaps the author’s pre-academical past haunts him. In particular, when for a number of years, during a very crucial period in the history of the liberation struggle in South Africa (1986-1991), Ellis edited the *Africa Confidential*. There are many stories about that newsletter’s connections with the British government bodies, but there is no need to repeat them here. More important is the assessment of its role by the leaders of the liberation movement, such as a South African intellectual and a former minister, Pallo Jordan.¹² “Ellis’s undisguised purpose during the 1980s was to discredit the ANC by labeling it a communist front movement, controlled by the Soviet Union and presumably pursuing its policy objectives. His newsletter carried scurrilous tales about communist manipulation, or engaged in red-baiting, naming alleged communists in the ANC and its leadership.”¹³

One can only guess what was the source of the *Africa Confidential*’s information, often distorted, deliberately or not. Ironically though, those distortions sometimes were useful for the movement. During Operation Vula, for example, we were glad to read in Ellis’s magazine that “leading Umkhonto commander Sphiwe Nyende [Nyanda]¹⁴ has left the beleaguered military to study in the Soviet Union, disenchanted with the ANC leadership”.¹⁵ Much later Nyanda wrote to me, “Without exception, those who were not privy to the information believed I was in the Soviet Union for studies. The enemy therefore never expected me to be right on its doorstep.”¹⁶

Even an earlier period, 1982-1986, when Ellis worked for Amnesty International, may have had its negative influence as well. During the years when Mandela was in prison, Amnesty International never adopted him as a “prisoner of conscience” and called for his release because he “refused to renounce violence”, even when, trying to save its face, it declared him in 2006 an “ambassador of conscience”.¹⁷

This book by Ellis can be recommended to readers, providing they wear, so to say, “correction glasses” to balance its obvious bias.

Vladimir Shubin

African Studies, Russian State University for the Humanities

12 By the way, Jordan has never been a member of the SACP.

13 Pallo Jordan, “McCarthyism rounds on Freedom Charter”, *Business Day Live*, 23 January 2014.

14 Later Nyanda was Chief of the SANDF and then a minister.

15 *Africa Confidential*, 8 September 1989, p. 4.

16 Letter to Vladimir Shubin from Sphiwe Nyanda, 2 December 2002.

17 <http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Govern/Political/mand_amn.html.<http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/nelson-mandela-1918>>, accessed 27 June 2013.