

## Reviews of books

Tom Lodge, *Red Road to Freedom: A History of the South African Communist Party, 1921–2021*. Woodbridge and Rochester NY: James Currey (hb £70/US\$105 – 978 1 84701 321 7). 2022, 626 pp.

The year 2021 marked a centennial for the establishment of the Communist Party in South Africa. Rather exceptionally in global terms, the South African Communist Party (SACP) enjoys a relatively vast popularity and a favourable historical reputation. It has had a quite turbulent history since its founding as the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) in 1921, but its consistent decisions since the 1950s to align with the African National Congress (ANC) and to prioritize the anti-apartheid nationalist struggle over the more orthodox class-based struggle have made it a pivotal organization in the history of national liberation in Africa.

Despite its key role in modern South African history, no comprehensive scholarly history of the Party has been available until now. Tom Lodge, a renowned historian of South African politics, aspires to fill this gap with *Red Road to Freedom*, an ambitious history of the Party's first century of existence. Certain episodes in the Party's history, especially between the 1930s and the 1960s, have been examined by historians, but a full evaluation of the Party, which was illegal and underground for several decades, was lacking until Lodge's significant contribution.

Such a project is not an easy undertaking. The Party's historiography has been shaped by strong political interests and biases and tends to either glorify or denigrate its past. The secrecy surrounding the Party since the 1950s makes reliable records or testimonies rare. The internal rifts and interpersonal clashes among its ranks leave us with contradicting facts. Freshly declassified archival materials – in both Eastern Europe and South Africa – along with new oral testimonies have called for such a project for some time. Fortunately, Lodge accepted the challenge.

Lodge provides us not only with an excellent synthesis of existing research, but also with original findings and insights, many of which are based on the author's own archival and oral research. The book also aims to address some understudied periods, for example by covering the Party's important 'pre-history' before 1921, re-evaluating its last 'legal' years at the end of the 1940s, and its more recent political existence in the shadow of the ANC in post-apartheid South Africa. But Lodge is also forthright enough to identify areas where further research is necessary, such as the history of South African Bundism and the communist involvement among university students.

Lodge is a master of details, and despite its goal to produce a grand narrative, the book often delves into the nitty gritty of communist politics and intrigues. Providing such a full historical picture through such a diverse array of sources is a remarkable achievement. While helping to substantiate Lodge's arguments, the abundance of details might, at some points in the book, be tedious for the non-expert reader. Yet Lodge has done a tremendous job in elucidating the meanings of theoretical

concepts such as the 'Native Republic' and 'colonialism of a special type', which often baffle students of South African radical politics.

Lodge attempts to resolve – or at least provide the best-known information on – several historical controversies, such as the Comintern's actual impact on the Party and Mandela's membership. He offers a balanced and complex analysis of the Party's oscillation between class-based struggle (with a focus on white workers) and its engagement in the national liberation movement (with an emphasis on cooperation with non-white nationalist organizations), also demonstrating how racialism sometimes played a role in the early Party. He delicately dissects the Party's relations and influence within the ANC, brilliantly indicating that, despite the communist over-representation within the ANC's upper echelons, South African communists should not be treated as a unified group, as 'their personal loyalties and their political intentions were probably more complicated' (p. 429).

The SACP–ANC intimate alliance is detailed with the finest nuance. Yet I believe that here lies the main lacuna in this otherwise extremely impressive project. The alliance is exceptional, not least because it has endured for seven decades and virtually turned the SACP into an auxiliary force within the ANC. This alliance is well described by Lodge, but its exceptionality is not explained sufficiently. What brought the SACP to decide to virtually minimize its separate identity for so long – indeed, until the present day? Why is it so tightly and piously linked to the ANC, despite the latter's changing forms and South Africa's shifting realities? Were there, after 1950, other alternative routes the Party might have taken? It reads almost as if this tight ANC–SACP alliance was inevitable. Lodge explains well how, by the 1950s, the communists came to prefer anti-colonial nationalism over class struggle, but this ideological decision – as well as the camaraderie during the anti-apartheid struggle in exile – does not fully explain why relations with the ANC became so exceptional and so long-lasting, even long into the post-apartheid era.

Nevertheless, Lodge has produced a historical masterpiece that presents the ultimate authoritative word on the history of communism in South Africa. The bookshelves of anyone interested in South African history or the global history of communism would not be complete without this work.

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Kenneth King and Meera Venkatachalam (eds), *India's Development Diplomacy and Soft Power in Africa*. Woodbridge and Rochester NY: James Currey (pb £25/US\$36.95 – 978 1 84701 274 6). 2021, v + 219 pp.

Kenneth King and Meera Venkatachalam helm this effort at exploring different aspects of India's development diplomacy towards the African continent. Although India and China are said to be competing for influence on the continent, the state