

REVIEW ESSAY

Gail M. Gerhart and Clive L. Glaser. *From Protest to Challenge. Volume 6. A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa, 1882-1990, Challenge and Victory 1980-1990.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 2010. xxxiv, 778 pp.

Struggles over memory are commonplace in contemporary South Africa. The 1980s are an especially contested part of its past. That decade witnessed a mass resurgence of popular struggles that picked up a thread of civil opposition going back to the 1976 Soweto uprising. From outside South Africa, the African National Congress (ANC) stepped up its armed struggle and sanctions campaigns; inside the country the United Democratic Front (UDF)—a loose federation of women's, youth, and civic organizations founded in 1983 in Cape Town as a response to tepid government reforms—coordinated rent, service, and consumer boycotts; and a new national trade union federation privileged political struggle. The state responded with more “reforms,” states of emergency, proxy wars, assassinations, and mass detentions.

Today legal apartheid is a distant memory for most South Africans. The reasons are multiple: a youthful society because of poverty and, more recently, an AIDS pandemic; preoccupations with consumption and class mobility; and a rush to forget on the part of most whites. For the most part the ANC's current behavior—associated with corruption, cronyism, and personalism—is presented as an extension of how the ANC and other opposition groups operated throughout the 1980s.

This revisionism is contested, however, by ANC and other struggle figures. The poet-politician Jeremy Cronin has decried such “revisionism” (Cronin 2003). He denies that the history of the ANC's armed wing can be reduced to what happened at “Quatro detention camp” where ANC generals executed dissident members, or that the legacy of township self-defense units that defended communities against a “bitter apartheid-launched low intensity conflict strategy” can be downgraded to a story of “indiscipline.” Apartheid-era struggles over education similarly cannot be reduced to a call for “No education before liberation,” a slogan that “was roundly condemned by both the ANC and the UDF at the time.”

Cronin may be right that such revisionism pervades popular culture. Fortunately, however, the data about the “real thing” is out there. Documentation of struggle history (and of the extent of oppression and its legacies) is increasingly available in and outside South Africa, particularly online. Think, for example, of Padriag O'Malley's 2007 biography of Mandela's Robben Island colleague Mac Maharaj (the book comes with an online database of interviews and commentaries); or the website sahistory.org.za with its short essays, biographical sketches, scanned books, and copious references maintained by photographer Omar Badsha in Cape Town. Similarly, I can recommend *Overcoming Apartheid* (overcomingapartheid.msu.edu), an online compendium of video interviews, rare photographs, and historical documents. (There, for example, I saw a former colleague, Shepi Mati, recall his activist roots in the Eastern Cape.)

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<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/pdfs/v13i1-2a6.pdf>

The progenitor of all these is the *From Protest to Challenge* series, the invaluable multivolume collection of documents from South Africa's liberation struggle, of which the sixth and final volume recently appeared. It's worth recalling the history of the series. Tom Karis, an American diplomat, had been an observer at the treason trial of 156 opposition leaders from 1956 to 1961 and had befriended one of the defense lawyers, George Bizos. A few years after the trial ended, Bizos gave Karis, now an academic, a set of the thousands of documents collected by the state to use as evidence in the trial. Karis, now working with another academic, political scientist Gwendolen Carter, also obtained a set of the trial transcript. In 1965, the Hoover Institute decided to publish some of the trial, to be selected and introduced with historical essays by Karis and Carter.

Originally Karis and Carter had planned to publish a single volume with an introductory text and a biographical appendix. This proved insufficient, and eventually they produced four volumes spanning the period 1882-1964. Volume one covered the period 1882 to 1934, volume two 1935 to 1952, and volume three (which was banned in South Africa) 1953 to the 1964 Rivonia trial. Volume four was a series of short biographical sketches of resistance personalities. Karis wrote the texts of volumes two, and together with Gail Gerhart, the texts of volumes three and four; Sheridan Johns III authored the text of volume one. Carter provided editorial oversight. All are or were American political scientists. These books, published in the 1970s, are now out of print, but revised editions are currently in preparation by Gerhart. After a long hiatus during which the South African government denied them visas for many years, Karis and Gerhart resumed the series in 1997 with a fifth volume that examined the period 1964-1979. Volume six, edited by Gerhart and Clive Glaser, a historian at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg—and the first South African to be a co-author in the series—focuses on the 1980s.

Like the previous volumes, number six consists of introductory text plus primary documents. The text chapters are broken up thematically and historically, with sections on “reform and repression in the era of P. W. Botha,” the seurocrat president whose regime and response to the lingering political and economic crises came to define the decade; the wide spectrum of internal protest politics; exile and underground politics; and, finally, the secret early phase of political negotiations. Part Two, the bulk of the book, consists of primary documents organized to parallel the essays in Part One. The book ends with a bibliography and a detailed index.

As with previous volumes of this series, the essays in Part One are well researched, clearly written and concise, providing useful context for the selected mix of organizational minutes, reports, letters, statements, pamphlets, interviews with struggle leaders, and other documents that follow. Part Two opens with Percy Qoboza's March 1980 speech at Wits University calling for the release of Nelson Mandela and closes with Mandela's speech from the balcony of the Cape Town City Hall to a crowd of thousands on February 11, 1990, the day he was released after serving twenty-seven years in prison. The 180 documents in between offer stark evidence of police brutality, executions, forced removals, and multiple states of emergency. But we also get a sense of how resistance movements sought to define their own struggles. The documents also reveal the ideological and strategic contests that presaged the revisionist debates of today.

Protest politics in the 1980s were dominated by piecemeal government reforms that included new local government structures for Africans and separate and unequal parliamentary legislatures for coloureds and Indians at the national level alongside the whites-only legislature.

The latter institution, of course, held real power. Documents of religious, sports, labor, and community organizations show that instead of dividing resistance, these reforms served to galvanize and unite opposition to the state. Though localized concerns drove the UDF, these struggles were always linked to an overarching opposition to apartheid, and in some senses, to the negative effects of an exploitive capitalist production system.

We also see evidence of the ANC's work to win the propaganda war in Europe and the United States. For example, Gerhart and Glaser include a transcript of a meeting at Britain's House of Commons in October 1985 at which Oliver Tambo and Thabo Mbeki respond to hostile questions from British MPs. In one exchange MP Ivan Lawrence lists a number of instances of ANC bombings in public places and assassinations of security policemen, community councilors, and former ANC members turned state witnesses. He wanted Tambo and the ANC to condemn any future terrorist acts. Tambo responds:

Let me get back a little to the first part of the question ... In 1981 one of our most outstanding leaders [Joe Gqabi] was assassinated by South African agents ... In that year South Africa had raided our people—raided Mozambique—and massacred very brutally some 13 of our people who were simply living in houses in Mozambique. That was 1981.

In 1982 the South African army invaded Lesotho and massacred not 19 but 42 people, shot at point blank range. 42. Twelve of them nationals from Lesotho. So there was this mounting offensive against the ANC. I think your question fails to [relate to] this aspect: that we were victims of assassinations, of massacres, and in return for what? We were not killing anybody ... An armed struggle is an armed struggle. People die. It has been fortunate perhaps, in that time that there have not been so many people dying on the other side of the conflict ...

[On our side people] have been hanged, they have been sentenced to long terms of imprisonment, for exploding a bomb, [a] bomb that destroyed a pylon; sentenced to life imprisonment. That is violence. This is what we are going through. As to these other people you are mentioning, we cannot condemn it.

That is part of the struggle. The enemy is the enemy (p. 584).

Scholars of social movements and of South African history will especially appreciate the extensive cataloging of the ideological and strategic debates within and outside of the ANC and the UDF, its allies, and member organizations. Like all movements of its size and ambition, the 1980s anti-apartheid movement was riven by contradictions, differences, and violence. We see debates over tactics and ethics (e.g. the use of the infamous necklace to punish informers), race versus class, factionalism, the role of whites, the efficacy of armed struggle, etcetera. Documents also shed light on the role of religious groups, especially Christian churches and some Muslim clerics, in framing the struggle against apartheid in a religiously conservative country and in combating the state's interpretation of religious texts. Here Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Cape Town cleric Allan Boesak, and Catholic Archbishop Denis Hurley feature prominently.

While the emphasis is on documentary evidence of black resistance, the editors include documents of a few white dominated organizations like the Black Sash and the End Conscription Campaign; in the mid to late 1980s the latter proved a welcome home to the small band of war dissenters (white men who resisted compulsory service in apartheid's army). There is also

documentary evidence related to black political figures deemed traitors by some in the UDF, such as homeland leaders; the coloured Labour Party; members of the President's Council created by the 1983 constitution, and, especially, on Mangosuthu Buthelezi (the self-declared prime minister of the Zulu king) and his Inkatha movement.

Through the documents we witness the intensifying tensions between the ANC and Inkatha and Buthelezi as Inkatha's ambitions increasingly coincide with the machinations of apartheid's "Third Force." Documents also include surprising twists. For example, in April 1989 cleric Beyers Naude, traveling to Malawi, stopped over in Lusaka to brief ANC leaders on political developments inside South Africa, including requests from Buthelezi to meet Mandela in Pollsmoor prison. Apparently Mandela wanted to know whether he should agree to a meeting with Buthelezi. We do not get to see what is in the letter, but the ANC Youth League and the ANC leadership in exile were opposed to even responding to it. Inside South Africa, however, Walter Sisulu (still in prison) advised that they at least acknowledge the letter. Archie Gumede, president of the UDF, did so too. But we also learn, curiously, that Harry Gwala, who had a largely unfair reputation as a hardliner, advised Mandela to reply to Buthelezi. Gwala's reputation stemmed from the fact that his base in northern Natal faced daily attacks from Inkatha paramilitaries and the police and had taken up arms to defend themselves. (Incidentally, we also learn that Mandela, impatient, had decided to take his own counsel in the meantime and wrote to Buthelezi.)

A widely popular view of the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), a 1959 spin-off of the ANC, as self-destructive is confirmed by pamphlets and party reports filled with accusations of murder, assassinations, and plots. In one instance, supporters of former PAC president Potlako Leballo insult his rival David Sibeko by calling him a "bon viveur" who serves the interests of Zimbabwe and Tanzania's governments. But the ANC's own excesses and embarrassments also get proper treatment. We see ANC leaders hedging on including whites and other "minorities" (i.e. coloureds and Indians) in leadership positions—something the leadership only agreed to as late as 1985. (They could though serve in the ANC's armed wing, starting in 1969.) There are also references to ANC violence against its own members (in military camps in Angola, such as the Quatro of Cronin's quote above). The final pages of the book also illustrate the ANC's quick transformation of its goals of radical transformation to a more narrow definition of political power.

As in previous volumes, the editors are careful to emphasize that these documents on the liberation struggle only represent a tiny fraction of what's out there. Other documents can be found online (www.aluka.org.za and www.disa.ukzn.ac.za); many more are on microfilm in the Cooperative Africana Microform Project (CAMP) collections at the Center for Research Libraries in Chicago; and important archives in hard copy exist at South African universities, particularly at the University of Fort Hare in the Eastern Cape. Sadly, the latter archives are only accessible to researchers with the time and resources to go there. Realizing that these documents are available at a few locations raises the question why the documents are not online. Most serious students of political history increasingly turn to online databases (not always digitized versions of the originals), and a number of holdings have caught onto this potential for popularizing history by easing access to primary documents.

Even if all the archival documents were available online, the *From Protest to Challenge* series

would still be an invaluable entry point for both undergraduates and serious researchers. South African public culture and scholarship have been impacted by a series of discourses and real political choices over recent decades. These include the culture of “reconciliation,” which dominated from the mid-1990s, adopting the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s (TRC) moral equation of the violence of oppression with the violence of resistance (cf. Bell 2003). In time, in the view of many, acts of “terrorism” by those resisting a system deemed a crime against humanity by the UN was equated with state-sponsored death squads and torture perpetrated by the armed forces and secret police units loyal to the apartheid government.

Another significant discourse is a postmodern turn in South African scholarship, in which the past appears less important in shaping the present and where people can invent and reinvent new identities. Some whites have also taken on identities of victims—the work of organizations like the rightwing Solidariteit and Afriforum come to mind—and minority discourses (previously used to justify apartheid) are reignited. Separately, in some circles the struggle against apartheid is delegitimized in one stroke by the actions of outsized individuals like expelled ANC youth leader, Julius Malema.

A recent incident is indicative of the new politics of memory. In May 2011, a leading gallery in Johannesburg exhibited recreations by South African artist Brett Murray of 1980s era anti-apartheid posters. Murray focused especially on a series of posters produced by the Medu Arts Ensemble, a group of South African exiles living in Botswana during the 1980s. The most iconic posters celebrated women’s struggles or slain resistance fighters like Solomon Mahlangu, an ANC guerrilla hanged by the apartheid regime in 1979. A 1981 poster by Medu featured the silhouette of a hunched soldier—representing Mahlangu—with a gun and the words: “Tell my people that I love them and that they must continue the struggle.” In Murray’s rendering the words are changed to, “Tell my people that I love them and that they must continue the struggle for chivas regal, mercs and kick-backs.” An earlier exhibition in Cape Town of Murray’s work featured five plaques lampooning resistance leaders: Chris “Hush Money” Hani, Walter “The Sweetener” Sisulu, Joe “Mr Ten Percent” Slovo, Steve “Kick-Back King” Biko, and Oliver “On The Take” Tambo.

Murray’s work was generally praised in South Africa. For local playwright Mike van Graan, the work transgressively reflected popular disaffection with ANC rule. Murray’s “politically correct” critics were playing the “tiresome race card,” and shooting “the white messenger.” Their objections would merely provide cover for “the politically opportunistic,” who appropriate blackness “as a smokescreen under which to pursue and justify dubiously-gotten gains” (Van Graan 2011). But Judy Seidman, who as a member of Medu worked on the Mahlangu poster, wrote in an open letter to the *Mail & Guardian* (July 10, 2011) that Murray’s work misappropriated Medu’s images and distorted history. In her words, “Reworking these images conveys rather a deep and more sinister message, quite other [than Murray’s] brave and laudable condemnation of bad morals and greed rampant amongst our current rulers. In re-constructing and undermining historical struggle images and messages, even to misquoting the words of our heroes, Murray suggests that bad morals and greed formed the underlying motivation for our struggle.” For Seidman, Murray was “suggesting that the ‘real’ demand, in 1979 and 1982 and 1984, was for BMWs and Chivas [Regal] and kick-backs.” To make plaques ‘commemorating’ heroes that label them as corrupt negates our history, and insults their memory.”

Which is why a series like *From Protest to Challenge* is so useful. It gets us out of the false dichotomy of heroes/villains and forces us to confront South Africa's history in its complex specificity. Given the contested present, it would be a shame were this its last volume.

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