

A NAMIBIAN HORROR

In November 1989 two persons, associated with Searchlight South Africa were introduced to, and interviewed two former prisoners of the South West African Peoples Organization, in London. Impressed by the story they heard, and convinced of its veracity, they wrote the following account. As we explain at the end of this article we have considered all the problems associated with telling the story and are convinced that justice can only be served by giving it the space it deserves. If we had kept silent we would be little more than accomplices to the perpetrators of outrageous and heinous crimes.

Silence of the Graves

There are people, some of them socialists, who welcome the exposure of crimes in the Stalinist regimes of eastern Europe but insist that the crimes of the leadership of the South West African Peoples' Organization (SWAPO) against its own members in Angola and elsewhere remain concealed.

They justify this on the grounds that Swapo fought the South African military in Namibia in a very long guerrilla war and at a terrible cost in casualties, and that South Africa – bearing in mind its overwhelming economic superiority, and Swapo's failure to win a single region within Namibia by force of arms – must continue to remain a power in the land. This ignores the appalling scope of Swapo atrocities continuing right up till the end of 1988, involving further hundreds of prisoners still unaccounted for. It ignores also Swapo's subjection in and out of the Constituent Assembly to the capitalist interests lying at the heart of the old regime: predatory mineral-stripping by multinational and South African mining capital, capitalist farming on the grand scale by a small number of white farmers, the state-within-a-state of the Oppenheimer diamond interests centred on Oranjemund.

To this is added South Africa's continuing occupation of Namibia's main port at Walvis Bay, which remains a heavily fortified South African military base on Namibian soil. To put the matter in terms of Cuba (and thus in terms very comprehensible to Swapo's security officials), it is as if the US had continued to hold not the base at Guantanamo but instead, Havana harbour. Namibia has become independent neither of capital nor of South Africa's military power.

To reach this negligible result, Swapo's war against its own members reached extraordinary dimensions. We print in this issue an interview with two sisters, Ndamona and Panduleni Kali, both committed to the same ideals with which they joined Swapo inside Namibia while at school 14 years ago.

They were arrested in Cuba in 1984 while studying on Swapo scholarships, flown to Angola under armed Cuban guard, handed over to Swapo in Luanda, tortured repeatedly on an absurd pretext by the Swapo security apparatus and imprisoned in holes in the ground for five years. They were

released last year in the transfer of political prisoners arranged by the United Nations as part of the global Namibian settlement.

We have received a number of documents prepared mainly by the Political Consultative Committee of Ex-Swapo Detainees (PCC) and the Parents' Committee, organizations which have fought bravely to establish the truth about the imprisoned, tortured and murdered Swapo fighters, when a deafening silence reigned everywhere else. These documents include lists of hundreds of names (still incomplete) of Swapo fighters known by the returned prisoners to have been held in numerous prisons, lists of prisoners known to have been murdered or died in the hands of their Swapo jailers, and a list of names of those immediately responsible.

From the interview with the Kali sisters it is clear that during official inspections of the prisons, the top Swapo political leadership—Nujoma, Mueshihange, Garoeb, Toivo ja Toivo—were confronted face to face by the prisoners with the facts of torture and extraction of false confessions on several occasions: and did nothing. There is no escaping the complicity of the entire political leadership of Swapo, especially Nujoma as president, over a very long period. These individuals have no place in any except a government of criminals and must be held to account.

An International Inquiry

We support the PCC's call for an independent international commission of inquiry to uncover the facts, let the consequences be what they may. If the inquiry concludes that all the Swapo prisoners — or a majority, or even a large minority of them — were South African spies, so be it. There is no other way southern and central Africa can begin to be made safe for democratic politics. This abscess infects the politics of the whole subcontinent. Without fully establishing the truth about these horrors associated not just with the 'liberation movements' but specifically with the name of Marx — we shudder to report that Swapo's torture headquarters was named the Karl Marx Reception Centre in Lubango — there can be no really democratic politics in the region, let alone socialism.

The momentous events in eastern Europe and the Soviet Union — in states which armed, funded and above all trained the Swapo torture-machine — cannot be cut off by the length of the continent from the struggles to create a free, democratic, prosperous and socialist society in southern Africa. The people of Namibia have the same interest as the tens of millions who seek to put an end to Stalinism and undemocratic politics in Europe, and in China.

Swapo's spy-mania has left a terrible legacy in the region, not only in the presence inside Namibia of scores of brutalized torturers and guards in the clique around the leaders of the majority party. In this huge territory with its pitifully small population (only one and a half million), the low level of development of manufacturing industry leaves the army and police in a very strong position to organize society. The question uppermost in the minds of

many in Namibia is clearly: Will the torturers of Swapo get their hands on the Namibian police and military? For many, that could be a death sentence. As it is, Swapo's legacy is a daily life of fear immediately reimposed on the returned prisoners, with videos of their false confessions circulated by Swapo in their home areas even before their arrival, like some kind of Stalinist obscenity. Fighters against imperialism are daily threatened with lynching by gangs stirred up by their former jailers, and their families are threatened and bullied.

The legacy remains in other ways too. As Max du Preez of the South African journal *Vrye Weekblad* has pointed out, Swapo's spy-mania had three leading elements: a powerful tribal consciousness on the part of the mainly Ovambo-speaking old guard around Nujoma, grouped especially in the Kwanyama sub-tribe; a very deep seated anti-intellectualism; and a contempt for democracy, in an organization which is not known for elected congresses and whose politburo and central committee are self-perpetuating (29 September 1989). To this we would add the consequences of Swapo's growing Stalinization in the Brezhnev years, especially after the Cuba/MPLA victory in Angola in 1975.

The successive changes at the top of the USSR after Brezhnev's death altered nothing in Swapo's methodology of rule. *Vrye Weekblad* reports in the same issue, for instance, the arrest and almost certain murder in Angola at the end of 1988 of Josef Hendricks, 18, known as 'Comrade Axab', the vice-chairman of the Namibia National Students' Organization (Nanso), only months after a Swapo journal *The Namibian Worker* had described him as a hero. He had escaped to Angola while on bail on a charge of incitement. Returning fellow-prisoners from Angola say he was hauled out of an underground cell and never seen again after threatening to tell what had happened to him. As Du Preez writes,

The brutal truth of the drama of the last few years is that anyone who could read or write well in Swapo became victims of the 'cleansing process', especially if they were not Ovambos. Especially students and graduates went down [translated].

Du Preez takes himself to task for not having investigated more vigorously the disappearance of several of his former friends in the Swapo leadership. He makes the observation that Swapo's measures against its own members have done more than Pretoria and the South African military over many years to destabilize the delicate tribal inter-relations in the country. He writes: 'The Ovambo-versus-the-rest sentiment is now sharper than I have ever experienced it in the eleven years in which I have actively covered Namibia as a reporter' [translated]. By comparison, the South African-supported Democratic Turnhalle Alliance (DTA) which Swapo for years excoriated as tribalist had emerged in this connection, if in no other, as 'little angels'.

This is borne out by the results in the subsequent elections to the Constituent Assembly in early November. Swapo won over 90 percent of the votes in rural

Ovamboland, and the largest total of any party in the three urban areas in the centre and south where there are big concentrations of Ovambo migrant workers (Windhoek, Swakopmund, Luderitz). This provided Swapo with 57 percent of the total vote throughout the country, and 41 of the 72 seats in the Constituent Assembly. Swapo's vote corresponds roughly to the proportion of Ovambo-speakers in the society. The non-Ovambo-speaking peoples in their entirety rejected Swapo. Yet it was not always thus. While large numbers of the prison victims have non-Ovambo names, all at one time enthusiastically committed themselves to supporting Swapo with the same naive good faith as Comrade Axab.

Descent into the Pit

The process of internal fracture within Swapo will need much further study, but a provisional interpretation can be offered here. Following an episode in the 1960s when the Tanzanian army was called in by Swapo to put down critics in its military training base at Kongwa, there were two crucial periods accelerating Swapo's descent to barbarism. The first was in the mid-1970s, when a storm of student struggles in Namibia – following the general strike of 1971 – coincided with the development of the black consciousness current in South Africa which culminated in the Soweto students' demonstration and massacre in June 1976. The black consciousness politics of that period set aside the former racially segregated divisions between the people designated in South Africa as African, Coloured and Indian enshrined in the old Congress alliance. Its effect within Namibia, especially among the youth, was to propel a large number of non-Ovambo speakers into Swapo, which had been formed in 1960 out of the Ovamboland Peoples' Organization, led by Nujoma.

In the same years, the collapse of the Portuguese empire compelled Swapo to reverse its alliances in Angola. Having fought previously alongside the Unita guerrilla army of Jonas Savimbi, the Swapo leaders now adapted to the Cuban/MPLA regime that won the civil war in Angola following the incursion by South African/CIA/mercenary forces. The new regime in Angola, dependent on the USSR, intensified moves within Swapo towards Stalinism that conflicted with the demands for democracy among its younger members, who called for a new constitution and convocation of the Swapo congress. On this occasion, Swapo called out the Zambian army against its own members, more than twenty of whom are listed by the Parents' Committee as having last been seen alive in Zambia in 1976/78.

The second crucial descent (literally) into the pit took place in 1983/84, when the security apparatus under Solomon 'Jesus' Hualala – head of security and deputy army commander – carried out a purge of the military leadership. Peter Eneas Nanyemba, Swapo's secretary of defence, died in 1983 in southern Angola, allegedly in a car accident. He was a member of Swapo's old guard, an organizer of the fish cannery workers at Walvis Bay on behalf

of Swapo's predecessor, the Ovambo People's Organization, as far back as 1959 (Herbstein et al, p.6). According to Johannes Gaomab (see below) Nanyemba was 'busy replacing members of the old guard in the military hierarchy. He was trying to replace illiterates with literates...'

Hauala claimed that Nanyemba's policy favoured only southern Namibians. In fact Nanyemba usually chose young, urban and educated men. The old guard ignored the fact there were many Ovambos among them. Educated Ovambos were considered decultured—*Mbutidis* (or weeds between the true corn). It seems that:

Nanyemba's reshuffle offended many Kwanyamas (the largest Ovambo sub-group). So Jesus aligned himself with the Kwanyama's and encouraged them to perceive Nanyemba and the educated group as a threat...[Without Nanyemba's protection after his death] the educated officials in party and army were purged as Jesus pleased (*Weekly Mail*, 5 October 1989).

At the time, leading South African nationalist leaders in exile (who knew Nanyemba) believed he had been murdered. Shortly before his death, Nanyemba and two of his closest colleagues in the leadership of the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN) had released a number of Swapo prisoners against the opposition of the security apparatus, headed by Hauala.

After Nanyemba's death, these two colleagues—Tauno Hatuikulipi and Bennie Petrus—were arrested by Hauala's men and died in prison, probably murdered after torture. Hatuikulipi was a former director of the Windhoek Christian Centre (the predecessor of the Council of Churches in Namibia—CCN) and a member of the Swapo central committee and military council. His death was not made public until six months later, when he was branded as an enemy agent who had committed suicide by swallowing poison from a capsule hidden in a tooth.

In the same period, one of the most successful of PLAN's military commanders inside Namibia, Johannes Mie Gaomab ('Comrade Mistake') was recalled from the field as commander of the southern sector in March 1984, arrested, tortured, made to 'confess' in GPU fashion and kept imprisoned until his release and return to Namibia last July. Gaomab, who had been decorated by both the Cuban and East German armies, was a friend of Petrus (*Independent*, 29 September 1989).

In the event eight members of the Central Committee of which two were members of its political bureau were also seized...On the part of PLAN the arrest swept [away] the Chief of Personnel, the Chief of Military Intelligence, his Deputy, and the Chief of Protocol at the DHQ and numerous other officers and combatants ('A Report').

The lunacy of the spy mania may be appreciated from the fact that even Nujoma's wife Kowambo was held as a suspect, together with her sister and

her brother (a member of the Swapo central committee). The parallels in the history of Stalinism are obvious: in the purge of the military, the paranoid destruction of leaders' families (see *20 Letters to a Friend*, by Stalin's daughter Svetlana Alliluyeva), the method of fabrication of 'confessions' (described in *On Trial* by Artur London, a victim of the Czech showtrial of 1951 and former deputy foreign minister) and the spiriting away of foreign students, as happened to Chinese Trotskyists in Moscow at the end of 1929, described by Wang Fan-hsi [Fanxi] in his book *Chinese Revolutionary*.

A Turn to the Left

What is further important about the Swapo prison tortures is the range of official bourgeois institutions that knew what Swapo was doing, and kept quiet; or were told, and did not investigate. The affair perpetuates the worst elements of the Popular Front politics of the 1930s when socialists and others found it expedient to remain silent over the destruction of all groups opposed to the tactics of the USSR during the Spanish civil war. Particularly culpable in Namibia are the United Nations and the churches. We can expect nothing from the ANC or the SACP, nor apparently from the organizations that claim to stand to the left of this unholy alliance.

At a press conference in Windhoek on 7 July last year organized by the Parents' Committee and by detainees released by Swapo, a former leader of the Swapo youth, Erika Beukes, whose brother Walter Thiro was murdered in the camps, stated:

Since 1985, or 1984, we continually sent letters and telexes to Dr de Cuellar [the UN Secretary General], we phoned the UNHCR [High Commissioner for Refugees] in Zambia, but nothing came of it until last week, at the return of these detainees...

According to Phil Ya Nangoloh, the chairman of the press conference, a delegation of the Parents' Committee met with UNHCR as recently as 20 April 1989 and was told 'that there were no human rights violations in those Swapo camps'. Ya Nangoloh accused the CCN of having also denied the allegations. He said the Parents' Committee had contacted the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) in 1987, but 'unfortunately [their] response...was negative'. After being invited to Angola by Nujoma to inspect the Swapo camps, he said, the LWF reported that it 'could not find any human rights violations in those camps'. In addition, the British government had knowledge of Swapo's practices from at least as early as 1985, when it granted asylum to former Swapo members. Like the claims of the Swapo prisoners themselves, it is vital that these and other matters be checked by a painstaking inquiry.

The return of the prisoners has now brought about a small though marked turn to the left, especially in non-Ovambo-speaking areas. Revulsion against Swapo's practices has radicalized politics in Namibia. This is focussed on a

small group around Erika Beukes, which launched the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) on May Day last year. The WRP participated campaigned in the recent elections within an umbrella organization, the United Democratic Front, which secured four seats and the third biggest total of votes after Swapo and the DTA. Swapo is now under attack from a vocal extra-parliamentary opposition that brands its programme and actions as a Stalinist betrayal to imperialist interests, and seeks a socialist revolution in Namibia and South Africa. A demonstration outside the legislature was organized by the WRP on the day the assembly began, denouncing the Swapo murders.

Three points need to be made about this group. First, it is politically dependent on the orientation, method and history of a British Trotskyist group, the Workers Revolutionary Party, which before 1985 was under the Stalinoid hands of Gerry Healy and others. The British WRP has made no independent study of the social conditions in Namibia, but has now found access for its politics in southern Africa. In giving support to the former prisoners of Swapo we must make it clear that we are in no way associated with the WRP or its political perspective.

Second, the international campaign to publicize Swapo's crimes against its own members is now principally the work of the British and the Namibian WRP. Other left wing groups in Britain shied from this task.

Third, the turn to the left among sections of students and workers in non-Ovambo-speaking areas presents a very complex phenomenon, with a bearing on conditions in South Africa. On the one hand, unlike in eastern Europe, the revelations of Stalinist crimes has not affected the attraction to the left. On the other hand, the form of politics of the WRP in Britain and the hasty and unconsidered way in which a programme of demands has been put together give serious grounds for concern.

These and other matters relating to Namibia cannot be explored here and will be considered in a future issue.

The fact that the main nationalist party in a country so closely tied to South Africa should already be so discredited, even before any public negotiations have begun over South Africa — where the working class occupies the pivotal place in the region — is a new element in a very swiftly changing scene.

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