African History: Professor Sik’s Second Volume


This is the second volume of this three-volume work to appear in English.* As in his first volume, Professor Endre Sik analyses the history of four-fifths of the African continent. This book covers the period 1900-1939. This major work by a Marxist historian is a pioneering effort that opens the way for other Marxist scholars. He has put together a jigsaw puzzle of African struggles and imperialist machinations in the territories seized by England, France, Italy, Belgium and Portugal.

His work describes how financiers, mine magnates, industrialists, landowners and their agents exploited Africa’s wealth and peoples with only one aim in view, and that was to extract the maximum profit in the shortest time.

The author has devoted many years to studying the national liberation movements of Africa and Asia. His book has grown out of his interest in and contact with the struggle against imperialism and colonialism. It is a work of great labour and love that reflects his sympathy with the oppressed and hatred towards the imperialists. His hatred, especially of British imperialism, has led him at times to make faulty evaluations, notably in his treatment of Afrikaner (Boer) nationalism in South Africa.

* The first was reviewed in The African Communist, No. 25.
In Sik’s account of South Africa he tends to concentrate on the conflict between British finance capital and Boer nationalism. Though the theme is not unimportant, this concentration tends to divert attention from the basic identity of interests of the two groups in relation to the African, Coloured and Indian peoples—the majority of the population, who often looked to Britain for assistance against the virulent racialism of the Afrikaner. As pointed out in the Communist Party’s programme The Road to South African Freedom (adopted in 1962):

In the oppression, dispossession and exploitation of the non-Whites, British imperialism and Afrikaner nationalism found common ground. This was the basis for the establishment of the Union of South Africa in 1910.

In fact, British and Boer imperialism, despite their rivalry and competition, co-operated with one another in oppressing the working people. The special form of colonialism in South Africa is that of an imperial power dominating an oppressed colonial people within its borders. It is this correct understanding which seems to have eluded our author.

Contrary to the impression given by Professor Sik, Louis Botha and Smuts served the interests of both finance capital and the landowners. The ‘Pact Government’ of 1924 was not ‘a compromise between the Boer nationalists and British finance capital’ as he states (page 150); it was rather an alliance (a coalition government of the Nationalist Party and the S.A. Labour Party) between the big landowners and the White labour aristocracy—at the expense of the African workers and peasants. It introduced the Industrial Conciliation Act of 1924 and the Mines and Works (‘Colour Bar’) Act—laws which gave to skilled workers’ trade unions the legal recognition and status denied to African workers, and which closed skilled jobs to Africans. Thus this Government established the privileged position of a section of the working class and initiated the historical process of degeneration of the once militant labour movement of the skilled workers which paved the way to its virtual disappearance and to the fascist South Africa of today.

Professor Sik has taken much trouble in examining the primary sources available to him. It is evident to our great regret that he did not have access to much of the material needed for a correct study of the working class and national liberation movements. This is the reason why he made incorrect evaluations of such major events as the introduction of the industrial colour bar, the ‘Rand revolt’ of 1922, and of the role of the early socialists and communists, of the A.P.O. (which he ignores) and of the African National Congress.
He describes S. P. Bunting, a founder of the Communist Party, as an opportunist and a racialist. He asserts that the Party had a colour bar, and that until 1928 it was chauvinist, sectarian and opportunistic (page 153). Such sweeping allegations are false and unjust. The Communist Party of South Africa never had a colour bar, though some of its members retained certain of the prejudices and reformism that belonged to their Labour Party antecedents. The founders of the Party—the trade unionists and intellectuals like Bill Andrews, C. B. Tyler, S. P. Bunting and D. I. Jones who organised and led the Party in its early years—never faltered in their adherence to Marxist principles and were deeply involved and closely linked with the labour movement. They were engrossed in the workers’ struggle against capital. ‘To be with the workers, wherever they are, in struggle or defeat’—this was their motto.

It is true that because of their absorption in the class struggles of the organised workers—at a time when African trade unionism was in its infancy—many of the pioneer Communists did not correctly interpret the Leninist policy of the Communist International regarding the national liberation movement. But S. P. Bunting and Ivon Jones in particular insisted that the Marxists should make the liberation of the African, Coloured and Indian people from national oppression a primary aim of the revolutionary movement. S. P. Bunting suffered much for his principles and never surrendered them. He was no chauvinist, though like other Communists of his time he failed to arrive at a correct appreciation of the white workers’ racial prejudices, and believed that the ‘class struggle’ would force them into solidarity with the Africans. Events have shown that this was a false optimism, which did not foresee the role of the white labour aristocracy as a junior partner of a Nazified Afrikaner nationalism in the ruthless oppression and exploitation of the Africans under the system of apartheid and white domination. Professor Sik’s failure to make such assessments detracts from the usefulness of the present volume.

But whatever their shortcomings, our early pioneers made an immortal contribution to the history of our country. They founded a great Party. It has played a glorious role in our people’s hard fight for liberation and socialism and will continue to do so. Their organisational and Marxist educational work among the masses of workers and oppressed people made a profound and enduring impression and helped give our labour and national liberation movements that exceptionally progressive character, resoluteness and maturity which enabled them to withstand and fight back against the most severe persecution, which earn them a foremost place in Africa and the
world, and which will lead our people forward in our revolution to victory.

The history of the Communist Party and the relations between class and national liberation forces in South Africa has still to be written.

R. E. Braverman.

**Who Owns the Press in Africa?**

*The Press in Africa*, by Rosalynde Ainslie (Gollancz, London 1966, 38s.)

One of the most astonishing features of independent and free Africa is the manner in which a hostile, imperialist-controlled press has been allowed to continue functioning with relatively little interference. This misplaced tolerance can hardly be regarded as an example of respect for the principle of freedom of the press which is not in issue in Africa for most countries. Rather is it an indication of the continuing strength of imperialist control of the commanding heights of the economy in Africa of which “Communications” are an essential part.

During the struggle for independence from the period of the Scramble for Africa to our day Africans have felt very keenly the frustration of imperialist-controlled instruments of communication. Newspapers, popular and serious literature, and later radio were used effectively to denigrate African culture and aspirations; history was distorted so as to provide justification for conquest and domination of our people; the efforts of the people to free themselves were belittled; Africans were consistently projected as inferiors who were savage, corrupt and incapable of governing themselves; Africa was insulated from the most progressive ideas of the epoch and tendentious notions of international affairs were imposed on them.

With all these bitter experiences one would have expected that whatever else they tolerated African states would promptly assume complete control of mass media including the press, radio, printing and publishing, television, telephonic and telegraphic institutions. Certainly it would be ridiculous to allow the erstwhile imperialist enemy to retain ownership directly or indirectly of such a vital part of government. This has not happened.

It is true that there has been a great expansion of services in this field all over Africa. Governments have started or expanded radio
services. With the rapid growth of educational facilities the potential of newspaper readers and radio listeners is growing fast. News agencies and newspapers have been started. Yet by and large it can be said that Africa does not control the mass media. This is an intolerable state of affairs.

All this has been recognised by African political organisations and numerous resolutions have been passed at Pan-African conferences and by the Organisation for African Unity urging the setting up of press and news agencies controlled by Africans. But apart from the doubtful expedient of deporting foreign journalists nothing really fundamental is being done to end imperialist influence of mass communications in Africa.

Yet this is a most vital element in the struggle for national independence and freedom. By using the hoary weapon of anti-communism the imperialists have regretfully caused a number of Africans to think that African control of the press, news agencies and so on is somehow linked with ‘communism’. This is because African control under present conditions can only mean public or state control except in a few countries. Such an attitude is clearly nonsensical. Would the French, British or other nations really tolerate a situation in which practically all their vital centres of communication were owned by foreigners inside their countries? Already the tendency for American influence to grow over certain sectors of mass media such as films is arousing apprehension and opposition in Europe. In other words the issue here is the national struggle for independence and freedom. The question is whether the imperialists should be allowed to exercise such influence over communications and education in Africa? That is why the hypocritical talk of alleged ‘threats against freedom of the press’ with reference to Africa by certain Western commentators is so much poppycock. The African people must assume control of all means of communication on their continent in the interests of their emancipation.

The subject is of such importance to Africa that the absence of literature dealing with it comes as a surprise. Hence the book by Miss Ainslie is all the more welcome to all genuine supporters of African freedom and independence.

Miss Ainslie modestly remarks that this book is not by an ‘expert’ nor is it ‘a thorough survey of the subject’. Having read hundreds of rave notices in the imperialist press on books by so-called ‘experts’ on Africa which are not worth the paper they are printed on we have no hesitation whatsoever in disagreeing with Miss Ainslie’s assessment of her book. This book contains a very comprehensive survey of the African press both in the past and present with an astonishing amount
of factual material. Furthermore, all the real and crucial issues affecting ‘communications’ in Africa in their widest sense have been dealt with in this excellent book. This is not to say that the academic researcher could not find any inadequacies in the book. There are. But here we have the first book to deal with the subject in so complete a manner.

Miss Ainslie first of all gives a useful region by region historical survey of the press in Africa. She then deals with the position that developed after the Second World War and finally the present situation in both liberated and unliberated Africa.

Very interesting material has been included in the book on the international news agencies, radio and television. The effects of the colonial legacy on postal, transport and telecommunications systems is also examined. The absurd situation whereby Zambian Ministers could not communicate abroad except through Salisbury—the capital of the rebel Smith regime—is eloquent testimony to the need to break with the imperialist past.

Throughout, Miss Ainslie gives fascinating examples of how events and issues vital to Africa have been influenced to our disadvantage by the imperialist news and press agencies. The notorious invasion of Stanleyville in 1964 by Belgian paratroops is very well dealt with in the book. The use of the mass media and communications as an instrument of counter-revolution and subversion by the imperialists is proved to the hilt.

To the false and hypocritical cry of ‘freedom of the press’ with which the imperialists seek to confuse the issues Miss Ainslie shows how revolutionary governments will seek to expand and foster mass media as a means of spreading education, national unity, economic and social ideas for modernisation, and consolidation of independence. These are the major tasks faced by most countries in Africa. Not the freedom of individuals or private companies to own and publish news. In any case, after filching the wealth of Africa for decades the imperialists can hardly expect to be allowed to use this ill-gotten wealth to give them an unfair advantage. Individuals in Africa do not have the kind of capital required for these enterprises. Only public ownership or the state can afford it.

Of great interest to African patriots is the effect on African unity of the present unhealthy situation of dependence on the imperialists in the communications field. The imperialists through their control over the distribution of news, literature and books can virtually manufacture dissension and divisions among and between African States. Thus the imperialists can publish stories indicating that hundreds of Ghanaians are held prisoner in Guinea and cause great indignation in the latter country. By the time the facts were established the damage
would be done. Similarly, stories of White nuns (it is always nuns, never women) being raped can be put out to influence a situation before facts can be checked which prove the allegation untrue. This has happened over and over again in the Congo (Kinshasa). To what extent are some of the inter-African crises artificially fomented? One way of solving the problem is not to engage in endless debate with the imperialists but simply to make it impossible for this sort of mischief to occur by taking control of the mass media.

Miss Ainslie herself obviously looks on this book not as an academic treatise but as a challenge to Africa—a programme of action in the press and communications field. Unless Africans control their press, radio and communications their independence is incomplete.

As for the imperialist attitude to this book we would like to predict that either all manner of irrelevant accusations will be hurled at Miss Ainslie without serious review of what the book contains or alternatively there will be an angry silence. It is the duty of all liberation organisations and independent African states to see that this important book reaches every corner of our continent.

A.Z.