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Publisher: Routledge

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South African Historical Journal

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rshj20>

From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa, 1882-1990. Volume 6: Challenge and Victory, 1980-1990

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Version of record first published: 01 Mar 2013.

To cite this article: Raymond Suttner (2013): From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa, 1882-1990. Volume 6: Challenge and Victory, 1980-1990, South African Historical Journal, DOI:10.1080/02582473.2013.775721

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02582473.2013.775721>

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BOOK REVIEW

From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa, 1882–1990. Volume 6: Challenge and Victory, 1980–1990. By GAIL M. GERHART and CLIVE L. GLASER. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010. 777 pp. ISBN 9 780 2533 5422 8.

The Road to Democracy in South Africa. Volume 4 (1980–1990). Parts 1 and 2. Edited by SOUTH AFRICAN DEMOCRACY EDUCATION TRUST. Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2010. 1693 pp. ISBN Part 1: 9 781 8688 8599 2. ISBN Part 2: 9 781 8688 8644 9.

The period of the 1980s has been described and analysed in a range of books, theses and articles grappling with the crisis of the apartheid regime that then entered a critical stage and the unprecedented character and scale of resistance that emerged.

Both works under review illustrate how the government faced an unparalleled level of internal and external pressures, with significant divisions emerging within its own ranks, between secuocrats and those favouring other ways of maintaining apartheid or pursuing a settlement that accepted majority rule but with the greatest possible safeguards for white privilege.

There were also divisions within the security cluster with the National Intelligence Service that had been revamped under Dr Niel Barnard, a former Free State academic, playing an active role in seeking a political settlement, in opposition to military intelligence, which was more inclined to wiping out the ‘enemy’. The security police were also uninterested in a peaceful settlement, focusing on arrests and extracting what information they could.

Until 1980 the apartheid regime enjoyed an image of relative invincibility, and a capacity to control resistance. Then, that was no more. Furthermore contradictions developed between the regime and its collaborationist allies in the bantustans and amongst the chiefs. Many of these sought to reposition themselves as they came to see the ANC as likely to play a leading role in the future.

While the national government was fortified by army and police support, the vulnerability of local government for Africans was dramatically demonstrated. Enjoying little legitimacy and without a tax-base this became the weakest link in the apartheid chain and it was here that the resistance scored its most dramatic successes. Councillors and others linked to apartheid were often driven out of townships and local ‘organs of people’s power’ often took their place, in many parts of the country.

This process did not develop as a result of a generalised and agreed strategy amongst the broad body of anti-apartheid forces. The resistance against apartheid was never a unified whole under a common ‘command’ before 1980, nor in this period, and the differences often

spilt over into bitter disputes and sometimes violence, which organisations generally sought to contain, but also sometimes encouraged in order to ‘win over’ those who wavered or resisted their sway. Gradually, however, from the late 1970s the ANC-allied organisations, particularly with the emergence of the UDF in 1983, established a hegemonic position. But it was a complex hegemony, in particular in their relationship with trade unions.

The relationship between the unions and the political organisations within the country was complex and ideological differences were sharp. This was true, even with the establishment of COSATU in 1985, which became a broadly ‘Charterist’ organisation. There were also significant differences found within the ANC and UDF leadership. These divergences often led to intense debate. Much contestation related to how the apartheid social order was characterised, notably the debate around ‘colonialism of a special type’, depicting apartheid South Africa as a colony oppressing all classes of black South Africans, through racial oppression and class exploitation. Other formulations contested this, notably by stressing class or race. From these differences over the relationship between or primacy of race or class flowed arguments over strategies and tactics to transform apartheid South Africa. Much attention was paid then and in the literature of the time to debates over the strategy and tactics of ‘national democratic revolution’ (NDR) and the relationship between the struggle for liberation and socialism.

The literature and debates were not restricted to political organisations but also gripped many scholars as reflected in journals like *Transformation*.

While those disputes were crucial, what is interesting now is the relative silence over what evoked such passion then. If apartheid was characterised as having various characteristics, have these all been eradicated or have the contradictions between various privileged sectors and the poor been resolved? If so, how? If not, what is planned?

But closer to the mainstream of democratic transformation is another silence and this relates to what may be one of the most novel and significant elements of the period of the 1980s, described in both volumes. South Africa was made ‘ungovernable’ and apartheid ‘unworkable’ in significant respects. But there was also the emergence, with varying success and sometimes with accompanying abuses, of significant manifestations of popular power at the local level. People were often organised at a street and block level and they took control of their own lives, sometimes in a way that was more satisfactory than or filled a vacuum left by the apartheid authorities that had been driven out of townships.

While the 1980s manifested the emergence of the popular in ways that had never been seen before, how is it that that mass presence has been allowed to disappear in the current period? Reading what people said in the 1980s it was not ‘meant to be’, in that leaders at various levels spoke of a continuing role for ‘the people’ beyond voting in elections.¹ My sense, and this is not covered in either book, is that from the late 1980s the subjective capacity or agency of the ‘masses’ or ‘the people’, was displaced (as self actors, subjects in their own right) by the ‘people’s movement’ represented by the leadership, and later by the ‘people’s government’, assumed to represent the popular. It would be interesting to consider to what extent this has a bearing on current political instability and widespread expressions of unrest.

Notably, much of the discussions in the 1980s did not relate to specific policy development, and as Gail M. Gerhart and Clive L. Glaser note (pp. 150–151), this was a late development. Many of the activists inside the country were fully occupied with

insurrectionist activities and only entered the policy terrain after 1990, while the ANC outside, sometimes with COSATU, started to develop processes for economic development during the 1980s. These related growth to redistribution (a link which was jettisoned fairly quickly after 1990). Constitutional processes initiated then had a more enduring effect.

Both books, with the SADET volume being in two parts, provide important tools for understanding the 1980s and possibly some of the unresolved questions of the present.

Everyone who works in South African studies, in particular historians and scholars in politics, await with some eagerness the publication of new parts of the *Protest to Challenge* project initiated by Thomas G. Karis and Gwendolen M. Carter over 50 years ago. Continued by Karis together with Gail Gerhart, after Carter's death it has come to be regarded as an artisan would treat his/her tools of the trade. The scope and timeframe of the work has broadened over time, increasing the space devoted to documents but also the commentary contextualising these.

Apart from the published volumes, there are important deposits of almost all of the material gathered during the project, only part of which has been published. This comprises documents, interviews and many other items that are crucial to any researcher of South African resistance. Thus any appreciation of the work undertaken needs to acknowledge that it is part of a much larger whole, to which very many scholars are in debt.

Revised versions of earlier editions of the series are in the pipeline, to be published in South Africa by Jacana, at affordable prices, starting this year (2013). This will make important documentation and introductory essays accessible to many more people than those who have been able to enter the various libraries from which the documents have been drawn or to purchase the previously relatively expensive books. My understanding is that, under the rigorous oversight of Gerhart, these new editions not only augment the documents but also provide revised and extended introductions.

The volume under review, produced by Gerhart with Glaser, maintains the exacting standards of previous ones with regard to the collection of documents. One may quibble about exclusions or abridgements, but that is a judgment call the editors had to make. Many of the documents make exciting reading, often revealing previously secret accounts of meetings or discussions, confirming suspicions one may have had about the pre-negotiations period involving small numbers of the leadership and excluding others or also amplifying or revealing new elements of broader resistance history. (This is also covered in Sifiso Ndlovu's Chapter 2 of the SADET volume). The history covered is that of a number of organisations; those supporting the ANC and those contesting its hegemony from a range of perspectives.

Continuing the format of the previous edition with a substantial introduction of over 200 pages, the editors survey the 1980s from a number of angles, generally making their summary a very good connecting point to the documents that follow.² The text continually refers to specific documents in the volume so that the reader can move from the narrative to a document and easily pick up the thread again.

The introduction provides a substantial overview of the 1980s in its own right, navigating a very complex period of revival of political resistance inside the country, linking in various ways with the ANC in exile, other organisations and broader international solidarity.

At the level of explanation and analysis, I have reservations about the authors' use of dichotomies and hierarchies in dealing with different resistance methods or modes of analysis. A range of different strategies and tactics are presented as opposites; for example, political organisation at various levels as opposed to armed struggle (e.g., p. 45). My understanding is that these were more often seen as and were in fact complementary elements of a broader whole.

These dichotomies and hierarchies are an obstacle to understanding how opposition to apartheid consolidated into the major threat that it became. One of the achievements of the ANC-led liberation movement was not to elevate class above race or vice versa, but to find a way of linking class exploitation and national or racial oppression. This may have had flaws and omitted or given inadequate attention to a range of other oppressions – in particular, patriarchy – but it was a way in which a range of sectors who suffered under apartheid, albeit unevenly, were mobilised and organised around a large area of common resentment of oppression.

This mode of analysis also mars treatment of the relationship between the exiled leadership and the 'inside'. Gerhart and Glaser speak of the influence of the ANC in exile as often being 'marginal' (p. 120). Lusaka did not 'run' opposition to apartheid inside the country, nor set up the UDF nor give directions to it, but there is plenty of evidence to the effect that large numbers of UDF leaders and activists saw themselves as carrying out the intentions of the ANC. Much published work refers to activists secretly listening nightly to Radio Freedom and carefully studying the ANC's January 8 anniversary statement. That is why when the ANC declared a particular year in honour of youth or women or some other sector, it would be followed by a proliferation of such organisations inside the country in the year that followed, as is reported in both volumes under discussion.

There is no doubt that many supporters of MK over-estimated its military power, which Gerhart and Glaser show was no match for the SADF. But as the SADET volume shows, it did launch some significant attacks, escalating in the period under review. This was militarily significant in that it had to be countered militarily. But the acts of MK were part of the reason why there was a massive surge of support for the ANC, and inspired many who were not formal members to join the resistance.

The SADET volume runs into two gigantic parts, containing (as in previous volumes on earlier periods) significant chapters on the ANC underground by Greg Houston, Jabulani Sithole and Janet Cherry. These add substantially to our knowledge in the field, drawing on interview and archival material never before accessed in very many cases. Taken together these chapters comprise over 450 pages.

There is a substantial component of regional and local studies of the UDF, its affiliates and other local resistance, by Jeremy Seekings, Sekibakiba Lekgoathi, Andrew Manson, Bernard Mbenga, Chitja Twala and Leo Barnard. Insofar as many activities of this period took place in areas far from the coverage of the main urban newspapers, these chapters add so much new data that it can lead one to rethink some of the characteristics of the period.

Jabulani Sithole and Sifiso Ndlovu discuss both SACTU and COSATU in two substantial chapters. While it is hard to do justice to all the complexities in the space allowed, these are good entry points. Greg Houston comprehensively discusses the ANC's armed struggle in a 140-page essay. The Chapter on the SACP by Eddy Maloka, drawing on party archives, which to my knowledge, are not yet deposited in any library, is a

substantial contribution to understanding the period of illegality, expanding an earlier slim volume which he produced.³

Organisations outside the Congress sway, like PAC, AZAPO, and BCM more generally, are covered in some 120 pages in chapters by Thami ka Platjje, Mbulelo Mzamane and Bavusile Maaba. There is a chapter on national organisation of civics by Jeremy Seekings, one on faith based resistance by Siphamandla Zondi, and also chapters on the Christian Institute, visual artists, the rise and fall of constructive engagement, and liberal opposition to apartheid.

Continuing work of the previous volume, Bhekizwe Peterson raises evocative questions in his chapter on the arts. Zine Magubane provides the first entry into the question of gender in the series. It is not a historical contribution but challenges paradigms that may be dominant in academia, that posit feminism as being incompatible with national liberation. Important as this input is, it does not sit comfortably with the overall conception of the series, which has sought to provide historical accounts of various elements of resistance history, with occasional reference to the role of women. The previous gaps mean that the intervention is not grounded in the SADET history as a whole, but also as a theoretical intervention it is buried within a series, where it will not be easily accessed by those who would challenge or debate its arguments.

My impression is that the SADET volumes have been underrated. Considered as a whole they comprise a comprehensive account of the post 1960 period of resistance. Other scholars will draw on this work, as with Gerhart and Glaser, for years to come.

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Notes

1. See M. Morobe, 'Towards a People's Democracy', *Review of African Political Economy*, 40 (1987), 81–87.
2. See T.G. Karis and G.M. Gerhart. *From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa, 1882–1990. Volume 5: Nadir and Resurgence, 1964–1979* (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 1997), 3–343. The introduction of the present edition is slightly shorter, running to 214 pages.
3. See E. Maloka, *The South African Communist Party in Exile, 1963–1990* (Pretoria: Africa Institute of South Africa, 2002).