

Review

Alexandra: A History (Wits University Press, Johannesburg, 2008)
Philip Bonner and Noor Nieftagodien

Reviewed by Alan Lipman

Much of my life has been spent with Alexandra Township in sight, in mind and ever alive in memory. Three decades of political exile abroad apart, Alex has been a central focus for me.

That's where I learnt and sharpened my knowledge of anti-apartheid activism and picked up the useful lesson of finding lively shebeens with wholesome home-brewed beer. That's where my wife and I visited friends, attended evening classes and studied under the direction of folk like Moses Kotane.

It's where we got caught up in the throbbing vitality of this mile-square freehold settlement. It's where we managed to dodge the police and, at other times, fell foolishly into their hands. It's where, daily, we drove people to and from central Johannesburg during the tenacious 1957 bus boycott. It's where, 50 years later, I carried out research into property ownership for the Gauteng Land Claims Commission.

Until I opened this book, I thought that I knew Alex and its almost century-old story. As committed scholars ought to do, as analytical social historians must do, Bonner and Nieftagodien punctured that mistaken notion.

They have confronted me with their carefully gathered, their rigorously interpreted, their always conscientiously questioned, historical information. Now I know just how superficial, how casual my knowledge of Alex, its people and their troubled story has been. I am chastened – and filled with

excitement about what I've read and learnt.

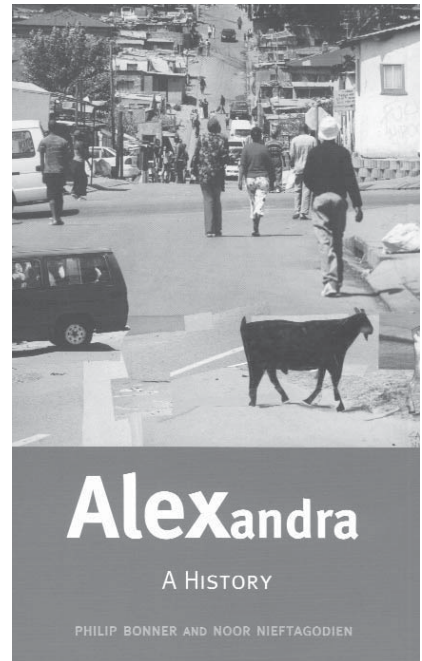
The book is, I must emphasise, a weighty tome. It contains well over 500 pages of fascinating material. It is a long haul in which almost every paragraph is jam-packed with information and with the authors' perceptive insights.

The authors are both based in the History Workshop at the University of the Witwatersrand and that shows, everywhere. The Workshop's qualities shine in the broad scope of the pair's comprehensive research network, in the thorough manner with which they have tested and cross-questioned their information and, not least, in the consistency with which the varying strands of the Alex history have been linked.

Taken all in all, this is a fine example of historical writing. It reminds one of the widely-known work of Howard Zinn, Edward Thompson and Christopher Hill in the United States and Britain.

Don't be deterred by this admirable conscientiousness. The text is immediately accessible. It is written in direct, straight-forward language. It is happily free of jargon or lofty pedantic passages. The descriptions and historical linkages are at once clear, the tone is relaxed, companionable.

Bonner and his co-worker have dedicated *Alexandra: A History* to the past and present inhabitants of the always crowded, jostling Alex. The story is told in 15 chapters. There is the always useful list of Abbreviations, the reproduced Map of Alexandra, the formal Acknowledgments, the Notes, Bibliography and Index. There are



the evocative photographs plus, unforgettably, the historically informed 'Introduction'.

I shall have to confine my brief comments to the introductory 16 pages and to Chapter Five, 'Reaping the Whirlwind, 1948-58'; Chapter Six, 'Political Culture in Alexandra, 1948-60' and 'Chapter Eleven: *Mzabalazo!* struggle for People's Power'. My choice lies in the fact that the 1950s and the early 1960s cover the years in which I was most directly associated with Alex, with its population and their vital social/political life; and Chapter Six will be of particular interest to SALB's worker readership.

Much of the 'Introduction' is given to exploring, and explaining, the selection of Alexandra. We are reminded that the area is "singular and distinctive as a freehold

township... it survived [as] representative of countless other similar freehold urban townships that did not. Alexandra thus offers a privileged perspective from which to view and understand a much larger slice of South African black urban society and experience."

The authors also mention such socially, economically and politically significant places of former freehold as Jo'burg's Sophiatown, Cape Town's District Six and Port Elizabeth's Korsten, all of which were once examples of this "relatively unusual privilege in white supremacist South Africa." All were places in which "property meant independence, self-worth and respectability."

Against this background, Bonner and Niefertgodien highlight a number of other telling circumstances. These include the many ex-sharecroppers from the countryside who, once they became established in Alex, "turned urban businessman and entrepreneur." This, the two argue, uncovers links between past rural assets and current urban property ownership, entrepreneurship and enhanced social standing.

They then deal with a number of related issues such as the racial inter-mingling and rich cultural lives which frequently characterised areas of urban freehold. Issues like their inhabitants' political awareness and their unfortunate proneness to criminal gang warfare. They focus on, among other matters, the mix of accommodation embracing local council and private developments, municipal single-sex hostels, multiple sub-divided homes, rooms-to-let and the always mushrooming shacks, shacks, shacks.

Then Chapter Five, 1948-58, the decade following three centuries of murderous oppression. These were

years dedicated to racist legislation and oppressive administration. This ranged from additional restrictions on land ownership to increasingly harsh police surveillance and action. Also it tells of intensified attacks on the dispossessed majority's health, its education, employment and its already limited freedom of movement. These reached into all major, and many minor spheres of life such as the military and constabulary acting more and more like a home-grown army of occupation.

As the authors record, many of the country's young people, and certainly those in Alex, responded during these brutalising years by turning, in often organised gangs, to crime. Indeed, these pages are marked by terms like *tsots*, by gang names such as The Spoilers and Zorro's Fighting Legion. It's a story of escalating nastiness.

And Chapter Six, politics in Alex. Recollections of the swinging music and dance, the vividly expressive literature and sport, and of how the diverse political groupings of this vital square mile lived together in mutual tolerance. My recall of these, particularly the ANC, the SA Communist Party, the PAC and, a little later, the ANC Youth League, is of the political clout that flowed and ebbed dramatically between them throughout this period.

The individuals who Bonner and Niefertgodien mention echo down the years. They include Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu, then came Lucas Bopape, Thomas Nkobi, and the many Alex residents who, arrested in December 1956, were accused in the drawn out Treason Trial that followed.

None of these people, I imagine, would have endorsed the xenophobic horror in the township with which the authors

conclude this story of violence, of resistance and national liberation. To my knowledge, the edgy anti-Indian and anti-white emotions of the 1950s never spilled over into such frenzied abuse.

Then Chapter Eleven, the heady days of people's power in the 1980s and the height of insurrection against apartheid. Although Alex was a latecomer to township uprisings, when it came its residents engaged in highly imaginative ways to challenge the state's power and the township exploded with a particular intensity.

The political leadership shifted to a new and powerful alliance of militant youth and trade union activists (most famous being Moses Mayekiso) with the formation of the Alexandra Action Committee (AAC). Trade union accountability and a strong socialist bias came to the fore.

The AAC's organisation was disrupted by an explosion of violence and confrontation with the state famously known as the 'Six Day War'. This ungovernability was followed by the AAC's initiative in setting up bold alternatives as the township created democratic organs of self government through accountable yard, street and block committees. Through such organisation residents launched a successful rent boycott and made such demands as affordable rents, troops out of townships and the release of political prisoners. To these initiatives the state responded with ferocity and hordes of vigilantes attacked the township.

But read about it yourself. You will surely learn from, and come greatly to appreciate, this tale of your own history. LB

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