

The communist party during the

war years: *the beginnings of grass-roots politics*

LULI CALLINICOS* assesses the role of the Communist Party during the 1940s

Soon after the South African Communist Party was unbanned, General Secretary Joe Slovo announced that the Party would not change its name, despite the world-wide trend against communism. He said the South African Communist Party had a proud tradition of resistance to racial discrimination and exploitation. Slovo gave as an example that the Communist Party of South Africa (the CPSA) had 'fathered the trade unions' in South Africa. This was certainly true in general. What is less well documented, though, is the extent of CPSA involvement in grassroots community struggles in the 1940s.

The CPSA by the 1940s
With a national membership of less than 300 in 1940, the

CPSA was small indeed. Yet, in spite of grave shortcomings and internal weaknesses in earlier years, the CPSA became the most influential political organisation in black communities in the Transvaal in the 1940s.

The CPSA in 1940 was an organisation weakened by a series of self-inflicted blows. The party was founded in 1921, four years after the Russian Revolution, and the establishment of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). During the 1920s and 1930s, CPSA members became increasingly involved in trade union activity, among black and white workers.

But the 1930s was a period of deep insecurity for communists. The USSR became increasingly isolated: it felt threatened by the capital-

ist countries of the West - by Britain, the USA, and France - as well as the violently anti-communist countries of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. Under the influence of Soviet leader Stalin, communist parties the world over began to investigate their own members. During the USSR's 'Great Purge', literally millions of even mild 'dissidents' lost their lives, leaving Stalin the sole leader of a party committed to a form of forced state socialism.

In South Africa, the CPSA was infected by rigid dogmatism. It ended up expelling as many as a third of its members. Anyone who questioned the 'party line', formulated by the Communist International in Moscow, was victimised. These included some of its most loyal mem-

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bers like founder-member Sidney Bunting, and many of the party's most effective trade unionists such as Solly Sachs and Gana Makabeni.

The turning point

By 1940, the CPSA was considerably weakened as a result of these purges. But the Second World War brought a turning point in its history. Its avowed non-racialism, and its opposition to the war from 1939 to 1941 won the support of many blacks, who were strongly opposed to the Smuts government. They distrusted his motives for joining Britain in the war against nazism.

Between 1941 and 1943, the CPSA went on a recruiting drive, and national membership rose to over 1 300 (*Inkululeko*, 23.1.43) This was still a small number, yet the CPSA, with its 'vanguard' policy of training a highly committed and tightly-knit membership, influenced the thinking of thousands of ordinary people. Elias Motsoaledi, who joined the CPSA in 1945, recalled many years later:

"Within the Transvaal itself there were more than 400 members. Four hundred at that time was a good number, because all of those members were active - they weren't just sitting."

The CPSA encouraged members to join other potentially progressive organisations. Besides throwing themselves into the trade union movement, members also joined township Vigilance Associations, Rate-payers' Associations and Ad-

visory Boards; the Native Representative Council, the Non-European United Front and the Indian congresses. But, above all, the party urged its members to help build the ANC into the main organisation of the African people. In the words of Elias Motsoaledi,



Elias Motsoaledi - joined the CPSA in 1945

Photo: Eric Miller/Afrapix

"The party encouraged us to join the national liberatory movement to give it a progressive outlook and lead it - to make it the mass movement it is supposed to be."

This was consistent with CPSA policy. In 1928, the party had officially taken the decision to strive for a 'Native Republic of South Africa' as the first of two stages towards a socialist democracy. Under the influence of Moses Kotane, the party developed a theory to accommodate its work with black nationalists. 'Nationalist in form, socialist in content', was its slogan.

Communists in the ANC

The ANC benefited from the contributions of leading com-

munist such as JB Marks (expelled from the CPSA in the late 1930s, but rejoining it a couple of years later), Moses Kotane, Dan Tloome and many others. These newcomers brought with them the skills which their party had given them - their experience in organising, their party discipline, and their theoretical understanding of exploitation and oppression.

"You see, the party was training us politically", explained Motsoaledi.

"I was taught the ANC by the Communist Party. So that when I joined the ANC, I understood the ANC better than some of its members... We were given political education. There were no political classes in the ANC. The political education was imparted by the party, who did not just make you join. You had to undergo training and you had to understand politics and you had to... make sure that you understand what you are fighting for. And you had to understand why you are fighting.... The reason why [the ANC] developed was as a result of running of classes by us, and these we got from the party."

Grassroots activity, local struggles and campaigns

The experience of two CPSA members in the 1940's - David Bopape in Brakpan and Naboth Mokgatle in Marabastad - show the important influence of the CPSA in some areas. They were new young members who had not been part of the destructive quarrels and the ex-



David Bopape - 'the party helped to revive the ANC'

Photo: History Workshop

pulsions in the 1930s. They had not experienced the grip which the Soviet Union had had on the CPSA. The USSR was for them a brave and respected ally, whose victory would bring democracy and social justice as a step nearer for the black oppressed. Bopape became a member of the Communist Party in 1940, two years before he joined the ANC.

Looking back on the role of the CPSA Bopape felt that the "dynamic approach to the national movement" of party members helped to revive the ANC. This was certainly true of Brakpan Location where he found the Brakpan branch defunct.

"I had to revive it," he says now. "I got hold of some old members who were workers in 1924 and 1936, when the ANC had been active here. I invited them and we built a powerful branch. The ANC was mainly elderly people, not very literate. In Brakpan the party and the ANC worked closely together - members of

the ANC were not always members of the party, and vice versa."

Bopape went on to become the Secretary of the ANC in the Transvaal, and in 1944 was elected national secretary of the Anti-Pass Campaign.

Naboth Mokgatle was another example of one whose life was deeply affected by the Communist Party and particularly by the committed white socialists in its night schools. When he joined the party, Mokgatle was placed in the Marabastad area group.

In his words: "I found not only Africans, but Europeans as well. The Communist Party at that time was highly disciplined. To obtain membership one had to prove one was willing to work and discipline oneself. I began to attend party lectures and classes and studied hard to enable myself to understand more about the party, the country's politics and the politics of other countries."

The CPSA initiated resistance to a number of problems which ordinary people faced in the townships. Besides its work in the trade unions, it supported bus boycotts and rent struggles. It campaigned against permits, poll-taxes, segregation and passes. Its members made regular public speeches. Gaur Radebe, for example, gave inspiring addresses at 'Number 2 Square' in Alex. Naboth Mokgatle and his partner Stephen Tefu held many public meetings and distributed leaflets 'in all localities' around Pretoria. Many white and black mem-

bers, including Yusuf Dadoo spoke on the Johannesburg City Hall steps on Sunday nights. Dadoo, together with GM Naicker, spearheaded the passive resistance campaign of 1946.

CPSA members like Bopape in Brakpan, and Edwin Mofutsenyana in Orlando, agitated for equal representation in town councils. Migrant members like Al-



Alpheus Maliba - popularised the party in rural areas

Photo: History Workshop

pheus Maliba went back to their own rural areas to politicise the peasants there.

The CPSA also started a new newspaper, *Inkululeko*, which published articles and news in the languages of English, Sotho, Zulu, Tswana, Xhosa, Venda and Shangaan. The party's black members contributed towards a new, non-racial culture of socialism in those years.

The CPSA's anti-war period

In September 1939 South Africa joined Britain in declaring war on Germany .

The CPSA opposed the move. Along with other Marxists, the CPSA denounced the war as an 'imperialist war' between rival capitalist powers. It called instead for a continuation of the 'people's peace' movement.

The reasoning of the party was that the capitalist countries were blatantly hostile to the USSR and to socialism. They had remained 'neutral' during the civil war against the Fascists in Spain in the mid 1930s. They stood aside, until the left was crushed. They had furthermore failed to prevent fascist Italy from invading Ethiopia, Africa's last independent black state.

In 1938 they had allowed Hitler to swallow up Austria, making it part of the new Nazi Germany. They also permitted Nazis to seize part of Czechoslovakia. And while Britain, France and the USA condemned the vicious persecution of Jews (as well as communists, socialists and Gypsies), these countries were unwilling to form an alliance with the Soviet Union against the Nazis in Germany and the Fascists in Italy. The turning point came only when Hitler broke his agreement with Britain not to invade Poland.

In 1938 Stalin startled the world by signing a 'Non-Aggression Pact' with Hitler. Officially the CPSA interpreted this as a defensive move by the USSR, because the British and French had failed to respond to the Soviet Union's requests for an alliance against Hitler. How-

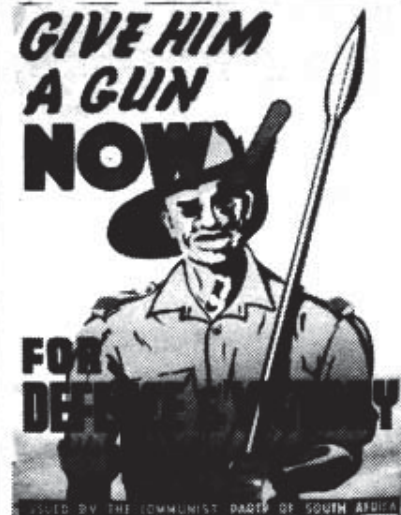
ever, not all members were happy about it.

But there was also a popular opposition to the war. Many Afrikaner workers, as well as many blacks felt they could not support Smuts. The CPSA decided to concentrate on local issues. Communists attacked 'Nazi' conditions at home - racial oppression, segregation and poverty wages. "Don't support this war where the rich get rich and the poor get killed", urged Yusuf Dadoo, party member and leader of the Transvaal Non-European United Front. He was jailed for four months for that statement.

The CPSA joins the 'war effort'

But in June 1941 the situation changed dramatically. Hitler's troops suddenly invaded the Soviet Union. The CPSA Central Committee issued a statement stating that the character of the war had changed completely: The Soviet Union is not an imperialist power and is not waging an imperialist war. It urged all progressives to join the war to defend the world's only socialist state. The Soviet Union was the inspiration and hope of all who have been kept under, declared Moses Kotane at a mass rally in Cape Town.

The CPSA publicised its slogan, 'Arm the People!' and issued thousands of pamphlets. It called for the recognition of African trade unions, and the establishment of workers' production committees to increase output to help the 'war effort' and pre-



Poster issued by the party in the 1940s

Graphic: SA History Archives

vent industrial sabotage.

"Give the people democratic rights", urged *Inkululeko*, "give them a country and a decent life, give them arms and there is nothing they will not do to defend their freedom and their rights."

As the Soviet Union began to bear more and more of the brunt of the war, so its reputation grew. In 1942 the South African government formally received a Soviet Consulate in Pretoria. The organisation, Friends of the Soviet Union, became respectable and collected funds and clothes for war-torn Russia. On the SABC, CPSA leader and veteran trade unionist Bill Andrews broadcast a May Day message in support of the war effort, while Communists in the army helped to form the Springbok Legion, which organised soldiers to campaign for democracy in South Africa.

Period of optimism

In what has been described as "a period of optimism", the party even put up white



Poster produced by the party in the 1940s

Graphic: South African History Archives

candidates in the 1943 general elections. Although they did not win any of the seats, the CPSA polled 11% of the votes. Later that year, CPSA candidates won seats in the Cape Town and East London city councils. In 1944, Communist Party candidate Hilda Watts won a City Council seat in Hillbrow. Elias Motsoaledi explained her victory as fol-

lows:

"Russia was defeating Germany. At that time Hillbrow was a petit-bourgeois constituency, and predominantly Jews. Hitler was persecuting Jews. That is why they voted for Hilda Watts."

But the election victories of the CPSA were not confined to whites. CPSA candidates were voted into



Hilda Watts - significant CPSA victory in Hillbrow

Photo: History Workshop

the township Advisory Boards in East London, Orlando, and Langa, among others. The CPSA continued to attract more black members than whites.* Thousands of Africans continued to oppose the war. But there was also, in the words of Elias Motsoaledi, praise for Stalin's "tactical move, to sign a treaty with Hitler, as a delaying tactic - which worked out to have been a great strategy." The CPSA's wide-spread campaigns, both in local townships and wider afield, attracted many thousands of blacks supporters, even though only a few actually joined the party.

Criticism

The CPSA was not without its critics on the left. The 1940s saw the emergence of a number of radical organisations which were disillusioned with the dogmatism and Stalinism of the CPSA during the 1930s.

There was a small but ar-

* By 1950, when it was banned, 1600 of the CPSA's 2 000 members were African, 250 were Indian, and 150 were white (See Karis and Carter, *From Protest to Challenge*, Vol 2, Hoover Institution Press, Stanford 1973, pp 107 and 408)

ticulate group of Trotskyists, mainly located in the Western Cape. Trotskyists were also organising black trade unions on the Rand in the 1940s. They accused the CPSA of failing to support strikes because of the party's support for the 'war effort'. By subordinating the interests of workers to the interest of the Soviet Union, they argued, the CPSA missed important opportunities for strengthening the unions in the war years.

The CPSA's wooing of white voters was for some socialists too much to swallow. They pointed out that by appealing to middle-class whites, communist candidates were abandoning class struggle. They felt that the communists were behaving like liberals, emphasising civil rights rather than the structures of exploitation in South Africa.

Perhaps the party's sternest criticism came from the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM), which was located mainly in the Western Cape, and many of whose members were influenced by Trotsky. The NEUM grew out of the organised resistance to the government's continuous attempts to extend its segregation policies to the coloured people. Its policy was founded on an 'anti-collaborationist' platform, and it roundly condemned the CPSA for contesting the racially defined parliamentary and municipal elections.

NEUM members also felt that, despite the Nazi attack on

the Soviet Union, the war continued to be an imperialist war. They felt that the CPSA's involvement in the war committed the communists to 'class collaboration' - for example, by their attempts to form a Popular Front of both middle-class and working-class whites and blacks in order to win the war.

The NEUM also criticised the communists for participating in 'dummy councils' such as the Native Representative Council and the township Advisory Boards. And they labelled as totally 'opportunistic' the CPSA's policy to join and work inside racially defined national movements such as the ANC and the Indian Congresses.

Finally, the newly formed

ANC Youth League was also deeply suspicious of what they saw as the 'manipulation' and white domination of the CPSA.

"Only later", recalled Walter Sisulu, "did I realise that Moses [Kotane] was in fact a man of his own. And so was Dadoo, he was a man of his own."

The CPSA itself admitted to making mistakes. At the grass-roots level, for example, it misjudged the deep-seated feelings of the thousands of landless and homeless families on the Rand. The CPSA members on the Orlando Advisory Board - Mofutsenyana and Moema - turned down squatter leader Mpanza's request for help. They did not trust Mpanza's motives, and felt that to start a squatter campaign on



Alexandra squatters on the march through Johannesburg

Photo: History Workshop

the eve of winter was irresponsible in the extreme. Walter Sisulu, recalling the response of the communists, commented:

“When you are engaged in the politics of combat, you tend to ignore, you tend to think less of what the other man is doing. You kind of think that he is being opportunistic, and you do not pay attention. You must try to pay particular attention [to your opponents].”

Mpanza’s stunning success was a lesson that the CPSA could not ignore. It was probably the cause of its failure to capture seats in the following three Advisory Board elections in Orlando. At its 1945 meeting the Johannesburg District Committee critically examined its role in the Sofa-sonke movement:

“We have failed to recognise the deep desire and need for vigorous and political leadership, we did not act as the vanguard of their struggle.” (Lodge, p 15)

The party tried to make up for this by encouraging more democratically run camps such as the squatter community in Alexander, led by CPSA member Schreiner Bazuza.

A vanguard party?

What was the nature of the CPSA’s intervention in the 1940’s? Did it play the revolutionary vanguard role it set for itself? The CPSA certainly had members in key community and national organisations, as we have seen. JB Marks, for example, was

was secretary of the African Mineworkers Union and led the 1946 strike. In the Council of Non-European Trade Unions (CNETU) four of the seven members in the executive were Communists. The CPSA had members in the executives of the ANC, the Indian Congresses and the Non-European Front. On the Rand alone the party had twenty-four active branches, most of them in the townships. Furthermore, CPSA members were involved in many local grassroots movements, as we have seen. It was this presence in almost all areas of opposition that promoted the criticisms of its opponents, as well as the attacks from the government.

The CPSA attracted a high calibre of members, and gave direction to their commitment and energy. But the members did not always have the same reasons for joining the party. Some were white intellectuals or radical immigrant workers; others were black teachers, or migrant workers. In the leadership, the majority continued to be white intellectuals. But it was the party’s non-racialism, and its ability to deliver practical improvements in their lives, as much as class struggle, that attracted many black members.

Inevitably, the character of the party was also influenced by these members: for example, migrant workers brought a connection with rural struggles. Moses Kotane emphasised the national and racial dimension

of the struggle.

The actual revolutionary nature of the CPSA during the forties is open to question. It did not always succeed in its aim of directing the growing militancy of the ordinary people. Sometimes it followed - rather than led - the movements of ordinary people in the townships and at the workplace. Yet the CPSA exercised a significant influence on a number of communities on the Rand. Through a small band of energetic and dedicated activists, the party performed a vanguard role, and had a substantial impact on the climate of resistance in the 1940s. It also made a crucial contribution to the development of the ANC as a more directed, grass-roots, working class organisation. This helped to equip the ANC for the years of struggle against the apartheid state that lay ahead.

SOURCES

This article is based on: Interviews by the author with Elias Motsoaledi, David Bopape, Ray Alexander and Walter Sisulu in June/July 1990; Bunting, B, *Moses Kotane: South African Revolutionary*, (Inkululeko Publications, London 1975); Hirson, B, *Yours for the Union* (Wits University Press, 1989) Lodge, T: ‘Class conflict, communal struggle and patriotic unity: the CPSA during the Second World War’ (African Studies Seminar, October 1985); Mokgatle, N, *The Autobiography of an Unknown South African*, C Hurst & Co, London 1971; various editions of *The Guardian* and *Inkululeko*.