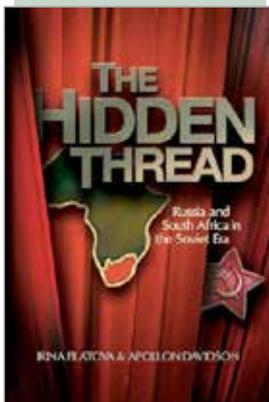


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**THE HIDDEN THREAD:
RUSSIA AND SOUTH
AFRICA IN THE SOVIET
ERA**

**By Irina Filatova & Apollon
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& Cape Town
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BOOK REVIEW

The Hidden Thread: Russia and South Africa in the Soviet Era by Irina Filatova & Apollon Davidson

I suspect that many South Africans' fascination with Russia, pre- and post-Soviet era as well as the Soviet Union, lies with a sense that our countries' histories contain so many parallels: minority elites and peasant masses; pockets of high technology industrialisation combined with an agrarian economy; lurches back and forth between democracy and authoritarianism, punctuated by revolutionary uprisings and mass protest. Indeed, in both countries one sees, too, tense engagements with liberal constitutionalism and the rule of law, faced off against populist nationalisms.

Given, too, the general lack of South African scholars familiarity with the Russian language, it's also not too surprising that few works of comparative history or of Russian-South African relations have been written. Those that have come from South Africa have been mainly polemical works, relics of the Cold War warning against (mostly, it seems, imagined) Soviet imperial designs on the country.

Thankfully, this new book by two leading Russian historians of South Africa, both professors for many years in the country, sets out to clarify Russian-South African foreign relations. Drawing on original and published sources from both countries, what we have is the most comprehensive and balanced account to date on the subject. In addition Filatova and Davidson are also lively and engaging writers, making this book enjoyable as much as informative reading.

Though their narrative focuses on the era of the Soviet Union (1917-1989/91), unsurprising given that this dovetails neatly with the apartheid era in South Africa, they begin by describing the first Russian encounters with Dutch and British rule at the Cape, diplomatic and trade ties with the Boer Republics – including strong Russian moral support for the Boers during the Anglo-Boer War. Such support included Russian volunteers serving in the Boer forces.

Interestingly, too, Russians were seen by Pondo chiefs in the Eastern Cape as potential allies in their struggle against colonial incorporation. Letters were written to the Tsar, who was perceived to be black, asking for assistance. It did not come, though in the 20th century the Soviet Union provided considerable educational support and military training to the descendants of these earlier African nationalists.

The 1917 Bolshevik Revolution's impact was also quite varied. While some South Africans served in the Allied war effort against the Red Army, the mainly white South African Left – then a mishmash of trade unions and socialist groups – was inspired to form the Communist Party of South Africa in 1921 and became part of Comintern. Even the National Party was not left unaffected – no less than future Prime Minister J B M Hertzog proudly endorsed the Russian Revolution and declared that the goals of Afrikaner Nationalism were identical with Bolshevism.

A relatively small but significant level of trade occurred between South Africa and the Soviet Union until at least the 1950s – and perhaps even afterwards.¹ South African mining companies were also engaging in trade agreements with the USSR over production and sale of key minerals – to the economic benefit of both parties.

Official South African–Soviet relations took a strongly Cold War turn from 1950 onwards. This was played out most dramatically during South Africa's war in Angola and Namibia during the 1970s and 1980s. Soviet military advised and supported the MPLA government of Angola in their war with South Africa and the UNITA guerrilla movement.

On a political level, the Soviet Union through Comintern's 'Native Republic' policy directed the Communist Party towards strong identification with African nationalism. This decision divided the CPSA and led to expulsions of dissident members. The Party itself, the only non-racial political movement in South Africa for decades, played a key role in cementing the alliance of the African National Congress with its supporters among minorities and the labour movement; it would also, in the early 1960s, be central to the formation and leadership of the ANC's armed wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe. In turn, the Soviet Union assisted MK in military training – though some within felt that the training was all too often overly focused on conventional, as opposed to guerrilla, warfare.

During World War II, with the USSR part of the Allied war against Nazism, the Soviet Union enjoyed a temporary resurgence in popularity through the Friends of the Soviet Union. Set up by the CPSA it included (for the duration of the War at least) the patronage of figures like Prime Minister Jan Smuts, his deputy Jan Hofmeyr and Anglican Bishop Lavis. After the war it continued, mainly led by Communists, and helped set up the South African Peace Council, the local wing of the Prague-based World Peace Council.² It died out by the end of the 1950s, as National Party discourse rapidly adopted Cold War rhetoric to serve the apartheid agenda.

Official South African–Soviet relations took a strongly Cold War turn from 1950 onwards. This was played out most dramatically during South Africa's war in Angola and Namibia during the 1970s and 1980s. Soviet military advised and supported the MPLA government of Angola in their war with South Africa and the UNITA guerrilla movement. Though Soviet military aid in the 'frontline states' and support for the ANC and SWAPO was significant, the authors do not dwell overmuch on it, seeing it as part of a much wider and more subtle Soviet foreign policy³.

Similarly South Africa was also a sideshow in global espionage activities. Among Soviet agents captured during the period the most important was navy commodore Dieter Gerhardt – who was later part of a multinational spy swop organised by the United States. South African intelligence, it should be noted, worked closely with American, British and West German secret services throughout the Cold War. The extent of South African involvement in the Cold War has yet to be examined

historically (if indeed the sources remain!) – what Davidson and Filatova offer are tantalising glimpses that cry for further research.

As both apartheid and Soviet communism slid into decline in the late 1980s, the authors reveal the extent to which both sides were reconsidering their rivals. South African scholars, many with intelligence and foreign affairs backgrounds, began considering renewed diplomatic relations with the USSR. In Russia, their counterparts began to reconsider how they might contribute to peace in South Africa. Some even went so far as to suggest a less inflexible attitude to white South Africa – a few even started to learn Afrikaans.

In the new era, say the authors, relations between the new South Africa and new Russia have normalised. A brief Russian romance with South Africa has cooled, and morphed into the hard-nosed diplomacy and trade issues that South Africa's entry to the Brics Group has generated. Indeed peace has even seen the collapse through economic rationalisation of the two major Russian Studies departments at South African universities (UNISA and Witwatersrand).

What this all too brief outline of *The Hidden Thread* has, I hope, shown is the complexity of the Soviet-South African relationship in the 20th century. Interspersed with the grand narratives of politics and economics, apartheid and Marxism-Leninism, the authors present short accounts of ordinary Russians in South Africa, and South Africans' experiences in the Soviet Union. Naturally not all areas are covered in the detail one might hope for – I for one feel that there is considerable need for more on the exile experience of South Africans in Russia, on early South African experiences in Lenin's and Stalin's USSR in particular. Similarly, it would be interesting to examine the influence of Russian literature on its South African counterparts: to what degree do authors like Gordimer, Brink and Coetzee, for example, consciously echo that historically-informed, spiritually tormented melancholia that one finds in the great Russian writers of the last few centuries?

But of course one cannot demand everything of one book, not least one that delivers so much as it is. The result of meticulous research. Irina Filatova and Apollon Davidson have produced for us a dense, rich narrative, intellectual filling, thick and tasty as borscht soup at its best. Thoroughly engaging, and truly entertaining as history at its best should be, this book will be the standard text on Soviet-South African relations for years to come.

NOTES

- 1 I recall that the first watch I owned (in the mid-1970s) was made in Russia. I heard later, though I have never been able to verify it, that many of the boots worn by South African Defence Force infantrymen during the 1970s and 1980s were of Soviet provenance.
- 2 Here I notice one of the few 'errors' in the book. Though the FSU and Peace Council were chaired by a non-Party member, the Reverend Douglas Thompson, he was not, as the authors say, a 'protestant dean' (p 192) but a Methodist minister. The term 'dean' is associated with Anglicanism, and the authors are almost certainly conflating Thompson with the British Anglican 'Red Dean' of Canterbury, the Reverend Hewlett Johnson, who was in many ways Thompson's more famous British counterpart. Johnson, it should be noted, was author of a bestselling apologia for Stalinism, *The Socialist Sixth of the World* (London: Victor Gollancz 1939), which was a standard introductory textbook for young South African Communists.
- 3 A more detailed account of this aspect of Soviet-South African relations can be found in the fairly polemical but comprehensive work of their fellow Russian 'Africanist', Vladimir Shubin. See: Shubin, ANC: A View from Moscow 2nd edition (Johannesburg: Jacana Media 2008); *The Hot 'Cold War': The USSR in Southern Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: UKZN Press, 2008).