**Introduction**

**Why South Africa – and Russia?**

South Africa has long fascinated historians and sociologists because its unique mixture of races, religions and traditions produced and reproduced unique social formations and deformations against the backdrop of world’s greatest concentration of mineral wealth. It has been a virtual laboratory of the social sciences. Only South Africa’s internal social dynamics could create its surprising political history. Yet this is also a society which has always been wide open to external influences. In different ways they have played upon its complex interior structure. And that is what this book is about.

For the last three and a half centuries South Africa’s history has not only been deeply affected by different external influences, but to a large extent it was actually formed by them. Some, like the Dutch and British, were obvious and enormous, for they created the core carrying structures of the country and much more beyond. Some influences, like that of the ‘Malay’ in the Cape or the Indian in Natal, were more subtle and mainly cultural, contributing to the unique texture of South African society. One could think of many other such influences – Portuguese, French, Jewish and German, to name merely the most obvious. And all this in a pre-globalised world when, on the face of things, events at the southern tip of Africa moved according only to their own momentum.

In this connection Russia seldom comes to mind. Some might remember Russian Jewish immigration at the turn of the twentieth century, when no fewer than 25 000 Jews arrived in South Africa from the Russian Empire. Others, mostly veterans of the ruling African National Congress (ANC), would speak with gratitude of Soviet assistance for their armed struggle against the apartheid regime. And that would be it.

Yet the truth is that in the twentieth century Russia, or rather the Soviet Union, left a deep and lasting impact on the trajectory of South Africa’s history. Soviet ideology still defines the spirit and letter of the main policy documents of the ANC and its allies, the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu). The Soviet mentality, values and vision of the world are still widely spread among the ANC leadership. Were it not for Soviet assistance to the ANC in exile, particularly in its first and most difficult decade, the ANC might not have survived at all. Were it not for Soviet assistance to the ANC’s military wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe, the history and character of the ANC would have been very different from what it became – and that means that South Africa’s recent history as a whole would have been different too. When ideologists of the apartheid regime spoke of the Soviet ‘total onslaught’ against South Africa, this smacked of paranoia: they found the influence of the ‘reds’ under the bed and everywhere else. Yet without the Soviet stand in the United Nations, without its anti-apartheid propaganda campaigns and without its support for and assistance to the international anti-apartheid movement, apartheid’s demise might have come in a different shape and form. And without the changes in Soviet policy under Gorbachev the ‘South African miracle’ – the negotiated settlement – might not have happened.

This book is about all that – and much more. How did Soviet ideals make their way to South Africa? What were these ideals? How was the connection established? Who were the people and what were the organisations involved in maintaining relations between the Soviets and the ANC? What exactly did Soviet assistance to the ANC consist of? How was it delivered? What did the South Africans who came to the USSR for training – whether in the 1930s or in the 1980s – study? How many of these trainees were there? Some names of Soviet spies in South Africa are well known – but were there many others? What were they interested in? And what about South African spies in the Soviet Union? South Africans and Russians fought together against Hitler – what were their attitudes to one another during the Second World War? And what did they think of one another during the only time when they clashed on the battlefield – in Angola? How did the change in the Soviet policy under Gorbachev happen, and what was the ANC’s reaction to that? How were relations between Gorbachev’s USSR and South Africa established?

Until recently there were no answers to many of these questions. The link between the two countries in the Soviet era was almost completely hidden. Most of the activities of the Communist International (Comintern), the international communist organisation centred in Moscow, which in the 1920s and 1930s established connections with South African communists, were secret. For a long time the USSR denied the existence of its military assistance to the ANC, and later this assistance was mentioned only in the most general terms. Soviet participation in military actions in Angola was completely denied. The Soviet archives of that era were closed. Many relevant South African archives were destroyed or lost. Veterans and witnesses on both sides refused to discuss uncomfortable topics.

The situation started to change in recent years. Some of the archives ‒ for example, those of the Comintern ‒ are now open to researchers. South African archives are collecting new materials and cataloguing their new collections. Veterans and participants in events started to publish memoirs and to share their reminiscences. Academic studies of various relevant topics began to appear.

This is not to say that, as far as relations between South Africa and the Soviet Union are concerned, the era of a researcher’s paradise has arrived. Far from it. The most important Soviet archives – those of the Committee of State Security (KGB) and of the Defence Ministry – are still closed. The archives of the former South African National Intelligence Service (NIS) are either lost or closed. Only a small part of the archives of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) is open, and many of its materials, even the published ones, were re-classified in recent years. The archives of the Central Committee’s International Department have never been opened. The archives of the SACP in exile seem to have been lost. We could continue this list – but we still think that the hidden thread which connected the USSR and South Africa in the twentieth century is becoming more visible, and that it is now possible to trace it, even though many details cannot be restored.

We have studied relations between South Africa and Russia for decades and published a number of books[[1]](#footnote-1) and numerous articles on this subject both in Russian and in English. But this is the first complete history of ties between the two countries in the ‘Soviet era’: from the Russian 1917 revolution to the collapse of the Soviet Union. We give sketches of the ‘prehistory’ of this era and of its aftermath too, but in terms of Russia’s impact on South Africa’s historical path, it is the Soviet era that is of salient importance. That is the subject of this book.

The material for it comes from Russian and South African archives, from the private archives of participants in events, from multiple published documents, newspapers, and parliamentary debates, from other researchers’ studies and from published and unpublished memoirs by participants in events and our own interviews and conversations with them.

We were participants in these events too. Our own memories and materials have also become part of this book. Together and separately we were privileged to have met and to have spoken with many of those who ‘constituted’ the Soviet era in South Africa: people of different views and fortunes, but all of them heroes of this book. Among them were Alex Boraine, Andre Brink, Yusuf Dadoo, FW de Klerk, Moses Kotane, John Marks, Govan Mbeki, Thabo Mbeki, Walter Sisulu, Helen Suzman, Oliver Tambo, and Frederik van Zyl Slabbert. We also had the privilege of discussing South Africa’s history and its ties with Russia with many leading South African academics. In Russia, too, we have known many participants in events – those who were the Russian part of the South African history, its Moscow chapter: Anatoly Adamishin, Viacheslav Shiriaev, Vladimir Shubin, Vasili Solodovnikov, Viacheslav Tetekin, Andrei Urnov and many, many others. All these people in different ways helped us to understand the era about which we write here.

Nelson Mandela placed a huge responsibility on us when in 1994, in his speech at the opening of the Russian Centre at the University of Cape Town, of which Apollon Davidson was director, he said: ‘As we measure the new location for the evolving relationship between the two countries, we must appreciate that Professor Apollon Davidson and his colleagues are well positioned to understand the real measure of the links between our two countries. They have personal experience of the long ties which bound our people to Moscow.’[[2]](#footnote-2)

We can only hope that this book is worthy of such a high appreciation of our scholarly endeavours. But we certainly think that it is a terribly interesting read.

1. II Filatova and AB Davidson, *Rossiia i Yuzhnaia Afrika. Navedeniie mostov* (*Russia and South Africa. Building Bridges)*. Moscow: Publishing House of National Research University Higher School of Economics, 2012; AB Davidson and II Filatova, *Rossia i Yuznaia Afrika. Tri veka sviqzei (Russia and South Africa. Three Centuries of Contacts)*. Moscow: Publishing House of State University Higher School of Economics, 2010; AB Davidson and II Filatova, *The Russians and the Anglo-Boer War, 1899‒1902*. Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 1998; A Davidson, I Filatova, V Gorodnov and S Johns (eds), *South Africa and the Communist International: A Documentary History (1919‒1939),* vols I, II. London: Frank Cass, 2003; AB Davidson and VA Makrushin, *Zov dalnikh morei* (*The Call of Southern Seas)*. Moscow: Nauka Publishers, 1979; AB Davidson and VA Makrushin. *Oblik daliokoi strany* (*The Image of a Far-off Country)*. Moscow: Nauka Publishers, 1975; AB Davidson, *Yuzhnaia Afrika: stanovleniie sil protesta 1870‒1924* (*South Africa: Birth of Protest, 1870‒1924)*. Moscow: Nauka Publishers, 1972. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Speech by President Nelson Mandela at the opening of the Centre for Russian Studies at the University of Cape Town, 17 August 1994, in A Davdison, ed. *Russia in the Contemporary World. Proceedings of the First Symposium in South Africa*, Centre for Russian Studies, University of Cape Town, 17-19 August, 1994. Cape Town: Centre for Russian Studies and the Marvol Foundation, 1995. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)