

THE DEATH OF ALBERT NZULA AND THE SILENCE OF GEORGE PADMORE

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The contradictions in Padmore's politics emerge most sharply in an episode relating directly to South Africa. His claim that the purges 'did not affect' the 'few Negroes working in Russia at the time of the first Five Year Plan' (*Pan-Africanism or Communism?* p.314) is refuted by a strange omission from his book. The matter relates to the last years in Moscow of the first black general secretary of the CPSA, Padmore's friend and comrade, Albert Nzula.

Nzula reached Moscow in 1931, the protege of Douglas Wolton who had organized the Stalinist purge of the South African party over the previous years. He arrived as representative of the party, its leading black member, and was co-author of a book in Russian published in Moscow in 1933 under the title, *The Working Class Movement and Forced Labour in Negro Africa*. Of course this book does not mention that the Russian state was itself at that moment industrializing on the basis of the same and even worse — forced labour. In a pamphlet published in 1935 after his death as a series of articles, Nzula is alleged even specifically to have denied this. He is alleged to have stated that black workers 'are not hoodwinked that there is a worse slavery and oppression than they have to face in South Africa. The screams of the bourgeois press about forced labour in the Soviet Union cannot have any meaning to those who are undergoing such labour'.¹

Privately, however, he developed a very different opinion of the Soviet Union from what was published posthumously under his name.

In a review of an English translation of Nzula's book in 1981, Charlie van Gelderen — a Trotskyist in South Africa and abroad for over fifty years writes:

There is some evidence that Nzula became disenchanted with Stalinism during his stay in the Soviet Union

According to the official version, Nzula died of pneumonia, aggravated by his chronic alcoholism on January 14, 1934.

According to C.L.R. James, Nzula was forcibly removed from a meeting in full view of the participants, by two men working for the Soviet security services and never seen again. This agrees with what this reviewer [i.e., Van Gelderen, then in London] was told personally by Padmore in 1935. Padmore also told me that just before his expulsion he was summoned to Moscow. While making preparations to go, he received a cable from Nzula, smuggled out through Latvia, which read: "George for God's sake don't come".

A young black South African, Beyers, who was in Moscow at the time attending the Marx, Engels, Lenin Institute, shared these suspicions. He returned from Moscow a confirmed oppositionist and became, for a short time, editor of the Cape Town Trotskyist paper *Workers' Voice*. Beyers told this writer that when fortified with vodka, which was pretty often, Nzula did not hide his hatred of Stalinism. His views must have been known to the GPU.²

Confirmation of Beyers' testimony comes from Edwin Mofutsanyana, a veteran black leader of the CPSA. In a taped interview with Bob Edgar in Lesotho shortly before his death, Mofutsanyana, who was in Moscow with Nzula, expressed disbelief in the suggestion that Nzula had been murdered by the Russian secret police but stated that when drunk he made clear he was a Trotskyist.³

Edgar's report of the interview continues:

Nzula had two problems that were eventually to spell his downfall. The first was a drinking problem, which Nzula told him had started as far back as his Aliwal North teaching days. According to Mofutsanyana, in Moscow, "this is what he used to do. Take a bag, go to the bar, and take as many bottles as he could. I had a lot of quarrels with him over his drinking, but I couldn't help him. To cure his alcoholism, he was sent to a sanatorium, but he came out after a month drinking more than he was drinking before. He told us he had a friend there who did not actually give him the medicine necessary for a cure."

Nzula's second problem was his growing disillusionment with the Soviet system. When he was drunk, he was most prone to come out with his Trotskyite and anti-Stalinist sentiments. Mofutsanyana did not specify how he picked up

these views (he guessed it may have been his associates at the Profintern [Red International of Trade Unions]), or which ideas of Trotsky he was espousing but what he remembers most was Nzula's questioning of Stalin's leadership. He recollected that one time Nzula reminded him of a meeting in Sophiatown at which Dr.A.B. Xuma, a conservative African National Congress figure, had spoken. Xuma had launched an attack on the Soviet government, charging that in the USSR all cars were owned not by the workers, but by Stalin. Nzula had taken on Xuma at the meeting, but now that he had lived in the USSR he was regretting his former stance.

In Mofutsanyana's presence, when Nzula was sober, he did not utter such heresies, but his views still reached the ears of Communist officials, who called him before the International Committee of the Comintern for disciplining. He was told that he would not be allowed to return to South Africa to infect Party members there with his Trotskyite ideas. One alternative put forward was that he would be sent to the United States to see if the American Communist Party could straighten him out. Nzula himself favoured that proposition, but before anything could be set in motion, he died.

Nzula's comrades in Moscow were told that he had been on a binge, had left his friends and fallen on a snowbank, had caught double pneumonia, and died. Mofutsanyana had no reason to disbelieve this. 'I personally expected him to go'. He knew of the controversy surrounding Nzula's death, and was himself questioned by the South African police about it on his return.

James' informant about Nzula's alleged arrest by the Soviet secret police was Jomo Kenyatta (later president of Kenya, who had been brought to Moscow by Padmore), but Mofutsanyana had no confidence in Kenyatta and did not credit his account. That does not automatically invalidate Kenyatta's account. Like Padmore and Nzula, Kenyatta in the early 1930s was active in Moscow in the leadership of the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers. He later claimed to James that 'his own desertion from the Communist camp was because of the treatment that had been meted out to Nzula'.⁴

A very large number of foreign communists of many nationalities were murdered in the USSR during the 1930s and 1940s. Among these were the South Africans Lazar Bach and

Maurice Richter, together with Richter's brother, Paul, executed in the Soviet Union a few years after the death of Nzula.

According to the veteran Chinese Trotskyist and former aide in the central committee of the Chinese CP, Wang Fan-hsi, some 200 Chinese students in Moscow were arrested as Trotskyists and brutally interrogated many later going to their deaths — as early as the end of 1929, more than four years before Nzula's death. From what the Trotskyists in China could find out, in Stalin's labour camps and prisons 'Communists with yellow skins received far worse treatment than their white fellow prisoners'.⁵ By 1934, to have arranged Nzula's murder would have been child's play for the GPU.

Moses Kotane (later general secretary of the SACP) and J.B.Marks (later chairman of the SACP) were both studying in Moscow while Nzula was still alive, along with Mofutsanyana, who says specifically that Kotane was transferred to the Eastern Workers Communist University so that he would not be influenced by Nzula's heresies.

The historians of the CPSA, H.J. and R.E.Simons, make clear that the execution of Bach and the Richters — accused of 'having shielded a follower of Leon Trotsky' — directly promoted the rise of Kotane, who was recalled with them to Moscow as leader of the opposing faction in the CPSA. Against Bach's faction, Kotane in Moscow argued Stalin's line that the revolution in South Africa 'implied two stages, one leading to a democratic state under majority African rule, the second to a full-blown socialism': the basis of the programme of the SACP to this day. The deaths of Nzula, Bach and the Richters within the Soviet Union cleared the way in South Africa for what the Simons themselves describe as 'a great turn to the right'.⁶

The SACP programme of today is the direct outcome of the purges in the Soviet Union. Despite the present climate of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, one doubts if this party dare press for a full inquiry into the deaths in the USSR of its former leaders in the 1930s and the exact role in Moscow of Kotane.

In his biography of Kotane, the SACP leader Brian Bunting notes that Nzula and Kotane had 'attended the same classes' in Moscow and that 'Kotane thought Nzula a brilliant student'.⁷ But there is not a single word in Bunting's book about Nzula's death. Kotane's predecessor as general secretary of the SACP is permitted to disappear from history as silently as so many others — with Bunting's endorsement — disappeared from life.

In *Pan-Africanism or Communism?* there is no mention of the execution of Bach and the Richters, and only the briefest reference to Nzula, who according to Padmore in his statement to Van Gelderen probably saved his life, possibly at the expense of his own. Nzula is referred to in this book merely as 'one of the ablest Young Party leaders' of the CPSA in the late 1920s. To this Padmore adds as a footnote: 'Mr Nzula died in Moscow in 1931 ...' (p.351). Nothing more! No reference to their joint work together in Moscow on *The Negro Worker*, nor to what Padmore knew or suspected of Nzula's death, nor to Nzula's role in saving Padmore from arrest and possible death at the hands of the GPU, nor to Nzula's hatred of oppressive conditions in the Soviet Union. Concerning Nzula's political evolution and death in the USSR, Padmore and Bunting share a common silence.

There is also the discrepancy between the date of Nzula's death as stated by Padmore (1931) and the fact that from 1931 until 1933 they worked very closely together as political collaborators. This mis-dating is typical of Padmore's disdain for accuracy. Doubt surrounds two crucial questions: 1. Why, especially in a book of this kind, he did not raise an inquiry into the nature of his friend's death? 2. Why, despite what he knew of Nzula's views and possible arrest, should he have stated that the purges in the Soviet Union 'did not affect' blacks? The principal beneficiary of Padmore's weird treatment of this suppressed episode — central to the revolutionary movement in South Africa — is Stalinism.

But nationalist politics in general was a beneficiary. Nzula's first hand encounter with Stalinism in the USSR and his evolution, as a black revolutionary, towards Trotskyism disprove Padmore's claim that 'Trotskyite Communists' were in essence white manipulators of black interests.⁸ From Mofutsanyana it is clear that what principally revolted Nzula in the USSR, unlike Padmore, was *its inequality*: the privileges arrogated to itself by a despotic bureaucracy, which Nzula could only compare with inequality in *South Africa*. By suppressing Nzula's insight into the essential nature of the Soviet Union, it is Padmore who is condemned by his perversion of the truth.

NOTES

1. A.Nzula, 'The Struggles of the Negro Toilers in South Africa', *The Negro Worker*, Vol.V, No.10, 1935, in A.T.Nzula, I.I.Potekhin and A.Z.Zusmanovich, *Forced Labour in Colonial Africa*, edited by Robin Cohen, Zed, London, 1981. Appendix 1. p.212. The major part of this book was published originally in Russian as *The Working Class Movement and Forced Labour in Negro Africa*, Moscow, 1933, with Nzula appearing under the pseudonym Tom Jackson.
2. Review by C.van Gelderen of A.T.Nzula, et al., op.cit., in *Critique*, No.14, 1981, pp.126-27.
3. Robert Edgar, 'Notes on the Life and Death of Albert Nzula', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, XVI, 4 (1983).
4. Cohen, Introduction, p. 15, reporting an interview with C.L.R.James, Trinidad, in the late 1970s.
5. Wang Fan-hsi, *Chinese Revolutionary. Memoirs 1919-1949*, (Hong Kong, 1957), OUP, Oxford, 1980, pp.128-29.
6. H.J. and R.E.Simons, *Class and Colour In South Africa 1850-1950*, Penguin, 1969, pp.477,491.
7. B.Bunting, *Moses Kotane: South African Revolutionary*, Inkuleko Publications, London, 1975, p.59.
8. Padmore, *Africa: Britain's Third Empire*, Dobson, London, 1949, p.222.