REVIEW

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People's War: New Light on the Struggle for South Africa

The Greek poet Archilochus offers an illuminating prism though which to view Anthea Jeffery's voluminous and illuminating book on the struggle for South Africa that led eventually to the triumph of the African National Congress and its installation as the governing party in 1994, even though Archilochus lived in the seventh century BC.

Archilochus contrasted the knowledge of the hedgehog with that of the fox, concluding that the hedgehog knew only one central truth while the fox, in contrast knew many smaller truths, which, as Isaiah Berlin noted nearly 2 700 years later, implicitly raised the question of whether the hedgehog's one truth was greater than the sum total of the fox's many truths.

Berlin, one of the most insightful of the 20th century historians, extended the thesis by dividing the great thinkers down the ages into hedgehogs and foxes, who, respectively, explain the course of history in terms of one central causal force or interpret it as the product of, and interaction between, many smaller causal forces.

Jeffery, who is a meticulous researcher, is almost certainly an Archilochusian fox by temperament. Yet her account of the rise to power of the African National Congress, from its proscription in April 1960 to its victory in the universal adult suffrage election of April 1994, concentrates largely – though not exclusively – on the ANC-initiated people's war as the single most important factor in its triumph.

The explanation of the apparent contradiction is simple.

While researching the transition of South Africa from a racial oligarchy dominated by whites to a non-racial constitutional democracy in which the ANC seems to be unassailably in control of the commanding heights, she came to the conclusion that the people's war was central to the explanation but at the same time a generally under-rated and unexplored factor.

Hence her decision to concentrate on the people's struggle as a pervading, perhaps even ubiquitous, theme in the ANC's rise to power. Hence, too, the subtitle of her weighty tome: New light on the struggle for South Africa. She does not, however, present the people's war as if it was the only component of the struggle that needs to be taken into account and, instead, locates it in the context of a multi-dimensional narrative in which it is, so to speak, a dominant contestant in the historical arena.

Taking a telescopic view of Jeffery's central thesis, three dates are particularly important in the chronology of the ANC's adoption and implementation of the people's war:

- 1961, when Boris Ponomarev, a high ranking official in the Soviet Union, was

assigned to become "the main interlocutor" with the South African Communist Party and the ANC.

- 1978, when an ANC delegation headed by Oliver Tambo, the leader of the ANC's external mission, visited communist-ruled Vietnam to learn from stalwarts of the successful Vietnamese communist war against the American backed anti-communist regime in Saigon, or Ho Chi Minh City as it was renamed by the victorious communist forces.

- 1985, when the ANC-initiated people's war began in earnest as its cadres launched a pitiless campaign against those they deemed to be enemies of the people, collaborators and impimpis, a process that included extra-judicial executions by necklacing.

As Jeffery explains, a people's war consists of two cardinal doctrinal stratagems: first, the belief that the struggle for power must be advanced in tandem on the military and political terrains, that guerrilla warfare must be augmented by ideological campaigning; second, the conviction that "the enemy" has many faces, including, obviously, the incumbent oppressor but incorporating rival political formations seeking to win the support of the populace to secure a platform for themselves in the post-liberation order.

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To expatiate on the second point: the objective of the strategists of a people's war is to ensure their political hegemony in the post war society by all means, including the use of coercion and terror to obtain the obeisance of the population as a whole and the submission of ideological rivals.

Jeffery sets the scene in a paper she presented at the launch of her book in Johannesburg.

It is mid-1985 in the Eastern Cape in Uitenhage, near Port Elizabeth. A stayaway has been launched by local leaders of the pro-ANC United Democratic Front, in the face of opposition from the Azanian People's Organisation (Azapo) and the Federation of South African Trade Unions, both of which feared that the stoppage would result in the dismissal of their members and consequent hardship for their families.

Their fears are well founded. Twelve people are killed during the stayaway. An atmosphere of fear prevails.

But Jeffery adds in her paper: "It is the rising incidence of necklace executions that has sparked real terror." Her account includes a description of the murder by an enraged crowd of a local councillor, Tansanqa Kinikini and his elder son, who were hacked and burnt to death. Part of the narrative describes how the councillor saved his second son from suffering a similar fate by shooting him before he could be lynched.

Necklacing is a terrifying form of extra-judicial killing, in which a motor vehicle tyre filled with petrol is hung around the victim's neck and set alight, resulting in an agonising death from burning and asphyxiation. The victims include Pakamisa Nongwaza, an Azapo member, and Nosipho Zamela, a young woman who was convicted by a people's court of collaborating with the police.

Jeffery comments in her paper: "Few remember Tamsanqa Kinikini and fewer still remember the fate his sons suffered. No one in wider society has any recollection of Noshipo Zamela and Pakamisa Nongwaza. … These events show the strategy of people's war at work."

But, while focusing attention on the people's war, Jeffery does not exonerate either the security forces of the previous regime or the Inkatha Freedom Party from blame for the violence. In a letter to The Star, sent as a riposte to a hostile review of her book, she states frankly that "both the police and the IFP … were to blame for many of the killings in the period."

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She nevertheless leaves little doubt that the ANC-directed people's war was a major contributor to the violence, whether the violence was perpetrated by the township comrades who served as ANC auxiliaries, members of the self-defence units that the ANC established, or the 13 000 trained and armed Umkhonto we Sizwe combatants that were allowed to return to South Africa after the start of the settlement negotiations.

While the ANC demonised President F W de Klerk for purportedly talking peace while covertly waging war through the putative Third Force, Jeffery argues that the ANC regarded the negotiations as "the terrain of the struggle" and that its manoeuvres there were made in addition to, rather than instead of, the people's war on the ground.

Jeffery argues that ANC propagandists, with the help of sympathisers in the media, successfully presented the ANC as a victim of violence rather than a perpetrator of it. She seeks to correct that view – which persists even today, as comments on her book by prominent ANC veterans Mac Maharaj and Kader Asmal demonstrate – by identifying the ANC as an orchestrating force behind much of the violence in its quest to establish its political hegemony ahead of the 1994 election.

In the final summing up in her book, in which Jeffery identifies the reasons for the ANC's victory, she reveals herself as essentially a pluralist who sees many interacting causes rather than a theoretician who is conscious only of a single central, overriding cause.

The many contributing causes to the defeat at the polls by the ruling National Party that she lists include the legalised system of racial discrimination that the party imposed on the black majority for decades and the loss of confidence by the National Party administration in its ability to rule in the face of the growing resistance from the black majority.

Further factors that explain the defeat of the National Party in the 1994 election incorporate the retreat of the regime's force from Angola and its adverse repercussions on the morale of the white minority, as well as the ability of the ANC to garner financial and moral support from around the globe as it prepared to contest the pending election, its long-standing alliance with dictatorial communist governments notwithstanding.

Another reason can be summed up in a single word: terror. To quote Jeffery: "The terror arising from the people's war was palpable from the start. It was evident from day one in Sebokeng (in the Vaal Triangle) when (in September 1984) four black councillors were attacked and brutally killed."

Jeffery is too conscientious a scholar to deny the ANC's victory was due in part to the messiah-like status attributed to Nelson Mandela before and after his release from prison in February 1990. While Mandela undoubtedly earned his moral authority by his resistance to racial domination before, after and during his 27-year incarceration, it might have blinded many South Africans to the brutalities of the people's war.