
Hans Beukes was the third Namibian native to ‘leave the comfort of home, to fight the apartheid regime on the world stage, where they enjoyed a monopoly of opinion’ – in the words of the American human rights activist, Allard Lowenstein. His predecessors were Mburumba Kerina – whom he identifies as the strategist of Namibia’s struggle for liberation – and the late Jariretundu Kozonguizi.

With the insight of an observer-participant in the decades long struggle, Hans now reveals painful details about the extent to which our liberation had been deferred for decades – while the country, about whose legal status in international law there could be no doubt, was used as a pawn on the chessboard of bitter Cold War rivalry between the West and the East.

On their side, the leaders of the liberation movement, jockeying for position, unleashed fratricide against ‘dissidents’ and, turning guerrillas into a regular army, threw thousands of young men and women to their death at the hands of the most redoubtable military force on the African continent.

The Soviet Union and Cuba responded to calls for solidarity from liberation movements fighting for the rights of their people. To secure Western interests in the European colonies that had gained independence from the mid-nineteen fifties onwards the US – with its Secretary of State Henry Kissinger engaging himself most energetically – sought to install in Zimbabwe and Namibia ‘moderate’, anti-communist and pro-Western regimes.

Hans throws light on the dismal conditions under which ‘dissidents’ were held in prison and concentration camps by the then Zambian and Tanzanian Presidents, Kenneth Kaunda and Julius Nyerere. Many lost their lives; others miraculously survived.

In searing testimony, Hans also exposes what can only be called a conspiracy of silence – if not a betrayal of the brotherhood of men – on the part of the Church (i.e. ELCIN in Namibia and LWF in Geneva particular), the so-called Anti-Apartheid solidarity groups in Scandinavia and elsewhere, the governments of Sweden, Norway and Finland as well as UN (Council for Namibia) in the face of real and imminent gross human rights violations by Nujoma and his junta against thousands of Namibian freedom fighters.

With reasoning that might be difficult for many to accept – as it would require divestment of articles of faith issuing from wishful thinking – Hans argues that the apartheid regime had wanted and welcomed SWAPO’s decision, on the poorest of advice, ‘to seek liberation through the barrel of a gun’. To pose a military threat to the South African regime in Namibia, was to justify its indefinite occupation as a buffer against ‘a total onslaught’ of South Africa’s enemies.

“One of the first things Mburumba Kerina and I discussed when I arrived in New York in mid-September 1959” he writes, “had been how our people could
possibly rid themselves of the apartheid regime at home. The thought of taking up arms against the military might of the SADF was so preposterous it didn’t even merit discussion. Two generations after the genocide visited upon them by the Germans, the people of central and southern South West Africa, imprisoned in reservations, were still in dire need of rehabilitation. The northerners were subdivided into tribes each under its chief, or king, about their allegiance to the rest of the country we could make no assumptions […]. Little had changed in the intervening years, except that the status accorded to SWAPO by the UN had effectively relieved the guerilla group of having to seek a basis of understanding with either SWANU, which opposed a military option, or pay heed to other activists at home. In a letter dated 9 February 1959, Mburumba Kerina wrote to Toivo Ya Toivo, ‘Together we shall smash those Whites out of the Government without using force but our brains.’"

Together with Keshii Pelao Nathanael’s Journey to Exile. The Story of a Namibian Freedom Fighter (Aberystwyth, Sosiumi, 2002) and Samson Ndeikwila’s Agony of Truth (Windhoek, Kuiseb, 2014), The Long Road to Liberation demands to be read by anyone needing persuasion that there remains a long road yet to cover.

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