

Irina Filatova and Apollon Davidson (2013), *The Hidden Thread: Russia and South Africa in the Soviet Era*, Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, ISBN 978-1-86842-499-3, 553 pp.

With transnational history having been in vogue for some time now, it is widely recognised that South Africa's past cannot be understood except in relation to its position in the world and its relations with other countries. But while there is a considerable literature on South African links to the United States¹ and the United Kingdom,² and though much has also been written about South Africa's place in the world economy,³ there are all too few general accounts by historians of how relations have changed over time between South Africa and other, specific countries. *The Hidden Thread*, now one of the most important of such accounts, is concerned with a particularly complex and interesting relationship, one that, on one hand, held a great allure for some individuals – for example, for South African communists and some Russian academics – and, on the other hand, was often characterised by immense hostility – between not only the two states, but also their ruling classes. The relationship between South Africa and Russia was long difficult to write about because of the myth-making that surrounded it and the obstacles to accessing relevant sources in the two countries.

Irina Filatova, who lives in Cape Town yet continues to teach in Moscow, and Apollon Davidson, who was the director of the Centre for Russian Studies at the University of Cape Town from 1994 to 1998 and remains active at Moscow State University, have been studying ties between Russia and South Africa for many decades. English-speaking readers may know of their joint book on Russia and the Anglo-Boer War and of the two volumes of documents on the Communist International (Comintern) they edited,⁴ but most of their publications have been in Russian. (Filatova, we are told, is the author of five books and some 200 articles, Davidson sixteen books and 600

1 E.g. Robert K. Massie (1997), *Loosing the Bonds: The United States and South Africa in the Apartheid Years*, New York: Doubleday.

2 E.g. Ronald Hyam and Peter Henshaw (2003), *The Lion and the Springbok*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

3 E.g. Thomas A. Koelble (1996), *The Global Economy and Democracy in South Africa*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press; William G. Martin (2013), *South Africa and the World Economy: Remaking Race, State and Region*, Rochester: Rochester University Press.

4 Apollon Davidson and Irina Filatova (1998), *The Russians and the Anglo-Boer War*, Cape Town: Human & Rousseau; Apollon Davidson, Irina Filatova, Valentin Gorodnov, and Sheridan Jones (2003), *South Africa and the Communist International: A Documentary History, 1931–1939*, two volumes, London: Frank Cass.

articles [ii].) Much of their huge output relates to the history of Russia and South Africa, and they have now distilled their knowledge into the monumental work under review, demonstrating their enormous dedication to uncovering this history as well as their empathy and enthusiasm for both countries. The order of the authors is significant, for Filatova did the writing and much of the research while utilising the contributions that Davidson, her mentor, now in his eighties, has made to this topic over many decades. The two authors themselves enter into the story they tell (Filatova has five index references, Davidson thirteen), and some may think that they should have expounded on their own involvement (for instance, Davidson's teaching at the Lenin School and his interactions with numerous South Africans in Moscow, or the authors' joint role in the Good Hope Society [389]; it is to be hoped that Davidson will soon publish his memoirs in English). Their Russian roots helped make it possible for Filatova and Davidson to interview numerous key players in both countries. Those they interviewed in South Africa included not only people active in the anti-Apartheid struggle: Filatova was able, for example, to persuade the usually unapproachable Niel Barnard to give her an interview about his role as head of the National Intelligence Service (NIS), during which he revealed that the NIS was in contact with the KGB in the late 1980s.

The Hidden Thread synthesises a very large body of original research. Its nearly five hundred pages of text are for the most part soberly written, but still full of extraordinary characters and incidents. While in places the book becomes almost encyclopaedic in its attempt to document relations between the two countries, it is both scholarly and readable, and it brings to light an enormous and diverse range of ties connecting the states under study. The book's subject matter is so interesting in part because, as the title indicates, many details of Russian–South African relations during the Soviet era (1917–1991) have indeed long been “hidden”. This is not surprising, given the ideological differences and antagonisms between the two countries. A number of key archives remain closed today. The topic is difficult to tackle, too, because of the links between the Soviet Union and the ideology of communism, which requires scholars to address anti-communism in South Africa (200ff.), and because of the need to place relations between South Africa and the Soviet Union within the context of the Cold War. On the whole, Filatova and Davidson meet these challenges very successfully.

They begin the book with a chapter called “Russia and South Africa before the Soviet Era”. We learn, for example, of Jan van Riebeeck's mention of Muscovy in his journal five months after the Dutch settled at the Cape (5), and of a diary kept by Gerasim Lebedev at the Cape in 1798 that was discovered in Moscow in 1959 (13). While fascinating, this information on South

African–Russian ties before 1917 is not related to what follows in the rest of the book, which guides us through the Soviet era: from the pro-Bolshevik statements by General Hertzog to the Comintern phase, to the era of the Friends of the Soviet Union during the Second World War, and on into the Cold War. Relations between the Soviet Union and Apartheid South Africa lie at the heart of the book, and Filatova and Davidson write about both secret and regular warfare, military aid to the African National Congress (ANC), the education of South Africans in the Soviet Union, and finally the “winds of change” in both Russia and Southern Africa in the late 1980s.

While the Soviet Union never thought of intervening militarily in South Africa, it did supply arms and money to the ANC, as well as advisers to those fighting South Africa in Angola, as part of its support for liberation movements all over Southern Africa. While this support has sometimes been presented as primarily motivated by a concern for the people of South Africa and their liberation from Apartheid, the Soviets certainly also worked to bring about successor regimes that would be sympathetic to their causes. Whether or not the Soviet Union expected that if ANC and SWAPO (South West Africa People’s Organisation) governments came to power they would be dominated by local communists or others sympathetic to the Soviet Union (in the Namibian case there was no communist party), they unquestionably hoped that the toppling of Apartheid would be a great blow to Western countries and that they would enjoy friendly relations with post-Apartheid Southern African regimes modelled, at least to some extent, on the Soviet paradigm.

The arguments that Filatova and Davidson make about the Soviet role in Southern Africa are mostly very convincing, though their book is, of course, not the last word on relations between the Soviet Union and South Africa. Some will say that they do not give enough explanatory weight to changes in the Soviet Union itself in the late 1980s.⁵ Specialists on particular aspects will doubtless quibble about some of the details and differ in their interpretations. Filatova and Davidson wrongly see those who went to talk to members of the ANC in England in the late 1980s as representing South African business (405, 409).⁶ In places, the reader may wish for more infor-

5 This criticism was voiced at the launch of the book at the Centre for the Book, Cape Town, in July 2013.

6 They mention the links between De Beers and Russia in the Soviet era, but were not able to find any substantiation of the rumour that Harry Oppenheimer attended the Bolshoi in Moscow in the 1980s (242-43) and seem not to know that Gordon Waddell, Oppenheimer’s “fixer”, was seen there. See Gordon Cramb, *Oppenheimer Fixer Who Side-Stepped Sanctions*, online: <www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/c440ff16-f827-11e1-bec8-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2a8ZxcxtC> (15 August 2013).

mation about the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA)/South African Communist Party (SACP). South Africa never “annexed” South-West Africa (41); not all the archives of the SACP in exile have been lost (3).⁷ While the bibliography of works in Russian and English is impressive, there are notable omissions.⁸ In addition, some passages could have been condensed (for example, what was taught at the Communist University of the Toilers of the East [KUTV]: 122-23). On occasion, the authors seem to lose focus on the two countries: Why dwell on George Bernard Shaw’s visit to Russia in 1931 (155-57) when Bram Fischer’s is not mentioned, though the latter’s visit played an important role in his political consciousness, as Stephen Clingman has shown?⁹

In a final chapter, entitled “Just Another Country”, and a postscript, Filatova and Davidson take their story toward the present, explaining why, ironically, relations between Russia and South Africa cooled in the early 1990s; they particularly emphasise the Russian government’s invitation to President F. W. de Klerk to visit Russia in 1992. The Centre for Russian Studies, established at the University of Cape Town in 1994, closed four years later due to lack of funding (481), but the authors end a section entitled “New Beginnings” by describing Russian President Vladimir Putin’s state visit to South Africa at the time of the BRICS summit held there in March 2013. They suggest that today both South Africa and Russia wish to transform the world economic order, which, they assert, is “a vision which derives from the messianic and ideological dreams of a bygone era” (490). The Russians who “had had enough of socialism at home and thought that they could prevent it from winning the day in South Africa by simply severing ties with the ANC” were engaged in a doomed enterprise, “as most romantic engagements are” (496). Whether or not one agrees with Filatova and Davidson, their book is indeed, to quote them, a “terribly interesting read” (4).

■ Chris Saunders

7 Eddy Maloka (2013), *The South African Communist Party: Exile and After Apartheid*, Auckland Park: Jacana.

8 Work by Baruch Hirson is one such surprising omission. They could have used, say, Douglas H. McClure (1979), *The Soviet Threat to Europe and Africa*, Cape Town: Jeremy Spence. Readers will also not be able to locate in the bibliography the essay by Essop Pahad and Willie Esterhuyse mentioned by the authors (409).

9 Stephen Clingman (2013), *Bram Fischer: Afrikaner Revolutionary*, new edition, Johannesburg: Jacana Media. Another example: Why write about Professor H. W. van der Merwe’s visits to Lusaka (404), which had nothing to do with the Soviet Union?