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Review

Book review: *Red Road to Freedom: A History of the South African Communist Party 1921–2021*, by Tom Lodge

Oleksa Drachewych[†] 

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*Correspondence: odrachew@uwo.ca

[†]University of Western Ontario, Canada

Red Road to Freedom: A History of the South African Communist Party 1921–2021, Tom Lodge (Martlesham, Suffolk: James Currey Ltd, 2022), ISBN 9781431431342, 626 pp., \$105.00.

Tom Lodge spent much of his academic career writing about South African politics. In *Red Road to Freedom*, he has produced the first full treatment of the history of the Communist Party of South Africa/South African Communist Party (CPSA from 1921 to 1950; SACP from 1953 to the present), from the years before its founding to the present, published to mark the party's centenary.

The book is testament to Lodge's extensive knowledge and decades of research on the party. Even-handed throughout, it deftly weaves discussions about the historiography and recollections of key figures with arguably the most complete treatment of the party's development, membership, challenges, and platforms. The result is a work of impressive erudition that will be the starting point for future studies on communism in South Africa.

Lodge begins with the party's prehistory, beginning in 1890 and ending with the party's formation in 1921. He highlights how many socialists viewed South Africa and Russia as similar in development. Later chapters focus on key themes or platforms: the early history (1921–26); the Native Republic Thesis period (1927–32); the Popular Front and the factional battles in the party (1932–39); the Second World War (1940s); the party after its banning in South Africa (1950–65); the party when led by an executive largely in Britain as a result of exile (1965–77); its support for violent methods to fight apartheid while supporting the African National Congress (ANC) and operating out of nations neighbouring South Africa (1977–90); and the party since the collapse of the Soviet Union (1990 to the present).

Of interest to readers of this journal will be Lodge's focus on the role of Jewish members in influencing the party and its direction. Jewish immigrants to South Africa, particularly those from the former Russian Empire, including the Pale of Settlement or the Baltics, were familiar with revolutionary ideas. Lodge suggests that "[t]hey maintained a reflexive set of political practices that, arguably, shaped South Africa's wider oppositional politics profoundly." He argues that Jewish immigrants "would make a lasting contribution to the evolution of South Africa's revolutionary socialism, initially reinforcing its predispositions to extend

organization beyond white workers" (p. 65). Owing to Bolshevism's early push against antisemitism, Jews became among the most notable supporters of the movement. Throughout the party's development, Jewish members remained prominent figures.

Lodge describes how disagreements among leaders derailed the development of the party. His appraisal is fair, denoting who came up with which platform, and explaining their success or failure. For example, in a lengthy but well-crafted analysis, he carefully outlines the party's prominent role in Umkhonto we Sizwe and the ANC-SACP alliance's use of violent resistance. He also explains how SACP members were prominent contributors to the ANC, often having to decide which party's goals to prioritize. His insights into the memoirs of party members – and their reliability as historical documents – are particularly interesting and important. On membership numbers, Lodge assesses official and unofficial claims about the party's membership to provide a true sense of the party's appeal. His meticulous research ensures that his conclusions are powerful and convincing.

Lodge refuses to speculate beyond where the historical record can lead him. For example, readers hoping to find a definitive answer to the source of the controversial Native Republic Thesis – the call for an independent Black Republic in South Africa in 1927–28 – may be disappointed. Instead, Lodge provides extensive treatment of the various accounts and arguments by key figures (such as James La Guma, Nikolai Bukharin, Max Petrovsky) in the decision to pursue the thesis. While he argues that La Guma probably was not the source of the thesis and claims the Comintern played a key role in it, he does not definitively state where the thesis came from. His focus instead is more on the thesis itself and its impact on the party, and not on relitigating controversies to attach blame. (This reviewer disagrees with some of his arguments about the scale of Comintern intervention in implementing the thesis.) The same care is provided to other prominent platforms including ideas of "national democracy", a line of thought inspired by Eastern European contacts after the Second World War, or views of South Africa as "colonialism of a special type". Lodge is clear in showing that the party was not merely a pawn of the Soviet Union. Soviet intervention played a role at key moments, but party members had plenty of room to develop responses to local conditions. Nonetheless, the party often chose to follow the Soviet line.

If there are any negatives, they are generally minor, especially for a book of this scale. In the earlier sections, Lodge could have gone further

in considering the broader global communist movement, as well as discussing the nature and impact of the Comintern and Soviet politics. For the period following the Second World War, Lodge increasingly includes global and transnational dimensions, a requirement given the extensive support that the Soviet Union and other communist nations provided the SACP and ANC in combatting apartheid. To this reviewer, Lodge's book got stronger as it went along; the latter chapters provide much firmer conclusions about the role, influence, and decision-making of the party. This strength is undoubtedly a result of the many interviews he was able to conduct with party members over the decades of his career.

Sadly, Lodge died in the autumn of 2023. Fortunately for the field, he completed before his death the definitive account of the South African communist movement. His book is a must-read for those interested in the history of communism in South Africa, the fight against apartheid, and South Africa's history generally.

Oleksa Drachewych
University of Western Ontario