

Review

A review of Sadie Forman and Andre Odendaal (eds) (1992) *A Trumpet from the Housetops: The Selected Writings of Lionel Forman*. London: Zed Books; Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press; Cape Town: David Philip.

James T. Campbell

One of the welcome side-effects of the collapse of apartheid has been an explosion of writing by and about South African white socialists. Characters as diverse in experience and temperament as Baruch Hirson and Ronnie Kasrils, Pauline Podbrey and the late Joe Slovo have recounted their years in 'the struggle', revealing worlds long cloaked in secrecy or hidden behind prison walls and banning orders.¹ These autobiographies have been accompanied by a series of biographies and commentaries assaying the lives and legacies of such radicals as David Ivon Jones, S.P. Bunting, Hyman Basner and Bram Fischer, as well as by two major collections of interviews with white (in one case, specifically Jewish) activists.² For the first time, scholars are in a position to write the history of one of South Africa's most mythologized communities.

Under any circumstances, these books would command our attention, but they have a special interest now, for the questions they raise have a distinctly contemporary ring. What is the relationship between racial and class oppression and, more broadly, between national liberation and the struggle for socialism? Can people build and sustain relationships of humanity and equal regard in societies cleaved by racial inequality? What is the legacy and present relevance of the South African Communist Party (SACP)? How does one balance the party's substantial achievements – its non-racialism, its pathbreaking role in organising black workers, its consistent opposition to apartheid – with its equally conspicuous flaws: political opportunism, intolerance of dissent, slavish subservience to Moscow? Does the SACP have a substantial role to play in the New South Africa, or is the party finally over?

The final question is especially apposite. While the tripartite alliance remains intact, there is no disguising the deepening gulf between the ANC and the SACP. President Mandela and Deputy President Mbeki publicly rebuked delegates to the party's 1998 annual conference for daring to criticise the government's

controversial 'neo-liberal' GEAR policy. The ANC has also declared that it will no longer reserve spaces on its parliamentary list for allies in the SACP or the trade union movement; every individual on the list will run as an ANC representative and be expected to offer unreserved support to ANC policies, including GEAR. In the meantime, the class fissures within the governing alliance continue to widen, pitting an emergent, politically influential black bourgeoisie against a frustrated trade-union movement and a volatile – and increasingly xenophobic – army of the unemployed. All these developments have sparked debate within the SACP, between an 'old guard' committed to the alliance – 'robust debate' is a sign of a 'healthy' relationship, intones its General Secretary Jeremy Cronin – and a group of young Turks, who pointedly ask how long the party can afford to endorse conservative, unpopular policies. Paradoxically, both groups can point to the party's dwindling membership rolls – sited between 10 000 and 20 000 today – to bear out their arguments.

The apparent eclipse of the SACP is a problem that will preoccupy political analysts in the run-up to the 1999 elections, and historians for years thereafter. Clearly no one anticipated the peculiar concatenation of circumstances presented by the 1990s. For all their talk about 'stages', SACP leaders almost universally assumed a revolutionary rather than a negotiated end to apartheid; they thus gave little thought to 'power-sharing', entrenched property rights or any of the other hazards of the so-called 'parliamentary road'. Nor could they have foreseen the stunning collapse of the Soviet Union, and that at the very moment of their final victory over apartheid. This coincidence, surely the most portentous in modern South African history, has not only deprived would-be revolutionaries of vital material and political resources; it has left them intellectually disarmed in the face of a new global economic orthodoxy, predicated on fiscal austerity, the sanctity of free markets and the futility of purposive political action. The real tragedy of GEAR lay not simply in its dubious neo-Smithian assumptions nor even in the economic and political turmoil to which the policy will predictably give rise, but in the apparent inability of actors across the political spectrum to conceive credible alternatives. Viewed in this context, the numerous books on white communists published in the euphoria of the early 1990s take on an unintended poignance. While the questions they pose retain immediacy and relevance, the air of triumphalism that surrounded them even four or five years ago, the reassuring sense of lives vindicated by history, has been dissipated. Victory seems less certain now, the revolutionary legacy less easily grasped.

One could pursue these reflections in any number of ways, but let us take just one text. *A Trumpet From the Housetops: The Selected Writings of Lionel*

Forman was published in 1992 as volume seven in Mayibuye Press's ongoing 'struggle' history series. It is a testament to the power of the apartheid regime that Forman is virtually forgotten today, even by professional historians. If he is remembered at all, it is usually as one of the 156 men and women charged with attempting to overthrow the apartheid state in the shambolic 1956-61 Treason Trial. Yet Forman was far more than just Accused Number 83. Born in 1927 in Johannesburg and active in party circles by the early 1940s, he blazed across the landscape of post-war South Africa 'like a fireworks display coruscating in all directions'.³ By the time of his premature death in 1959 – he died on Christian Barnard's operating table during an operation to repair a heart ravaged by childhood rheumatic fever – this brilliant and iconoclastic intellectual had distinguished himself as student leader, newspaper editor, defence attorney, historian and party theoretician, especially on the controversial 'national question'.

The editors, Andre Odendaal and Sadie Forman, Lionel's widow, are explicit about what they take to be the contemporary relevance of Forman's life and work: 'The aim here is to let a relatively unknown voice from the 1950s speak, and to make accessible to present-day scholars and activists hitherto unknown or inaccessible material ...' After decades of National Party censorship, they continue, it is possible to 'start drawing back the veil over parts of our past', to illuminate not only 'the varieties of thinking and the complexities of politics within the liberation movement at an important stage of its development', but also the critical part played by the Communist Party in 'guid[ing] the ANC in the non-racial direction it took in the 1950s'.⁴ They take the title for the volume from Forman's declaration of revolutionary faith, written as the anaesthesia took hold before the unsuccessful operation to save his life.

If this doesn't come off you're not to mourn for me. I'm going without the slightest fear of death and if I die it will not hurt me at all, except in the thought that it will hurt you ... If there is any meeting of friends, what I want said clearly and unequivocally is: All his adult life he tried to be a good communist ... Now I am legally as safe as houses, I want it trumpeted from the housetops. Lionel Forman believed in communism for South Africa with a burning passion till the day he died, and in all his adult years that passion never once diminished.⁵

A Trumpet from the Housetops brings together 60 selections, usefully organized into four sections. Part I, the longest section, features Forman's historical work, most of it researched and written during the long Treason Trial and first published in the party journal *New Age*. Part II contains two chapters from *The South African Treason Trial*, which Forman co-authored with the

exiled trade unionist Solly Sachs. Part III, an assemblage of occasional pieces from the years 1947 to 1959, includes commentary on the developing Cold War, editorials on socialism and surviving fragments from Forman's unpublished autobiography, *A Book for Karl*, which he wrote for his infant son in 1952, after learning that his heart condition was likely to prove terminal. The final section, and the one most relevant to political debates today, gathers together Forman's idiosyncratic writings on the 'national question'. The cumulative effect of the four sections, and of the eulogies and testimonials that close the book, is little short of awe-inspiring, especially when one realizes that it is the output of scarcely more than a decade, by an individual burdened by a debilitating illness.

Like so many prominent South African socialists, Forman was a product of Johannesburg's immigrant Jewish community. In the half century after 1880, upwards of 60 000 Eastern European Jews arrived in South Africa, a small trickle of the more than three million people driven from their homes in Russia's 'Pale of Settlement' by economic depression, mounting legal disabilities and violent persecution. The majority settled in Johannesburg, clustering in the Jewish enclave around Commissioner and Marshall Streets, before moving into working-class suburbs such as Mayfair, Fordsburg, Doornfontein and Yeoville. While the book offers little about Forman's origins and youth, what there is suggests an almost archetypal migrant experience. David Forman, Lionel's father, came from Lithuania. He emigrated first to London, settling in Aldgate in the East End, before embarking for South Africa in the early 1920s. On board ship, he met his future wife, Sarah Shribnick, an English-born Jew of Eastern European stock who was accompanying her impoverished parents to South Africa. Following their marriage, the couple opened a shop in Rosettenville, a dusty working-class neighbourhood on the southern edge of the Reef. Lionel, their eldest child, was born on December 25, 1927.⁶

While the predominant political impulse among Jewish immigrants was Zionism, many new arrivals from Eastern Europe brought with them a tradition of left-wing politics, conceived in the long struggle against Tsarist tyranny and channelled through organisations such as the Jewish General Workers' Union or Bund, established in Lithuania in 1896. Forman was influenced by both impulses. Like Joe Slovo, Baruch Hirson and dozens of other immigrant children, he cut his political teeth in Hashomer Hatzair, a socialist Zionist organisation dedicated to training young Jewish pioneers for emigration to Palestine. While socialist in orientation, Hashomer Hatzair was essentially a romantic nationalist movement, akin to the German *Wandervogel* movement or the British Scouts. Participants wore uniforms and lived in communal houses decorated with Diego

Rivera prints; they engaged in long hikes, folk-singing and an ascetic daily regimen to prepare themselves for the rigours of kibbutz life. Forman read the canonical works of Marx and Lenin in Hashomer Hatzair, but he soon grew disenchanted with the movement's 'Israeli-oriented ethic'.⁷ Shortly after his 15th birthday he left the group and joined the Young Communist League (YCL), the youth affiliate of the Communist Party of South Africa and the standard pathway to full party membership.

In the YCL, Forman made many lifelong friends, including Ruth First, the strong-willed child of Lithuanian Jewish immigrants, whose career as a student leader and journalist paralleled his own. The YCL also afforded him his first sustained contact with Africans. For Forman, as for so many budding white leftists, black people had long been at once ubiquitous and invisible, and to interact with them in a position of mutuality was a revelation. 'These were the first Africans I had met,' Forman wrote in one of the surviving fragments from *A Book for Karl*. 'In my last months at school, I learned from a group of people, most of whom were barely literate, far more of value than I did in my years at Forest High ...'⁸ He recalled in particular an African named Seperepere, who excelled as a proponent of National Party race theories in the mock parliamentary debates staged by the YCL as part of its Speakers' Training Course.

Seperepere's favourite foil was a chauffeur named Mopeli, who played the role of the United Party's Jan Hofmeyr, chief lieutenant to the Prime Minister J. C. Smuts, and a man notorious for piously protesting racist laws only to sell-out at the crucial moment. The audience listened carefully as Mopeli made his introduction to some bill:

'Everyone in Parliament must realise that the day must come when Africans will have direct representation in this House. It is our task as Christians to prepare the Africans for that day, by providing better educational facilities, better ...'

'Kaffirboetic', Seperepere interjected.

'As a Christian I am a lover of all mankind,' replied Mopeli urbanely.

'And womankind. A lover of Kaffir womankind.'

Seperepere's sally was so typically Nationalist that it could have come right out of *Hansard*, and the audience laughed its appreciation.⁹ The exercise ended with the United and National Party delegates crossing the aisle to join the CPSA and helping to draft South Africa's first five-year plan.

While Forman embraced the CPSA unreservedly, party leaders entertained some early doubts about him. The problem stemmed from remarks Forman had made in his first major public address, delivered at a ceremony commemorating

Red Army Day. In the conclusion of the speech, a predictable recital of the virtues of the brave Soviet soldier, Forman commented on the distance that South African communists had still to travel before they attained such saintly status. What, he asked rhetorically, would a Soviet soldier fresh from the battle against the Nazis think of a Communist Party that commemorated the October Revolution in racially segregated ceremonies? A fair question, in retrospect, but one that fell foul of the reigning united front orthodoxy, which emphasised the importance of securing whites' commitment to the war effort, even at the cost of accommodating their racism. Denounced as a 'Trotskyite', Forman was saved from expulsion only by the timely intervention of First, who reminded other leaders of his youth and immaturity. Two years later, Forman was admitted to full membership of the CPSA, becoming, in his own words, 'the youngest and proudest cardholder in the party'.¹⁰

Forman matriculated to the University of Cape Town in 1945. Cape Town by the mid-1940s had displaced Johannesburg as party headquarters, and Forman was soon in harness, contributing articles to the *Guardian* and speaking at open-air rallies on the Parade. As a leader of the Students Socialist Party, he campaigned against the extension of the colour bar at the university – he was asked to resign from the local chapter of the National Union of South African Students after organising a non-racial social – and participated in a bruising internecine battle between Stalinists and Trotskyists, which ended with the Trotskyists (and most of the SSP's black members) walking out. In 1949, having completed a master's degree in social sciences, he moved to the University of the Witwatersrand to study law, joining a coterie of stalwart party members, including First, her future husband Joe Slovo, and Harold Wolpe. The years at Wits coincided with the CPSA's controversial decision to disband itself in order to forestall prosecution under the Unlawful Organisations Bill (later to be enacted as the Suppression of Communism Act). The decision, which was effectively reversed by the secret launch of a reorganised SACP in 1953, seems to have had little effect on Forman and his comrades, who continued to labour on behalf of the party throughout the hiatus. As editor of the *Wits Student*, Forman kept up a steady tattoo against apartheid, especially as it encroached on the university. At the same time, he and his party comrades concluded an alliance with liberal students on the shared ground of non-racialism, enabling them to exert an influence on campus far beyond their numbers.¹¹

Needless to say, the left-liberal alliance was a rocky one, with the leftists castigating liberals for their indifference to racism beyond the campus borders and liberals accusing leftists of Stalinism. Much of the rancour focused on the

National Union of South African Students' continuing affiliation with the Prague-based International Union of Students. While liberals condemned the IUS for its 'shameless Stalinist manipulation' of the international student movement, Forman and his comrades defended the affiliation as vital to 'developing international student understanding'.¹²

In 1951, Forman was chosen to represent NUSAS at the annual convention of the IUS in Warsaw. After the convention, he was seconded to IUS headquarters in Prague, where he remained for two years, working on the *World Student News* and vainly trying to maintain a united international student movement in the face of the escalating Cold War and the eruption of Titoism in Yugoslavia.

The years in Eastern Europe were highlighted by Forman's marriage to a fellow South African Sadie Kreel and the birth of their son Karl. What else he took from the experience is not immediately apparent. *A Trumpet From the Housetops* contains none of his writings from Prague, and his one retrospective reflection on the experience was written in the atmosphere of self-criticism ushered in by Nikita Krushchev's 'Secret Speech' and may not accurately reflect his sentiments at the time. *A Book for Karl*, written during a break in Britain before returning to South Africa, may have included some critical commentary on life in Eastern Europe but, alas, only fragments survive (of the two copies of the manuscript, one was burnt by Forman's father during the Treason Trial to prevent it from falling into the hands of the police, while the second was entrusted to Harry Pollitt of the British Communist Party, in the hopes of having the book published. Pollitt, for the record, refused to endorse publication, on the grounds that the book was critical of a 'brother party' and either lost or destroyed the manuscript).¹³

Whatever lessons Forman took from his sojourn in Europe – an issue to which we will return – his formidable personal courage survived intact. He understood that in returning to South Africa he would attract harassment, including possible banning and arrest, and would almost certainly lose his passport. The Nationalist authorities did not disappoint: they confiscated all his books at the airport (only Karl's book, secreted in a mattress, survived); they 'listed' him under the terms of the Suppression of Communism Act; and eventually they charged him with treason.

Through it all, Forman refused to be cowed. He completed his legal qualification and immediately launched a bustling practice defending trade unionists and political defendants. He also continued to work as a journalist, editing *Advance*, the party weekly that superseded the *Guardian* after its banning, and contributed regularly to *New Age*, which succeeded *Advance* after it was banned. He became

a master at exploiting the spaces in the state's repressive edifice, managing simultaneously to lampoon the 'lunatic provisions of the Suppression of Communism Act' while remaining legally within them.

The years after 1953 marked Forman's most fertile intellectual period, the fruits of which are well represented in *A Trumpet From the Housetops*. From his editor's desk at *Advance*, Forman penned scathing denunciations of apartheid, as well as a perspicacious weekly international column, in which he traced the spreading roots of the Cold War in sites as distant as Berlin and Vietnam. His reputation as a theorist, however, hinged on a controversial series of editorials on nationalism, the complete run of which is reproduced in section four of the book. Forman was neither the first nor the last party theorist to confront 'the national question'. From the early musings of the CPSA founder David Ivon Jones to the current SACP debate over the tripartite alliance, South African communists have been compelled to clarify their relationship, both theoretically and practically, with the national liberation movement. Uneasy with nationalism's reactionary potential yet committed to a pragmatic alliance with the ANC, most of Forman's contemporaries sought refuge in the 'two-stage' theory, in which the transition to socialism would come only after the consolidation of a 'national democratic' revolution.¹⁴ Forman accepted the importance of the nationalist movement, but he defined its value in sharply different terms. In the process, he unleashed a brief but fierce debate on the character and political potential of nationalism.

The debate began innocuously enough. In a 1954 *Advance* editorial entitled 'Don't Spread Malan's Lies', Forman took South African socialists to task for their uncritical acceptance of the Malan government's discourse of 'race'. From that conventional premise, however, he went on to argue that South Africa was not in fact a multi-'racial' but a multi-'national' society and, further, that robust ethnic nationalism – what he called 'people's nationalism' – was a 'progressive' force that should be encouraged by the party. 'Our Zulu poets must sing sagas of liberation in their mother tongue,' he wrote, 'the people must rock with laughter at Sotho satires on the Nats ... Great flowering national cultures must carry the ideas of freedom into every kraal, hessian shanty and *pondokkie* in terms the people can understand.'¹⁵ In subsequent editorials and essays he went further, arguing that ethnic 'nations' possessed a right not only to their own language and culture but to political self-determination, including the right to enter or withdraw from the broader South African polity. Not surprisingly, the argument elicited a chorus of criticism from comrades, who accused him of everything from 'ultra-leftism' to apartheid apologetics. Forman responded collegially but

vigorously, conceding the centrality of class struggle and 'the obvious end aim' of a unitary nation, while standing firm on his original proposition: '... the only correct path towards a single South African nation is through the creation of conditions by which the different national cultures in South Africa may first flower, and then merge'.¹⁶

Most readers today will likely side with Forman's critics, and wonder whether, in rejecting Malan's lies, he succumbed to Verwoerd's. Those acquainted with events in KwaZulu-Natal in the past 10 or 15 years will be apt to question Forman's portrayal of ethnic nationalism as 'healthy' and 'progressive'. Ultimately, the significance of the intervention lay less in the validity of his argument than in his determination to foment debate on an 'astonishingly neglected' issue.¹⁷

Forman was no dissident, but here and in several other places in his writing he exhibited an intellectual venturesomeness that was extremely unusual in the party climate of the 1950s. In such circumstances, the response of the SACP leadership was dismally predictable. After letting the matter run for several weeks, party officials declared the national question 'divisive' and curtailed discussion. The issue re-emerged briefly in the last year of Forman's life, following the publication in the USSR of I. I. Potekhin's *Formation of Common Nationalities of the South African Bantu*, which argued a distinctly Formanesque line.¹⁸ But this Moscow-inspired debate subsided as the party confronted the cataclysm of Sharpeville and subsequent banning of all legal opposition to apartheid.

As provocative as Forman's writings on 'nationalism' are, it is his career as a 'people's historian' that is most likely to engage historians today. Forman came to history-writing in a characteristically idiosyncratic way. Soon after his arrest in 1956, he was contacted by Solly Sachs, then living in London. Sachs proposed a jointly-authored book on the Treason Trial, with him covering the 'international dimensions' and Forman providing first-hand testimony from the dock. The result was *The South African Treason Trial*, published in 1957. Banned in South Africa, the book accomplished its authors' goal of awakening the British public. 'This is courage not to be measured,' enthused one reviewer. 'Has a prisoner under a death charge ever before written and published the story of his trial whilst it was still going on - written it challengingly, glorifying in his crime, pouring scorn on the prosecution, exposing to the world the depraved principles of the Government that holds him?'¹⁹

To make matters even more surreal, the first copies of the book arrived the very day that the long preparatory examination ended and the bulk of the accused were remanded for trial. His fellow trialist Helen Joseph, author of *If This Be Treason*, the sequel that Forman had planned but did not live to write,

recalled sitting 'in the cells under the magistrate's court waiting for our new bail to be arranged and autographing each other's copies'.²⁰

In preparing the book, Forman conducted extensive research on the history of South African political trials and of the oppositional movements that gave rise to them. The research was issued in a series of long articles on the history of the South African liberation struggle, many of them focusing on the long and problematic relationship between white leftists and the African Nationalist movement. Originally published in *New Age*, the essays were collected as a book under the title *Chapters in the History of the March to Freedom*. Significantly, publication was opposed by many of Forman's comrades, who accused him of advancing heterodox interpretations. Party writers had a 'duty' to express the movement's collective point of view and not just ride [their] own individual hobby-horses, the late Michael Harmel wrote. An even more troubling rebuke, unmentioned by the editors, came from Brian Bunting, now a party elder statesman, who urged Forman to delete his account of Comintern meddling during the Native Republic period.

[I]t is wiser to draw a veil over what ... the CI instructed the PB [South African Politbureau] to do in the Twenties and early Thirties. These things were not public knowledge and the ruling class is still looking for evidence of orders from Moscow ... I am not suggesting that we should 'alter' or distort party history for our own purposes. But any history is in the end a selection of facts - 'even Theal' - [and] the measure of the historian and the index to his conclusions is the kind of fact he chooses to select ...

The salient fact of the CPSA, Bunting concluded, was that it 'was a splendid organisation, beloved by the masses, far in advance of any other organisation in the country, perhaps the continent'.²¹ Forman bristled at the criticisms, but he was a loyal party member, who accepted the principles of 'collective democracy' and 'the paramount importance of discipline'. In one of the surviving excerpts from *A Book for Karl*, he declared that a single deviation from party discipline can do untold harm to your comrades²² and that a person who persistently acts against the rule of the party is an enemy of the people. He acceded to certain revisions in the text, most of which seem to have been authored by Ruth First. The book was finally published in 1959.

In a thoughtful introduction to Forman's historical writing the editors go to considerable lengths to establish his claim as South Africa's first 'people historian'. While one might quibble about priority - Eddie Roux's *Time Longer than Rope* and I. B. Tabata's *The Awakening of a People* appeared in 1948 and 1949

respectively – the label is broadly apt. Many of the central insights of the revisionist or radical historiography that swept through South Africa in the 1970s can be found in Forman's writing a generation earlier.

For Forman, as for the revisionists, the signal event in South African history was the mineral revolution – the opening of the diamond and gold fields in the 1870s and 1880s, and the compressed industrial revolution that those discoveries set in motion. As a materialist, he recognized the way in which the racial categories prevailing in popular and academic discourse could obscure what was fundamentally a process of capitalist transformation. Forman also exhibited many of the methods and practices of the 'popular history' to which South African revisionism gave rise. He deliberately wrote history from the 'bottom up', giving pride of place not to white statesmen such as Hertzog and Smuts but to those who struggled to free South Africa from their grasp. Thoroughly researched and methodically argued, his writing was also unabashedly polemical, and took great delight in slaying white sacred cows, witness such titles as *Van Riebeeck Was a Robber* or *Dingaans Day*, which presented the murder of Piet Retief from a Zulu point of view. Finally, Forman strove in his historical writing to engage a mass readership, inviting readers to write comments and criticisms and to help locate sources – an 'experiment in collective participation in history writing' presaging the work of the South African History Workshop movement in the 1980s. Today, such assumptions and practices are so widespread that it takes an effort of imagination to understand how radical they were in the context of the 1950s. One wonders how South African historiography might have been transformed had Forman lived to complete the Ph.D in History for which he was registered at the time of his death.

When all is said and done, what is most compelling about *A Trumpet From the Housetops* is not Forman's theory of nationalism, however provocative, nor his history writing, however prescient, but the man himself, and the problem of historical judgment that he poses. How could an individual so palpably humane, so intellectually vital, so hostile to political shibboleths, have remained a devoted member of one of the most unredeemably Stalinist communist parties in the world? As a researcher, Forman understood only too well the party's lamentable history of sectarianism and suppression of dissent, and he confronted those same qualities among his own comrades on an almost daily basis. He also had the advantage of two years of direct experience of 'advanced people's democracy' in Czechoslovakia. (Forman's South African contemporary, Pauline Podbrey, resigned from the party after a similar stint in Eastern Europe). How did he keep the faith?

Such questions must, of course, be approached with due humility, and with acute awareness of the perils of historical hindsight and retrospective moralism. There are many historians today who would take Forman's devotion to the party as *prima facie* evidence of his moral and political bankruptcy, as if he bore some direct, personal responsibility for the tens of millions of corpses produced by Stalinism. On the other extreme stand those who argue that South African communists' loyalty to Moscow was incidental to their politics, and in no way vitiates their principled and courageous opposition to apartheid. Closely associated with the latter position are those who concede the SACP's egregious flaws, but offer pleas in mitigation: local party members 'didn't know' the full horrors of Stalinism; self-criticism would have strengthened the hand of fascists at home; the SACP, whatever its flaws, remained the only viable political outlet for white progressives. Given party leaders' strenuous efforts to suppress non-communist socialist alternatives in South Africa, this last plea is a bit like the child who murdered his parents and then appealed for clemency on grounds of orphanhood. One of the great virtues of this book is that it provides an opportunity to push beyond such facile posturing, to plumb the dynamics of loyalty in an individual who was not a party hack but a man of conscience, insight and personal courage.

Some reviewers of *A Trumpet from the Housetops* have sought to avoid the problem by suggesting that Forman, 'had he lived longer', would have broken with the party, a charitable reading but one clearly at odds with his death-bed request to be remembered as a 'good communist'.²³

The editors of the book do not venture so far, but they do go to considerable lengths to portray Forman as a heterodox, 'a critical maverick forever chafing against party conventional wisdom'. Even that interpretation, however, cannot be pushed too far. The critical evidence is to be found in Part III of the book, particularly in the essays collected under the heading 'Keeping Socialist Debate Alive'. The heading, if not disingenuous, is at least open to misinterpretation. Most of the selections do not focus on fostering debate within the party but on sustaining any discussion of socialism or communism in the face of the National Party onslaught. The only exceptions are the last two essays, 'Stalin and Democracy' (which was apparently never published) and 'Lessons from Hungary', both of which were written in the brief period of liberalisation following Khrushchev's accession. These essays need to be read carefully to arrive at a balanced assessment of Forman's status as 'maverick'.

In the undated 'Stalin and Dictatorship', Forman discusses Khrushchev's secret (but widely circulated) speech to the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party. In contrast to comrades who rejected the speech or denied its

relevance to South Africa, he recognized the truth and magnitude of Krushchev's revelations. Party members, he declared, had 'been living a huge lie for the last twenty years'. Instead of the triumph of democratic socialism, the Stalin years had brought the perversion of democratic practice, and of law itself; instead of the promised 'withering away of the state', the Soviet Union had produced a fearsome police machinery and, 'worst shock of all', a political culture in which numbers of people – and possibly a large number of people – who supported policies in opposition to the party line were treated as traitors ... Such sentiments, on their face value, lend support to the editors' characterisation of Forman, but there is too much here that does not ring true: the essay's belatedness, the apparent failure to publish it (a fact which the editors neither acknowledge nor explain), the unconvincing tone of 'shock' at reports that dissidents, 'possibly a large number', had been victimised. Significantly, the essay concluded by stressing the 'positive aspects' of the debacle.

Standing out most boldly is this. That by bringing mercilessly to light the criticisms of the methods of the Soviet party leadership during the preceding 20 years, Krushchev has taken the best means of ensuring that now a new era is indeed beginning. With the immense burst of discussion that has taken place throughout the Soviet Union, with the progressive movement all over the world alerted, there is little doubt that the conditions that were created for dictatorial rule will not again be able to arise.

The final peroration was, by Forman's formidable standards, callow: 'But just as all the mess, blood and agony are part of the birth of the human baby, so the mess, blood and agony of the Soviet people have given rise to their socialist state ... [W]hat an enormous debt we owe them!' ²⁴

Similar problems pervade 'Lessons From Hungary', published in *New Age* on November 1, 1956, literally hours before Soviet tanks rolled into Budapest. In the essay, Forman again positioned himself as critic, challenging his comrades to confront the faults of socialist regimes. As evidence, he offered – 'belatedly', he acknowledged – an account of his experiences in Eastern Europe five years before. In unstinting prose, he described the 'security stranglehold', 'the grotesque examples of red tape, inefficiency and buck-passing', the 'steady monotony' of government-cleared movies, the obscene privileges afforded Soviet *functionaries*, the gulf between 'soaring production statistics' and one's inability to buy a 'decent tin-opener' or a reliable contraceptive, as well as the cynicism to which such realities gave rise. Yet here again the sense of anguish was somehow tempered by Forman's innate optimism; his abiding faith in the

party; his confidence that 'the bitter lessons of the past have been learned', making 'our transition to the new age ... all the simpler'. The biggest problem with the essay, however, is simply its timing. One searches Forman's writing in vain for any critique of the 'advanced peoples' democracies' prior to 1956, or, more tellingly, for any published commentary about the Soviet Union's brutal suppression of the Hungarian revolution.²⁵

There is a still deeper problem, having to do with the nature of Forman's intellectual practice. For all his commitment to robust debate, Forman remained convinced that political problems had clear solutions, that there was in fact a single, correct answer or 'line' that could be established through the dialectic of debate and which, pending revision, required obedience. If the hallmark of the genuine maverick is scepticism, a conviction that all answers are and should be provisional, Forman simply does not qualify. Even his intervention on the national question – an intervention, it should be noted, that took Stalin's dogmatic definition of 'nation' as its point of departure – was intended to 'encourage and develop a unity of ideas' among party members on an intractable problem. Indeed, as one reads Forman's work, it is difficult to conceive of a more classically Marxist imagination. History was progressive; reason could command interest; society could be understood, transformed, controlled.

All of which is to say that Forman was indeed a 'good communist' in the fullest sense of the phrase. Our obligation as historians is not to stint the fact, still less to enter posthumous pleas in mitigation, but to confront the man, on his own terms and in his own time.

In Forman, we see the South African Communist Party at its very best. For him, concepts such as 'party discipline' and 'collective democracy' were not mere cant, catchwords to elude personal responsibility or silent dissent, but revolutionary responsibilities, embraced with full awareness of their importance and of their potential costs. Like all of us, he found ways to rationalise unpleasantness: while the evils of the capitalist system were intrinsic, communism's horrors were contingent and, once exposed, unrepeatable; while the building of 'the new age' had engendered 'terrible errors and terrible barbarities', these were 'not even a tiny fraction of the cruelties, suffering and inequity ... perpetrated daily and deliberately in the old order'.²⁶

In the end, however, what sustained Forman was not rationalisation nor simple party loyalty but an unshakeable faith that he was on the side of history, that the victory of the working class – in South Africa and ultimately the world – was inevitable, that the new world aborning would be immeasurably more just than the old. To confront these convictions today is to be brought face to face with our

own historicity, and with the simultaneously liberating and crabbing consequences of the collapse of the Soviet bloc. In Forman's faith, we confront our own agnosticism; in his confident belief in the movement of history, we see reflected our own drift and uncertainty.

Whether or not the revolutionary legacy of Lionel Forman has any relevance in today's post-apartheid, post-Soviet world is a question that only time can answer. At the very least, one might hope that the future South Africa will embody something of his energy, intellectual passion and openness to debate. In the meantime, his writings, now nearly 50 years old, offer an unexpected window onto our own historical predicament. One does not need to indulge nonsense about the end of history to recognize that we are living through a peculiar historical eddy, when the great revolutionary current that propelled so much of the history (and historiography) of the last two centuries has seemingly ceased to flow. And nowhere are the ironies and paradoxes of that predicament more acute than in South Africa.

*Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive.
But to be young was very heaven!*

Wordsworth wrote that, reflecting back on the revolution in France, at the birth of the modern epoch. Today, nearly two centuries later, the prospect is more perplexing.

Notes

1. Baruch Hirson (1995) *Revolutions in My Life* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press); Ronnie Kasrils (1993) *Armed and Dangerous: My Undercover Struggle Against Apartheid* (Oxford: Heinemann); Pauline Podbrey (1993) *White Girl in Search of the Party* (Pietermaritzburg: Haded Books); Joe Slovo (1995) *Slovo: The Unfinished Autobiography* (London: Hodder & Stoughton).
2. Baruch Hirson and Gwyn A. Williams (1995) *The Delegate for Africa: David Ivo Jones, 1883-1924* (London: Core Publications); Edward Roux (1993) *S.P. Bunting: A Political Biography*, New Edition (Bellville: Mayibuye Books); Miriam Basner (1993) *Am I An African: The Political Memoirs of H. M. Basner* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press); Stephen Clingman (1998) *Bram Fischer: Afrikaner Revolutionary* (Cape Town: David Philip); Hilda Bernstein (ed.) (1994) *The Rift: The Exile Experience of South Africans* (London: Jonathan Cape); Immanuel Suttner (1997) *Cutting Through the Mountain: Interviews with South African Jewish Activists*

- (London: Viking). For recent historical accounts of the white left, see Joshua Lazerson (1994) *Against the Tide: Whites in the Struggle Against Apartheid* (Bellville: Mayibuye Books); and Sheridan Johns (1995) *Raising the Red Flag: The International Socialist League and the Communist Party of South Africa* (Bellville: Mayibuye Books).
3. Sadie Forman and Andre Odendaal (eds.) (1992) *A Trumpet from the Husetops: The Selected Writings of Lionel Forman* (London: Zed Books; Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press; Cape Town: David Philip), p. xiv.
 4. *Trumpet from the Husetops*, pp. xxxi-xxxii.
 5. *Trumpet from the Husetops*, p. xv.
 6. *Trumpet from the Husetops*, p. xv. On Eastern European Jewish immigration to Johannesburg, see Riva Krut, 'The Making of a South African Jewish Community in Johannesburg, 1886-1914' in Belinda Bozzoli (ed.) (1987) *Class, Community and Conflict: South African Perspectives* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press).
 7. *Trumpet from the Husetops*, p. xvi. Hashomer Hatzair's theoretical foundations rested on the writings of Ber Borochov; see particularly his *Nationalism and Class Struggle: Essays in Zionism and Socialism*. For a description of life within a South African chapter, see Hirson, *Revolutions in My Life*, pp. 92-134.
 8. *Trumpet from the Husetops*, p. 122.
 9. *Trumpet from the Husetops*, p. 122.
 10. *Trumpet from the Husetops*, pp. 123-6.
 11. Bruce K Murray (1997) *Wits: The Open Years* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press), pp. 75, 99-108, 116-129.
 12. Murray, *Wits*, pp. 118-125.
 13. *Trumpet from the Husetops*, p. 199.
 14. The 'two-stage' theory was formally adopted by the SACP in 1962. See A Lerumo [Michael Harmel] (1971) *Fifty Fighting Years: The Communist Party of South Africa, 1921-1971* (London: Inkululeko Publications), pp. 96-7, 140-2; and SACP (1981) *South African Communists Speak, 1915-1980* (London: Inkululeko Publications), pp. 284-320. For earlier encounters with the problem, see, inter alia, Martin Legassick (1973) *Class and Nationalism in South African Protest: The South African*

Communist Party and the Native Republic, 1928-1932 (Syracuse: African Studies Center); Brigid Lambourne, 'Sowing the Seeds of Alliance: The Evolution of Colonialism of a Special Type: 1952-54', *African Perspective II* (1993), pp. 47-61; James Campbell, 'Romantic Revolutionaries: David Ivon Jones, S.P. Bunting and the Origins of Non-Racial Politics in South Africa', *Journal of African History* 39, 2 (1998), pp. 313-328; and Johns, *Raising the Red Flag*, pp. 200-270.

15. For the full text of 'Don't Spread Malan's Lies', see *Trumpet from the Housetops*, pp. 172-4.
16. *Trumpet from the Housetops*, p. 189.
17. *Trumpet from the Housetops*, p. 176.
18. For the correspondence between Forman and Potekhin, see *Trumpet from the Housetops*, pp. 190-215.
19. *Trumpet from the Housetops*, p. xxiii.
20. Helen Joseph (1998) *If This Be Treason* (Johannesburg: Contra Press; orig. pub. 1963), p. 17.
21. Correspondence in Forman papers, Mayibuye Centre, University of Western Cape, quoted in Mia Roth, *Eddie, Brian, Jack and Let's Phone Rusty: Is this the History of the Communist Party of South Africa (1921-1950)?* My thanks to Professor Roth for providing me with a copy of this unpublished paper.
22. *Trumpet from the Housetops*, pp. 122-3.
23. See, for example, the thoughtful review by the historian Peter Alexander in *Journal of Southern African Studies* 21, 4 (1995), pp. 669-71.
24. For the text of 'Stalin and Dictatorship', see *Trumpet from the Housetops*, pp. 163-6.
25. For the text of 'Lessons from Hungary', see *Trumpet from the Housetops*, pp. 167-9. In their introduction, Forman and Odendaal claim that Lionel Forman stood 'alone' in opposing the Soviet invasion of Hungary, but offer no evidence for this proposition; see pp. xxviii, xxxiii.
26. *Trumpet from the Housetops*, p. 167.