Stephen Ellis: A Standard of Moral Courage

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OBITUARY

Stephen Ellis: A Standard of Moral Courage

The study of the anti-apartheid struggle in South African history has suffered a severe loss with the death of the British scholar Stephen Ellis, who died of leukaemia in Amsterdam on 29 July this year, aged 62.

Described by his friend and colleague Richard Dowden, the director of the Royal African Society, as “one of the greatest Africanists of his generation”, no historian came with a wider experience across a range of African societies in researching the history of the ANC, the South African Communist Party and their military wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) over the period of the Cold War. Prior to his two ground-breaking books on the ANC - published 20 years apart, beginning in the immediate aftermath of the unbanning of the ANC and the release of Nelson Mandela – Ellis had been editor in 1986-91 of the London-based subscription newsletter, Africa Confidential. He was later editor in London between 1998 and 2006 of the Royal African Society’s journal, African Affairs. Tim Kelsall, his co-editor at African Affairs, paid tribute to his “encyclopaedic knowledge, consummate professionalism, and also the kindness and consideration he showed to authors.”

From his first book, The Rising of the Red Shawls: A Revolt in Madagascar 1895-1899 (Cambridge University Press, 1985), he came during his last years to one of the most complex subjects in the modern political history of South Africa: the question, whether Nelson Mandela had ever been a member of the SACP. Ellis had been preceded in this research by his fellow historian, the Russian scholar Irina Filatova, with complementary inquiry subsequently carried out in tandem. No equivalent research on this subject had been attempted by five biographers.

First Ellis in 2012, and then Filatova the following year, published books in English while Mandela was alive proving he had been a member of the SACP at Central Committee level in the period between the Sharpeville massacre in March 1960 and his arrest near Howick in KwaZulu-Natal in August 1962. Despite ongoing criticism of their findings by the British historian Hugh Macmillan, their judgement was confirmed by the SACP itself on the day following Mandela’s death.

Ellis’s first book on South Africa, Comrades against Apartheid: The ANC and the South African Communist Party in Exile (co-authored with Tsepo Sechaba, the pseudonym of Oyama Mabandla, a former member of the SACP in exile and the ANC security department, Mbokodo) was published in 1992 by James Currey, Oxford, and Indiana University Press. Before the Motsuenyane commission was appointed by the ANC in 1993 under Mandela’s guidance to carry out investigation into abuses committed in the ANC in exile, this was the first book to provide conclusive evidence of the mutinies in MK in Angola in 1984, of Quatro prison camp and of the dreaded Mbokodo (“the grindstone”), as well as of the determining (but not exclusive) presence of the SACP in the leadership of the ANC over this period.
His second and last book on South African history, *External Mission: The ANC in Exile 1960-1990* (published by Jonathan Ball in 2012, then by Hurst & Co, London, and Oxford University Press, New York), was the first book written in English to provide convincing evidence – confirmed the day after Mandela’s death by the SACP – that Mandela had been a member of its Central Committee.

In his researches into Mandela’s relationship with the SACP, he was preceded by Irina Filatova, based in Cape Town but working part of each year as professor of history at the National State University Higher School of Economics in Moscow. In the late 1980s before the fall of the Soviet Union, Filatova had been professor and head of the African Studies department at the University and was also a member of the Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee. She was subsequently head of the department of history at the University of Natal (Durban-Westville). Together with Professor Apollon Davidson, for decades her colleague in Russia-South Africa studies, she was one of four co-editors of the two-volume collection of documents from Soviet archives translated into English, *South Africa and the Communist International: A Documentary History*, published by Frank Cass, London, in 2003, as well as of two other books written with Davidson on Russian/South African history.

Their book carrying evidence of Mandela’s membership of the SACP, *Rossia i Yuzhnaya Afrika: Navedeniiie mostov* (Russia and South Africa: Building Bridges), was issued in Moscow in 2012 by the publishing house of the National Research University Higher School of Economics. Adapted and expanded in translation by Filatova, *The Hidden Thread: Russia and South Africa in the Soviet Era*, was published in South Africa in 2013 by Jonathan Ball.

Supportive first-hand evidence was provided the same year by Professor Sir Bob Hepple QC, who as a member of the SACP Central Committee had been arrested by security police in the raid in July 1963 on the ANC/SACP/MK headquarters in Rivonia, Johannesburg. Hepple appeared in the dock alongside Mandela and the other accused on the first day of the Rivonia Trial. His autobiographical memoir, *Young Man with a Red Tie: Mandela and the Failed Revolution, 1960-63* (published in July 2013 by Jacana), supported the direction of Ellis’s and Filatova’s researches, as well as reporting the state’s withdrawal of charges against Hepple and his release from detention on condition he became the first witness for the prosecution, followed by his escape from the country – and the trial – organised by the SACP.

Ellis’s two books on the ANC - each of them the first to provide South African readers with reliable information on matters of great importance - were separated by a joint study written by him and his partner, Gerrie ter Haar: *Worlds of Power: Religious Thought and Political Practice in Africa*, published by Hurst & Co, London, in 2005. In his 25 years of work relating to South Africa, Stephen was richly supported and encouraged by Gerrie, herself emeritus professor of Religion and Development at the International Institute of Social Studies of Erasmus University, Rotterdam, and a world authority on religious thought in Africa.

Their range of work complemented each other’s. Ter Haar’s website at the African Studies Centre in Leiden, where Ellis was director and later senior researcher, describes her as a “scholar of religion specialising in the religious traditions of Africa and the African diaspora”; the author or editor of more than twenty books, including translations into French, Italian, Spanish and Japanese; and author of papers published in a wide range of
academic and professional journals. She was vice-president of the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) as well as academic programme director of the XIXth IAHR World Congress in Tokyo in 2005 and is a founding member of the African Association for the Study of Religions (AASR). While Stephen was head of the African sub-region at the International Secretariat in London of Amnesty International between 1982 and 1986, Gerrie worked for its Dutch section.

Their partnership of head and heart, bringing a broad, humane and spiritual vision to some of South Africa’s most harsh and knotty issues. The title of Gerrie ter Haar’s book, *How God Became African: African Spirituality and Western Secular Thought*, published by the University of Pennsylvania Press in 2009, indicates their sharing a significantly different mode of thought from the dialectical materialism of the SACP and its predecessor, the CPSA, founded in the wake of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia in 1917.

In this spirit, Ellis was director of the Africa programme at the International Crisis Group in 2003-2004, and an advisor in 2013-14 to the West Africa Commission on Drugs, chaired by former President Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria. His work as advisor accompanied his announcement to family and friends at his 60th birthday party in Amsterdam that he had leukaemia and would be beginning chemotherapy. Dowden wrote that his “last book, yet to be published, is on the Nigerian drug networks whose skill, power and reach across the world amazed even the US Drug Enforcement Agency.” It follows Ellis’s article, “West Africa’s international drug trade”, in *African Affairs* in 2009.

In South Africa, he worked in 1997-98 as a researcher for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. His review of the TRC’s Final Report published in the journal *Transformation* in 2000 noted that it had made a “notable attempt to be open-minded in considering the history of South Africa, and was less politically prejudiced than many onlookers ever thought feasible.” Its Final Report, he urged, was “a clear attempt at a balanced account of at least certain categories of human rights abuses….” The same open-mindedness, balance and absence of political prejudice, accompanied by research of unwavering rigour, were his own qualities as a historian. Veterans on both sides of the struggle against the apartheid state came to appreciate his integrity.

This did not stop the ANC exile journal, *Sechaba*, published in London, from responding in October 1988 to revelations published by Ellis in *Africa Confidential* with an editorial headed: “Whom does Africa Confidential serve?” Sechaba denounced *Africa Confidential* for giving a “gloomy, if not a horrifying and frightening picture” of conditions in the ANC in exile, stating it reports were “more like distorted intelligence reports than serious journalism.”

The editorial, which implied that Ellis was an “agent” working for a hostile intelligence agency, followed a detailed article in *Africa Confidential* referring to the role of Chris Hani - then MK army commissar - in “Putting down the 1984 mutiny in the ANC training camps in Angola” (Vol 29, No 16, 12 August 1988) - probably the first reference to the mutinies. Ellis was unphased. In December 1988 he went on to provide accurate information about the imprisonment by Mbokodo of the ANC’s research director (later Arts and Culture Minister), Pallo Jordan, in Lusaka in June 1983. (Vol 29, No 24)

On the day before he died, Stephen Ellis told me of the extreme difficulty he had faced in obtaining verification of the information he had acquired, and the lengths to which he had gone to ensure it was reliable. That was the measure of the man. Everything he published in
Africa Confidential about the mutinies and Jordan’s detention was subsequently proved to be true. The smear suggesting “distorted intelligence reports” had a truly South African denouement when it was revealed a few years later that the editor at Sechaba at the time had himself been turned through his alcoholism into working for apartheid state intelligence.

Continuing before his death in the Catholic faith of his childhood, Ellis was born in Nottingham in the English Midlands, attended a local grammar school, worked after school as a volunteer teacher in Cameroon - his first acquaintance with Africa - graduated at Oxford and then worked as a teacher in Madagascar before returning to Oxford for his doctorate.

In addition to his studies on Madagascar and South Africa, books followed on Liberia (The Mask of Anarchy: The Destruction of Liberia and the Religious Dimension of an African Civil War, University of New York, 1999), in which he confronted evidence of cannibalism with his characteristic rigour, and Season of Rains: Africa in the World (Hurst, London, 2011), which the former ANC MP Andrew Feinstein, author of After the Party, described as “required reading for anyone who cares about Africa and its role in the world”, noting Ellis’s “remarkable historical knowledge, … reflecting over three decades of searingly honest and perspicacious engagement with the continent”.

His final post, appropriately, was as Desmond Tutu Professor in Social Sciences at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam.

Alongside his final book on the Nigerian crime syndicates due for publication after his death, a final article will be published by the journal Cold War History, London, in which Ellis provides further confirmation of Mandela’s SACP membership, acquired by Irina Filatova from a recent publication in Russian by Vladimir Shubin, the leading Soviet official responsible for matters South African.

He has provided South African historians with a standard of moral courage and intellectual independence, and will be greatly missed.

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