

BOOK REVIEW

Sylvia Neame. *Drama of the Peace Process in South Africa: I Look Back 30 Years.*

Cape Town: Best Red, Human Sciences Research Council, 2021. ix + 518 pp. Notes. Source Material. Index. \$32.00. Paper. ISBN 978-1-928246-42-8.

Vivid personal insights can often illuminate the crossroads of history, and Sylvia Neame's reflections on the South African transition out of apartheid in *Drama of the Peace Process in South Africa* provides just such an opportunity. Neame, a former political prisoner and victim of state torture, managed to escape further persecution through exile in 1967 and eventually settled in the then German Democratic Republic, where she embarked on an academic career at Karl Marx/Leipzig University while remaining in dialogue with leading fellow members of the African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Communist Party (SACP). As Neame herself therefore notes, she wrote the book as a historian who is both an insider and an outsider in the national liberation movement and so offers a compelling perspective as a participant-observer.

The book is organized in an unconventional style. Neame's work, as part analytical history and part personal memoir, is divided into three sections. Following a consideration of her methodological approach to understanding the debates surrounding the nature of the liberation struggle, she provides a detailed assessment of the major theoretical and policy shifts within the ANC and the SACP, beginning with Nelson Mandela's rise to take the leading role in the negotiations and transition from the mid-1980s. Here, she covers the major issues and key moments which leaders debated, often hotly. These include matters relating to Mandela's individual role in taking the initiative to begin talks about talks with the apartheid regime, various critical policy shifts related to the outcomes of the struggle within both the ANC and the SACP, and the long process of negotiation with the white-dominated government.

Among the more notable of Neame's arguments in this section are an acknowledgement of the special colonial conditions in South Africa that mitigated against a true socialist revolution, and how this later imposed the need for a compromise, leading to a negotiated solution for a national democratic transition and only partial revolutionary change. As Neame shows, this was a major point of concern among SACP leaders, but one that

was ultimately conceded owing to both the practical and historical exigencies of the situation. Other important issues that resonate with recent scholarship on Nelson Mandela and the ANC include the critical question of the turn to the use of violence and the creation of Umkhonto We Sizwe. Curiously, Neame does not take up the question of Mandela's controversial membership in the SACP. She does provide significant commentary on the ANC's push for the establishment of a unitary state in the face of considerable opposition from both the white National Party and Mangosuthu Buthelezi of the Inkatha Freedom Party.

Neame also illuminates the fascinating and important global dimension of the transition. Her many insights into the role of the Soviet Union, China, Cuba, and the influence of the war in Vietnam on ANC strategy are all fresh and compelling. Of continued importance to current ANC politics are her analyses of both the negotiations over economic policy and the ANC leadership's views on the centrality of rural and mass resistance during the People's War for ungovernability in the 1980s. She then reflects on de Klerk's role and the final transition from the Government of National Unity to the ANC's democratic victory and political dominance.

The analytical section, which comprises less than half the book, is followed by a much more personal set of insights in sections that include excerpts from Neame's personal diary from 1985 to 1989, and then extracts of internal policy papers she drafted for the ANC and SACP. These materials are interesting, and revealing of her own views, frustrations, and caveats, as well as contextual news of the day. Some readers, however, may not find all the diary excerpts, which include various ruminations about mundane daily activities—a walk in the park, a meal out—to be relevant. In these pages, Neame emphasizes that her personal role in and perspective on the transition was strongly influenced by her life in exile in East Germany, and this necessarily limited her participation in general policy discussions or party politics. In any event, it would have been interesting to read responses from the range of ANC-SACP leaders that are so central to her critique of party policies. Still, the book is well written and provides some important insights from a keen participant-observer.

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