South African People's History

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For over a decade the History Workshop in South Africa has been engaged in a unique task of historical reclamation, placing committed scholarship at the disposal of the social majority of that country. Knowledge of history—of the resistance to oppression before and after the imposition of apartheid—has become a weapon in the struggle for a new, more democratic society. The writing of such history is thus an intellectual show of solidarity with the aims of the Mass Democratic Movement. Three new works published under the auspices of the History Workshop and two progressive presses illustrate the degree to which this movement has become a source of power for the mass of the South African people.

These three works fulfil the function of reinterpreting South African history in complementary ways. Two are by scholars, who have chosen familiar themes in modern South African history, but have treated them in unique and imaginative ways. The third is a compendium of articles—designed for direct communication with the African masses—which first appeared in the *New Nation* between 1986 and 1988. The three works are written in plain English, produced for sale as cheaply as possible, and are thus accessible to people of varying educational and income levels, including those radical youth now engaged in People's education on a full-time basis through the construction of alternative, grassroots institutions. In format and affordability, they are designed to be of use to students and makers of history alike.

The book with the largest sweep is the *New Nation* text, the first of a projected two-part series. It is intended to revise South African history in the light of the dramatic reconsiderations of social history and political economy which have revolutionized South African studies since the late 1960s. Viewed superficially, it has a deceptively generic quality which disguises the identities of its contributors, at least initially. Upon closer ex-
amination, however, the tactical basis of this approach may be seen. In part it reflects the apparent aspiration of the History Workshop to write a collective history rather than one crafted by individual “stars.” But it also reflects the dangers inherent in trying to get out the “real story” while under the scrutiny of seemingly ubiquitous agents of the apartheid state, for whom the New Nation has been a nuisance since its inception. Thus Zwelakhe Sisulu, editor of the New Nation, was in detention for the better part of the period during which these pieces were prepared. He was released after more than 400 days in custody, but was forbidden to practice his journalistic craft. The people's history page of the New Nation, prepared under the auspices of the History Workshop, began at the urging of Sisulu, who broached the idea late in 1986. On 23 October 1986, the first edition of “Learning Nation,” as the people’s history page was called, made its appearance.

Volume 1 of New Nation, New History includes nine sections. The first three focus upon regional historical phenomena in the Transvaal, Natal, and Eastern Cape respectively. They each emphasize the position of the rural, preindustrial communities which antedated the mineral revolution as these stood in the years preceding the wars of dispossession and the rise of capital. These relatively brief pieces focus on the theme of resistance to alien encroachment, whether the latter took the form of Afrikaner irredentism or British colonialism. As much as possible they examine events from "inside," i.e., from something approaching the viewpoints of indigenes, rather than those of the settlers, colonial bureaucrats, traders, or missionaries, whose voices tended to dominate the discourse on the “Native Problem” during the imperial era. At every stage these sections show the role played by different types of leading figures who galvanized opposition against efforts to displace, subdue, or incorporate their communities. These leaders range, for the nineteenth century, from Nyabela of the Ndzundza Ndebele to Sekhukhune of the Pedi to Shaka and Cetshwayo of the Zulu. But there are also portraits of mission-educated Christians such as Kgalema Dinkwanyane and the amakhuthwa (believers) of Natal—also known derisively as amagogoboka (traitors)—led by John Langalibalele Dube. For the twentieth century, further pieces focus on the Zulu King Bambatha, the rise and fall of the ICU (Industrial and Commercial Workers’ Union), and the shift from moderation to defiance in the period following World War II.

Because the book is organized topically and regionally, chronology occasionally suffers. Sometimes it is helpful to flip back and forth in order to gain a full understanding of the magnitude and concurrence of the resistance efforts described. On the other hand, the regional approach effectively demonstrates the surprising degree of unity, in the face of larger threats to local autonomy, of groups so diverse and widely dispersed that they could not have forged alliances with one another. Nevertheless, for people not accustomed to viewing the process of change from the perspective of time, a brief, even one-page timeline might usefully have been included.

Sections four and five deal with the destruction of a semi-autonomous peasantry, with the creation of an urbanized contract labor force composed of African, Indian, and “Coloured” workers forced to live in locations on the
LEARNING NATION
How the ghettos began

Even the state has now accepted that the six million blacks in SA's townships are here to stay, that this was not always so. For nearly a century, blacks had to fight for the right to live in towns. In our next three articles, we will trace this struggle on the Reef.

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PLANNING CO-ORDINATOR

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Reef, and with a parallel process which brought about the growth of poor white slums. If the passage of the 1913 Land Act is the climax of the section on the loss of African control of land, the promulgation of the 1923 Urban Areas Act stands as the pivotal factor in the creation of ghettos during the interwar period. Pass laws and other "influx control" regulations—and their relationship to squatting and other strategies to which homeless families resorted—are also examined within the context of the formation of townships. Beer brewing, the subject of la Hausse's monograph, receives space as well.

Section six treats the 1950s, focusing primarily on the ramifications of the revitalization of the ANC, the Defiance Campaign, and the formation of the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU). Section seven provides a description of the turbulent 1960s and 1970s—highlighting Sharpeville, Black Consciousness, and the Soweto uprising.

Then the book shifts to examine the struggle of women and the role of literature in manifesting and shaping a new South African consciousness. These final two sections of the volume contain some of its most interesting material. The articles on women in section eight present female migration and its consequences, domestic labor, brewing, women in industry, and militant agitation undertaken by women's groups. Each of these contain significant information, especially in the context of South African history, where writers have not paid sufficient attention to the contributions of African women. It is to be hoped that the second volume will reflect more of an effort to integrate women's travails and triumphs throughout, rather than concentrate them into one section which could be ignored in favor of others revolving around male leading figures. That said, the fact that the section exists at all is to be commended: it provides a basis for enlarging upon what has already been done. Too much of what women of all backgrounds have done in South Africa remains relegated to the status of footnotes to the history of the country, and it is time that this be acknowledged and corrected, especially by radicals.

The final section, on literature, traces the history of both oral and written literature in South Africa, beginning with *lithoko*, the heroic praise poetry of the Basotho, and linking it with the pioneering efforts of prose writers such as Solomon T. Plaatje, Thomas Mofolo, R.R.R. and H.I.E. Dhlomo, and A.C. Jordan. Autobiographers Peter Abrahams, Es'kia Mphahlele, Richard Rive, and Frances Baard also receive special consideration, and two final articles concentrate on the black press. This section shows the ways in which literature has exhibited both continuity and change for African writers, and reveals the deep roots of an authentic and independent African voice, uncompromised and resilient in the face of the fetters of generations of government repression. It is a fitting end to a book published by an institution which seeks to continue this authentic and autonomous radical journalistic tradition, the *New Nation*.

The literature section, nevertheless, shares the flaw of the book overall, treating African literary women on little more than a token basis. One wonders why no attention is paid to such writers as Miriam Tlali or Ellen...
Kuzwayo: their works are not even mentioned in the otherwise extensive bibliography. Moreover, the heading “women” in the bibliography contains only three titles, and these are insufficiently augmented by inclusions under other sub-headings. There is no good reason for omitting autobiographies of such cultural workers as Miriam Makeba, whose life story is widely available within southern Africa. Nor is it readily apparent why Winnie Mandela’s Part of My Soul Went With Him or Sibambene: The Voices of Women at Mboza are not listed. Also ignored are Beata Lipman’s We Make Freedom, Richard Lapchick and Stephanie Urdang’s Oppression and Resistance, and IDAF contributions such as You Have Struck a Rock, For their Triumphs and their Tears, and Women Under Apartheid. All of this should be remedied as the second volume is prepared.

Robert Edgar and Paul la Hausse, in their monographs, each seek to explore a particular subject which had a profound effect upon South Africa. Edgar’s topic is the slaughter of some two hundred members of a millenarian movement which captivated thousands of Xhosa speaking Christians, who set up a permanent village at Ntabela, near Queenstown in the Eastern Cape, in the years immediately following World War I. The community, known as the Israelites, was led by a charismatic prophet named Enoch Mgijima, a member of the “Mfengu” sub-group of Xhosa speakers, whose forebears had settled as refugees among the Gcaleka of the Eastern Cape in the wake of the mfecane or wars of Shaka. Mgijima was born in 1868, the son of a farmer. The father, Jonas Mayekiso Mgijima, was himself part of a community seeking to adopt Western ideas and culture, including mission education at such schools as Healdtown and Lovedale, and membership in the Presbyterian or Wesleyan Methodist churches. Enoch Mgijima became a lay preacher with the Wesleyan Methodists.

Unlike his brothers, who attended Lovedale Institution and later Zonnebloem College in Cape Town, Mgijima was unable, for reasons of health, to go much further than Standard 3 (fifth grade). On 19 April 1907, however, Mgijima experienced a vision in which he was taken to the heavens by an angel who commanded that he fulfill his mission by educating his people and encouraging them to worship God according to the old traditions. The vision also included an apocalyptic reference to a war and an impending end of the world from which only the faithful would be spared. Although he tried to resist acting upon the vision, Mgijima’s “call” to prophecy was strengthened when he witnessed the passing of Halley’s comet in April 1910. He gradually drifted away from the Wesleyan Methodists in the two years that followed.

Edgar firmly places Mgijima within a triple context: the Xhosa prophetic tradition, the creation of independent “Zionist” churches, and the pattern of linkages which developed between different groups of African Christians in South Africa and some black American churches during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Mgijima’s movement was not unlike other South African independent churches which forged links with Afro-American denominations. The leading figures of these denominations, such as those of the National Baptist Convention and
the African Methodist Episcopal Church, had themselves started as members of orthodox, white-controlled congregations from which they subsequently broke away to form their own, autonomous groupings. In South Africa (as well as in other parts of the continent), this trend was stimulated by the economic and social oppression endured by Africans, on the one hand, and also by the limited opportunities for career advancement within religious communities led by the established churches. White leaders were often unwilling to encourage African Christians to become full members of the clergy rather than mere subalterns of expatriate priests, bishops, and ministers.

Mgijima sought and achieved affiliation with the Church of God and Saints in Christ, led by the black American prophet William Crowdy, but was subsequently cast out for his continuing, allegedly apostate visions. This excommunication led to a schism within Mgijima's church, his faction becoming known as the Israelites. During 1919 Mgijima had a vision calling him to gather his followers together at his home in Ntabelanga, the site of the annual Israelite Passover held each April. Mgijima's appeal was answered by upwards of 3,000 people, and this brought his followers under official scrutiny, stimulated by white farmers who feared the "Black Peril" they seemed to represent. Thus began a test of wills between the colonial state and the religious community which led ultimately to the Bulhoek Massacre of May 1921, in which hundreds of Israelites were shot down by members of a police force of 800 assembled from all parts of the country.

Edgar discusses some of the widely different interpretations of this event and its significance, stressing the unity which emerged among African intellectuals who commented on it. He makes the text even more powerful by his generous inclusion of rare photographs of the principals and their localities, giving the piece an immediacy which permits modern readers to return to the Eastern Cape during the early 1920s. In a succinct but scholarly monograph, he has made a lasting contribution to the history of popular responses to oppression in South Africa. Edgar is no stranger to the subject of millennarian movements: this is his third examination of the Bulhoek massacre, and his second book-length study of peasant responses to colonial rule in Southern Africa. In each study he shows a subtle but persuasive identification with the victims of arbitrary, capricious, and Machiavellian decisions by authority, without portraying the oppressed as helpless. Nor does he resort to the use of cheap emotional devices to elicit sympathy for the "misguided" or "pathetic" Israelites. In fact, he avoids such judgments, concentrating instead upon showing how one community was able to come to conclusions about itself and what it should do to remedy its condition, and how "God's plan" was thwarted by a government that continually overreacted to any manifestation of African assertion, be it political, religious, or cultural. Many readers will be able to make concrete use of the lessons of this study.

Paul la Hausse's book is similar to Edgar's in important ways. In his case, the problem under examination is the political economy of alcohol. Like Edgar, la Hausse first wrote about his subject while a graduate stu-
dent, and his thesis led him into such related areas as the growth of amalaita gangs in Natal. While his thesis concentrated almost exclusively on the history of alcohol in Natal, his book covers the entire country. Further, while his thesis was restricted to the first three decades of this century, Brewers, Beerhalls and Boycotts takes on everything up to 1976 and beyond. Consequently, he has produced a book with the feel of a popular history of alcohol, which also explores the vital role of alcohol in the creation of a captive African work force.

Alcohol provided the battleground for several generations of resistance to capital and the state in South Africa. Well before the nineteenth century, the brews made by fermenting "traditional" grains had social as well as nutritional value. The most common such drink was known as utshwala (Nguni), byalwa (Northern Sotho), or joala (Southern Sotho). La Hausse distinguishes between brews made from grain and the stronger beverages brewed from honey, marula berries, or the leaves of prickly pears. At the heart of la Hausse's work is an analysis of the development and transformation of a resilient drinking culture among Africans in South Africa. In the early times, fermented beverages made under "traditional" conditions had been viewed as "the food of the people." The colonial and industrial transformation led to a culture which was both informed and deformed by a very different approach to drinking; it was coupled with the much stronger alcoholic beverages brewed from hops and other grains consumed by people accustomed to distilled alcohol.

Settlers and their colonial allies resented the autonomy of women who produced "traditional" alcoholic beverages for their male relatives and friends, as well as what they perceived as the "idleness" of the African men who drank these brews and did not feel the need to be part of the colonial economy. From the 1870s, therefore, settlers began to pressure governments to craft legislation which would limit the rights of Africans to brew and consume "traditional" beer. Simultaneously, they used other means—including the "tot" system of providing partial payment to workers in alcohol—as vehicles through which Africans could become addicted to European beer and distilled spirits, and thereby be incorporated into the colonial economy as consumers of alcohol and sellers of labor. Once a dependence was created, the growing demand for these beverages aided the expansion of liquor syndicates on the Rand and, later, the development of a government monopoly.

African resistance to these trends took several forms. Professionals like Sol Plaatje advocated temperance, and created societies for its promotion. Others, including Saul Msane, advocated outright prohibition. By 1908, meanwhile, beer halls began to appear in Durban, challenging the independent, largely female producers of utshwala (sorghum beer), who depended upon brewing either in part or entirely to sustain themselves. Shortly before that time the highly intoxicating isishimiyana (an onomatopoetic term reflecting the shimmying of an inebriated man) had begun to appear, in response to a demand for newer and stronger beverages. The efforts of the Durban Town Council effectively curtailed the
independent production and consumption of alcoholic beverages by semi-autonomous brewers, and brought the exclusion of Africans from the liquor trade. By the 1920s the ICU had become identified with boycotts and other efforts to limit the effects of alcohol consumption upon already impoverished African working people. For a year from 1929 to 1930 its supporters succeeded in heaping heavy financial losses upon the beer halls.

At the same time, an independent marabi culture emerged in the slums of Johannesburg, in which alcohol played a vital part. Marabi parties in private houses and shebeens created the context in which South African jazz musicians learned and plied their trade, while they and their audiences drank ever stronger, often toxic concoctions with names like skokiaan, istikilimiqiki ("kill me quick"—a widely encouraged name for home brew in Africa), quediviki ("kill the weekend"), and se pa ba le masenke ("stagger on the fences").

La Hausse manages to capture effectively Africans' simultaneous and paradoxically contradictory impulses, toward and away from alcohol. Alcohol was at once a release from the overwhelming burdens of oppression and the grossest manifestation of the debilitating effects of that oppression. It was clearly responsible for the deaths of some of the most gifted township artists, as well as of countless others who were poisoned by deadly skokiaan, or killed as a result of quarrels or accidents exacerbated by drinking. In South Africa, la Hausse indicates (though not explicitly), the consumption of alcohol has had effects that defy description. Alcohol's effects are felt not only by the black population, but by others whose addiction goes unmentioned and untreated. There is no telling what role alcoholism has played in incidents of spouse and family abuse, divorce, abandonment, homelessness, homicide, and suicide in historic and contemporary South Africa.

Alcohol led to a deep and complex wellspring of hostility in opposition groups in the period from the 1950s into the 1980s. An illustration of reforming zeal in the eradication of alcohol is the case of the women of the Mkhumbane section of Durban, home to 90,000 people in 1952. In 1958, after the construction of KwaMashu township, the government decided to relocate the population of Mkhumbane. A part of this process was government liquor raiding. Taken together these measures provoked a popular response from residents outraged at having to move, and especially by the women brewers who were being deprived of their meager livelihoods. The book concludes, in contrast, with a description of the manner in which politicized youth in Soweto targeted alcohol as one of the most potent symbols of both government oppression and African acquiescence in servitude. The full story is quite revealing.

In this book as in New Nation, New History, women are beginning to get their due. La Hausse's attention to women, while relatively understated, is always apparent: virtually no aspect of this story may be viewed without considering its impact upon African women, non-producers and producers of alcohol alike. Regardless of whether they stood in support of or in opposition to alcohol, they consistently sought to protect tradition.
These texts mark a new step in historical writing on South Africa. They are implicitly anti-apartheid without focusing on it. Rather they concentrate on recasting the past and the present in terms which may be useful in constructing a viable and inclusive future for all who live in South Africa. Some white readers may be alarmed at the fact that their story is not being told, except between the lines. But this is the converse of looking into a mirror and seeing those whom it is no longer possible to avoid—people of the townships, the black gardener, domestic, chauffeur, cook, or child-care worker—who had previously been taken to be a part of the landscape. Such readers may have to adjust their vision somewhat, to accommodate an ineluctable reality. Americans, too, can learn a great deal from this.

Notes

1. See the use of the term in Colin Bundy and Christopher Saunders, Reader's Digest Illustrated History of South Africa: The Real Story (Pleasantville, New York, and Montreal, 1988).
