

A new look at the enigmatic PAC

SOBUKWE AND APARTHEID by Benjamin Pogrund (Jonathan Ball, R39,95).

THE PAC has always been a poor second on the black South African political scene, not only in terms of support but also in that there are few, if any, generally sympathetic but critical analyses of the organisation.

This book, primarily a biography of the PAC's best known leader Robert Sobukwe by a former Rand Daily Mail deputy editor, helps to fill that gap on SA's political history bookshelves.

Less consciously, it is also a reflection of that curious era (which extended also to Donald Woods' relationship with black consciousness leader Steve Biko) when white liberals felt more at home with leaders of black exclusivist (some would say anti-white) organisations than with their rival — the non-ra-

cial but SA Communist Party-allied ANC. (These two aspects of ANC policy were, of course, the prime reasons for the PAC breakaway in 1959.)

As an overall political history of SA the book is severely lacking — at least for moderately knowledgeable South African readers.

It would have sufficed for Pogrund to have kept the history of apartheid to the minimum required to contextualise Sobukwe's life and times.

But he has tried to go further and failed. The book is littered with meaningless phrases which cannot be called serious analysis.

For example, explaining the atmosphere preceding the 1955 Klip-town congress at which the Freedom Charter was adopted, he writes: "Some form of anti-apartheid action was sorely needed." What is that supposed to mean?

It is, further, a rather irritating book in many parts, in that it is almost as much a Pogrund autobiography as a biography of Robert Sobukwe.

Woods' work on black consciousness leader Steve Biko was heavily criticised in that it appeared to lionise the author for the trials and tribulations he had suffered as much as to examine the subject.

Pogrund leaves himself open to the same criticism.

This is not to underrate Pogrund's journalistic work.

Indeed, contemporaries of his during the PAC's 1959/60 heyday say Pogrund deserves a great deal of credit as he was, at the time, the only white journalist on a mainstream newspaper to take black politics seriously.

One of the most fascinating revelations of this book is that Sobukwe — despite being second only to Mandela as a South African political hero — lived an extremely brief active political life.

He was a prominent member of the Fort Hare branch of the ANC Youth League in the years 1949 and

1950.

He then disappeared into teaching in out-of-the way Standerton for four years.

And he then spent another four politically inactive years teaching and studying at Wits University and devoting himself to family matters.

He re-entered political life in 1958, and quickly rose again to prominence as the battle between the Africanists and the rest in the ANC was reaching its climax.

Sobukwe was arrested on the day of the Sharpeville shootings — March 21, 1960 — and spent the next nine years in prison after which he was banned and banished to Kimberley where he stayed — leaving the city only for medical treatment for the cancer of which he died in 1978.

The book provides valuable insights into the politicking which preceded the PAC breakaway. The author was present at ANC meetings and conferences where the split developed and finally burst. Despite his closeness to Sobukwe, he does not appear to cover up the less than gentlemanly tactics employed by both some Africanist and ANC elements.

The eyewitness accounts of the Sharpeville shootings remain dramatic although less original.

Because Pogrund's close relationship with Sobukwe began developing only in the late 1950s, a large proportion of the book covers Sobukwe's politically inactive time.

Much is devoted to the six years in prison he served in terms of the so-called "Sobukwe clause" which was passed in Parliament purely to keep him in prison after completion of the three-year sentence he earned for organising the anti-pass law campaign which culminated in Sharpeville.

The injustice of that act, perpetrated by the unlamented John Vorster, burns through.

No less offensive are the reminders of obstacles Jimmy Kruger



□ ROBERT SOBUKWE

placed in the way of allowing the dying Sobukwe to receive the best possible medical care in 1977 and 1978.

Most importantly, though, the book provides some understanding of the ways of the PAC.

At Sobukwe's funeral, in spite of an invitation to do so from the family, neither Pogrund nor Helen Suzman were permitted to speak because of the hostility of PAC supporters.

This was similar to the atmosphere earlier this month at the funeral of journalist Sam Mabe.

As a friend of the PAC's foremost leader, Pogrund's exposition of the contradictions between the organisation's purported ideal of a non-racial SA, and its ideology which encourages anti-white racism, is one of the most valuable aspects of the book.

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Robert Sobukwe Papers

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