

## Intelligence in Public Media

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### ***International Brigade Against Apartheid: Secrets of the People's War that Liberated South Africa***

Ronnie Kasrils, ed. (Jacana Media, 2021), 386 pages, index.

#### **Reviewed by Paul Kepp**

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On March 21, 1960, in a township outside Johannesburg, South African police fired into a large crowd protesting outside a police station. Sixty-nine were killed, 180 were injured. The Sharpeville Massacre is seen by many as the beginning of the worldwide anti-apartheid movement. Three decades later, that effort culminated in negotiations with the South African regime, the end of apartheid, and the country's first democratic election in 1994. The African National Congress (ANC), not the only organization in the anti-apartheid movement but its vanguard, has governed South Africa since then.

More than any other cause or conflict in Africa in the 20th century, the anti-apartheid movement drew support from individuals, organizations, and nations across the globe. *International Brigade Against Apartheid: Secrets of the People's War that Liberated South Africa*, tells their story. The book consists of 64 short essays about countries, organizations, and individuals outside South Africa who contributed to the struggle against apartheid. It was edited by Ronnie Kasrils, whose credentials for the task are impeccable. He served the anti-apartheid cause from the early 1960s, first within South Africa and later in exile, holding important positions in the ANC's intelligence, military, and political structures.

*International Brigade* is divided into two parts: the first covers the contribution of non-South Africans in the secret work of the ANC within South Africa. The second half describes the internationalist effort on the world stage: economic and sporting sanctions, training, fundraising, and political activism on behalf of the ANC and the anti-apartheid movement in general.

If the title of the book brings to mind the Republican cause in the Spanish Civil War, it is no accident. Kasrils draws the connection explicitly in his introduction. Both conflicts attracted global interest and support from nations and individuals. The anti-apartheid cause, like the Republicans in Spain, exerted an especially strong appeal on the political left. As a CIA officer with extensive Africa experience once stated, "If you look at southern

Africa, you would think the Russians won the Cold War." *International Brigade* reflects that, and abounds with language of the struggle, solidarity, and liberation.

The parallels with Spain end there, however. Internationalists in the Spanish Civil War fought as a unit in pitched battles against the enemy. The ANC and its military wing, by contrast, never posed a military threat to the Pretoria regime. As one contributor noted in "Internationalists who Joined the People's War," South Africa lacked the conditions for guerrilla struggle. The country was highly developed, with few mountainous or heavily forested regions that could serve as safe havens. South Africa at the time was governed by a well-resourced regime pursuing a total-war strategy not just against the ANC, but in and against neighboring nations that dared to support it. Although successful in infiltrating individuals and small groups in and out of South Africa, and carrying out small-scale sabotage on infrastructure and regime targets like police stations, the ANC's ambitions for armed struggle were never fully realized.

The first half of *International Brigade* the book focuses on clandestine operations inside South Africa. Europeans and Africans (rarely Americans) played a key role smuggling weapons into South Africa and moving ANC operatives in and out of the country. For example, among the most long-running and successful operations, described in "The Truck Safari: 1 Trip, 1 Tonne," involved hiding weapons in trucks used to ferry tourists from north to south across the African continent, ending in South Africa where the weapons were disembarked and cached. Some 40 such trips were made in the 1980s and early 1990s, ferrying tons of weapons and ammunition into the republic. Similarly, the need to move operatives secretly in and out of South Africa, and to communicate with them securely, emerges in *International Brigade* as one of the ANC's most important tasks. That requirement became more acute as township unrest exploded in the 1980s. The ANC, fearing it was losing touch with mass movements inside South Africa, organized "Operation Vula" to infiltrate leaders into South Africa to bridge the

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gap between internal and external elements of the anti-apartheid struggle. (Although not specifically discussed in this book, the ANC was even able to establish contact with the imprisoned Nelson Mandela.) Several essays in the first half of *International Brigade* (e.g., chapters 27–29) deal with different aspects of Vula. This part of the book suffers from repetitiveness: while not diminishing the courage of those involved, there are only so many ways to describe emplacing an arms cache or crossing a border.

The second half of *International Brigade*, titled “Solidarity Across the Globe,” covers the contribution of internationalists on the world stage: the worldwide, grassroots effort to mobilize economic sanctions, sports boycotts, and diplomatic pressure against the apartheid regime; as well as securing support and safehaven for anti-apartheid activists in exile. It is, arguably, a more important story. Although the ANC was never able to mount a serious military challenge to Pretoria, it was successful in positioning itself as preeminent in the anti-apartheid movement. By the time the ANC and other organizations were unbanned in 1990 and negotiations began on a new democratic dispensation, no one seriously questioned that the government in waiting was the ANC, and that Nelson Mandela would be its president. This was a major achievement, and the ANC owes much to those who stoked the anti-apartheid fires and supported its political work around the world.

The essays are well-organized by geography and chronology, but the quality of the writing varies, as is to be expected in any book with 60-odd contributors. For example, the chapter by British journalist Victoria Brittain (“African Continental Solidarity Defied the Cold War”) is a clichéd and uninformative pastiche that does no justice to African countries that supported the anti-apartheid movement. By contrast, sections on the United States (“USA Protest Began with ‘Germ’ of a Movement”) and the Soviet Union (“The Soviet Union and the Liberation Struggle in South Africa”) are excellent, and stand on their own as succinct summaries of two radically different approaches to the struggle against apartheid.

Another challenge with *International Brigade* is also a function of its format: a reader not familiar with the events described in the book will quickly become lost in the welter of names, places, and acronyms that appear throughout the book. A list of abbreviations would have been helpful. *International Brigade* consists of essays solicited by the editors, but stylistically it is reminiscent of a succession of oral history interviews. That vehicle is of value in preserving the memory of specific events, but will appeal most to those who themselves were participants, or who already possess expertise on the topics in question. Readers looking for a more traditional, comprehensive account of the anti-apartheid movement may wish to read Kasrils’ exuberant and entertaining autobiography, *Armed and Dangerous* (2nd edition, Mayibuye Books, 1998). A more objective, critical treatment can be found in *External Mission: The ANC in Exile, 1960–1990* by Stephen Ellis (C. Hurst and Company, 2012).

The post-Mandela years have not been kind to the ANC. Thabo Mbeki’s incoherent response to the AIDS crisis, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela’s very public fall from grace, the epic corruption of the Jacob Zuma era, and other travails have fueled a sense of unfulfilled promise and missed opportunities in South Africa. A few contributors to *International Brigade* mention this; Kasrils himself asks in the epilogue, “was it worth it?” Most of the individuals who served in or alongside the brigade returned quietly to their professions and lives, in South Africa or elsewhere, after the end of apartheid. A small number went on to positions of power or wealth in the new South Africa—including Kasrils, who served as Minister of Intelligence Services, among other roles. Some of the latter betrayed the ANC’s ideals through greed and self-interest. Accountability for those failures belongs to them, not to “the good people,” as Kasrils calls them, of the International Brigade. To paraphrase Abraham Lincoln, if apartheid was an offense which history willed to remove, then it is hard to disagree with the book’s conclusion that yes, it was worth it.



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