

THE PRINTED PROPAGANDA OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF SOUTH AFRICA 1921-1950

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a cursory overview of the printed propaganda produced by the Communist Party of South Africa from 1921-1950. The production, distribution, consumption and regulation of the printed propaganda are briefly described, followed by a discussion of the representation and construction of identities in the images contained within the printed material. Key identities which emerged in images over time, such as the figure of the South African worker and “comrade gentleman” are then briefly discussed.

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Introduction

In this paper an overview of the printed propaganda produced by the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) from 1921-1950 is offered. The paper proceeds by offering a brief description of the production, distribution, consumption and regulation of the party's propaganda followed by a cursory discussion of the representation and construction of key identities which emerged in the images. This paper responds to calls for the recovery of "lost histories" which are described by Jonathan Woodham (2005:264) as the:

"... untapped and at present largely invisible wealth of material representing the work and lives of graphic designers, industries and local associations from countries and regions outside the dominant nexus of Europe and the United States. Such evidence is not generally to be seen in current publications or research, resulting in growing pressure for the recovery of these 'lost histories'."

The study of the CPSA's printed graphic propaganda is important, not only because it brings such a hidden history into view, but also of the insights which it offers into how South African communists have viewed themselves and others in the past.

The CPSA came into being on 29 July 1921 with the merging of the International Socialist League (ISL) and a number of other South African socialist organisations. The party dissolved in 1950 in anticipation of being banned under the

Suppression of Communism Act and was relaunched as an underground party in 1953 under the name the South African Communist Party (SACP), which was eventually unbanned in 1990. The important role played by the CPSA and SACP in the liberation struggle of South Africa is generally acknowledged and in the early 1990s the SACP entered into a tripartite alliance with the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the African National Congress (ANC). The latter political party came into power following the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994 and has remained in power to date.

Before the 1950s there was no other South African political party like the CPSA as it was singular "in its commitment to socialism, its identification with the Soviet Union, its opposition to racial discrimination, the only political party open to all races, only party concerned to mobilise blacks, only political party whose primary focus was extra-parliamentary" (Johns 1994:2).

Propaganda was important to the CPSA and a sizeable volume of printed material produced by the party survives. Although the party had wide-ranging propaganda activities, the focus of this paper is on the printed propaganda which contained images, and this includes materials such as newspapers, pamphlets, leaflets and posters.

At its founding, the party affiliated itself with the Communist International¹ (Comintern) and

¹ The term "International" describes a series of federations of socialist parties and organisations, the first of which was the International Working Men's Association, or First International (founded in London 1864 and dissolved in 1876), followed by the Second International (founded in Paris 1889 and disbanded with the

accepted the *Twenty-one Points – Conditions of Admission to the Communist International*, which meant that both the party and its propaganda would have to adhere to the decisions, directives and resolutions of the Comintern (Bunting 1981:58; 61). The very first point of the conditions revolved around the character and means of propaganda, and requirements for the party press. Points four and five emphasised the importance of continuous and organised propaganda and point 18 stipulated that communist parties must publish the most important documents of the Executive Committee of the Comintern (Bunting 1981:58- 61).

The Comintern formed a direct communication channel from Moscow to communist parties throughout the world and used its congresses to issue major directives, and its journal, *International Press Correspondence (Inprecorr)*, to outline these directives (Clews 1966:33). The policies of the Comintern were directed by the Russian Bolsheviks (Bullock and Trombley 2000:139) who gained power in November 1917 (Jowett and O'Donnell 1992:175). The Bolsheviks were single-minded in their resolve to create “a new social order”, the realisation of which relied on “an immense network of propaganda” which used “the press, educational institutions, the arts and even science” to reach its goal (Jowett and O'Donnell 1992:175). It could be asserted that the “brief” which the CPSA set itself with regard to the production of its printed propaganda was further

directed by a document adopted on 12 July 1921 at the Third Comintern Congress which the CPSA, as a member of this organisation, was obliged to adhere to. *The Theses on the Structure of Communist Parties and on the Methods and Context of their work* contained a *Propaganda and Agitation* section which outlined the purpose and form of, and the approach to communist propaganda, and identified the role players involved in propaganda activities (Degras 1971:261-265). The influence of this document was felt for the next three decades in the propaganda work of the CPSA.

The CPSA maintained connections with communist parties abroad, particularly that of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) since its founding. By the late 1930s the party “had enjoyed a close fraternal relationship with the CPGB for many years” and the party’s views were heavily influenced by the CPGB’s journal *Labour Monthly* (Bernstein 1999:36). The forging of links between socialist parties across countries and continents grew out of the idea of “the world revolution” and “the international solidarity of the working class” which was integral to the Bolshevik programme (Jowett and O'Donnell 1992:177). One consequence of these links was the distribution and circulation of socialist propaganda amongst organisations which resulted in the development of a shared socialist visual language. Seidman (2007:27) observes that during the first half of the twentieth century the iconography used by the South African Left originated in “international revolutionary graphics” and that

outbreak of the Second World War) and then the Third International (founded in Moscow in 1919 and dissolved in 1943) also known as the Comintern (Bullock and Trombley 2000 :439).

CPSA and trade union magazines and newspapers not only reprinted international images, but also adapted graphics to make them more relevant to the South African context, especially with regard to confronting race and class issues. Hence we see icons such as the globe of the earth, chains, raised fists, the rising sun and the hammer and sickle symbol, appearing in CPSA printed propaganda from the 1920s and regularly thereafter.

Production, distribution, consumption and regulation of CPSA printed propaganda

Members of the CPSA took responsibility for the production and distribution of printed propaganda and this duty was taken on and executed with varying levels of success during the party's years of existence. In the face of immense challenges and frequently hampered by lack of funds, repression and prosecution, the party nonetheless managed to produce and disseminate printed propaganda virtually continuously from 1921 until 1950. The party paper formed the backbone of the CPSA's printed propaganda and the changes in its name and the languages it contains indicated the changes in the party's view of its own identity and the identity of the audiences for its propaganda.

The newspaper's name during the first half of the 1920s, *The International* (figure 1), reflected the party's conscious alignment to the international communist movement. In this regard the CPSA manifesto declares that the party "will derive great strength and inspiration from its connection with the *World Communist International*

...heartened by this sense of solidarity and support...we hold aloft the glistening banner of the World Commune..." (Bunting 1981:64). The paper's name change in 1925, to *The South African Worker* (figure 2), was an acknowledgement of the South African identity of the party and indicated the conscious decision made by the CPSA to attract black African members. This decision is further underscored by the renaming of the paper to *Umsebenzi* (The Worker), subtitled *The South African Worker*, at the beginning of 1930 (figures 3 and 4). This name change was accompanied by an increase in the use of indigenous languages, images of black Africans, and symbols drawn from the South African context in the pages of *Umsebenzi*. In 1936 the name reverted back to *The South African Worker*, subtitled *Umsebenzi*, showing the party's attempt to once again attract white workers. By the 1940s the paper was named *Inkululeko* (Freedom), a name which it retained throughout that decade (figures 5 and 6). This name indicated the firm commitment of the CPSA to an African identity and clearly constructed the party as striving for freedom.

In addition to the official party newspaper, the CPSA also produced pamphlets and leaflets, a practice which reached its height during the Second World War. In the 1930s and 1940s a number of serial publications also saw the light, although these were mostly short-lived. The propaganda from the 1940s may be distinguished from preceding decades by its broad range and diversity and includes large, full-colour posters

alongside a number of other serial publications, pamphlets, leaflets, and booklets. These types of propaganda assume a broad audience as is evident from the variety of languages (including isiZulu, isiXhosa, Sesotho, Afrikaans and English) and diversity of visual representation contained therein. However, the official conception of the party's identity was visually represented in *Inkululeko* in the form of a black African male.

The quantity of printed propaganda produced and distributed by the CPSA provides evidence that the party never reached its goal of becoming a party for the South African masses (Fortescue 1991:481). No figures are available to indicate how many newspapers were sold during the 1920s. The largest number of *Umsebenzi's* sold in the 1930s was 5,000 copies per edition. During this time the leading CPSA publication was a serial publication named *Umvikele Thebe* which at one stage sold 10,000 copies. During the Second World War CPSA propaganda production and distribution reached an all time high. At the beginning of 1943 a print run of 40,000 copies a month was claimed for the party paper (Ceiriog Jones 1997:364) and pamphlets were produced in quantities of up to 50,000 copies (SAHA WITS: AL 3027 Barbara Harmel, B 2.1: Rusty Bernstein interview transcript).

The production costs of printed propaganda was funded from a variety of sources, including the monthly dues from party members, donations received from communist organisations abroad, and money raised through fundraising campaigns,

functions and collections organised by the party and its members. In addition the sale of printed propaganda and advertising space brought in revenue, but only a very limited amount. Initially advertising revenue was not sought by the paper and only a few advertisements appeared in the 1920s. A continuing concern for the CPSA was the lack of financial resources to allow for the production of printed propaganda. Even at the height of the party's popularity during the Second World War, the paper made regular appeals for financial support from its members and sympathisers. Despite this ongoing financial battle, the party paper appeared from 1921 to 1950, with the exception of a period of time from March 1938 until December 1940 when it closed down due to financial and other difficulties (Bunting 1981:96).

The CPSA relied on its members to assist in whatever way they could with the production of printed propaganda. This meant that party members always acted as editors and writers for the paper and sometimes even as typesetters and image makers. In the first half of the 1920s the production of the propaganda was dominated by British-born males. The appointment of the first black African editor in 1929 foretold a shift during the following decade in which the editors included black and white South African-born males, and one female British-born co-editor. By the 1940s the paper only had black African editors, and even when edited by a board, only one of the ten editorial board members and two of the nine contributing editors were white (Ceiriog Jones

1997:364). *Inkululeko* aimed to present an African image to the audience, the regular contributors were black Africans and the inputs of white communists were not acknowledged in print (Ceiriog Jones 1997:364) or disguised by the use of pseudonyms.

The methods of distributing the party newspaper remained essentially the same over the three decades examined and included street sales and sales at public meetings and events, as well as distribution by subscription and through various agents in South Africa and beyond its borders. As with the production of the paper, party members were expected to assist with its distribution by selling it and packing the paper for postal distribution. Selling the paper was not easy work, and could even lead to the arrest of the seller (Roux and Roux 1972:97). However, it helped forge a sense of common purpose and identity among members of the CPSA and in later years many communists recalled fond memories of their experiences of selling the paper during the 1930s and 1940s (Roux and Roux 1972, Podbrey 1993, Slovo 1995, Bernstein 1999, Alexander Simons 2004).

Efforts by the government and other opponents at regulating the printed propaganda of the CPSA were ever present. In the 1920s the South African government and the Comintern exerted the strongest pressures on the CPSA. Whereas government interference was bravely defied by the party, Comintern interference was willingly submitted to. In the 1930s the Comintern's

influence increased to the point of virtually destroying the party, and government repression became increasingly harsh. However, the party overcame these challenges to emerge even stronger in the 1940s, particularly due to its decision to support the war effort following Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. Whereas the destructive interference of the Comintern into the CPSA's affairs ceased by the early 1940s governmental repression and prosecution continued. In 1948 the National Party government was voted into power and in 1950 passed the "Unlawful Organisations Bill" which outlawed the CPSA and led to the party's dissolution. During the party's existence opposition to common enemies served to strengthen the resolve of party members to fight for their beliefs and neither death or injury, nor incarceration could stop this resolve. The obstinate efforts of the CPSA to produce and distribute printed propaganda, despite the many challenges it faced attests to the zeal with which the communist gospel was propagated by the party and its members.

Representation and construction of identities in images

The examination of the images contained in the CPSA's printed propaganda shows that the propaganda borrows, copies and takes inspiration from a range of sources.² The iconographies of the

² The CPSA newspapers offer the richest source of graphic propaganda. Available copies of the newspaper from the 1920s contain 34 photographs and 26 other types of images, including cartoons, illustrations and graphics. Newspapers from the 1930s offer 270 visual images, consisting mainly of linocut cartoons. During the

nineteenth century socialist and labour movements are the main influences on the imagery from the 1920s whereas the influence of Bolshevik propaganda becomes very evident in the imagery from the 1930s. The influences of socialist realism, Soviet, British and American war propaganda, and a variety of photographic representational traditions and modernist design styles are evident in the printed propaganda from the 1940s. These influences, in conjunction with the party's South African context and fluctuating access to human and financial resources, resulted in the printed propaganda of each decade developing a distinct visual style and iconography.

In the first half of the 1920s the inclusion of imported cartoons and images in the newspapers resulted in a "Labour movement aesthetic." The newspapers from the second half of the 1920s have a more "South African" socialist visual style due to the name and masthead change of the paper and the insertion of portraits of black Africans. The development of a localised socialist visual iconography is very evident in the CPSA newspapers from the first half of the 1930s. This is chiefly due to the presence of distinctive linocut cartoons which show typical South African people, objects and environments. The stronger mainstream British and American influences on the printed graphic propaganda of the 1940s results in an overall loss of "communist" identity.

1940s the newspapers predominantly printed photographs and 1094 images were examined. Images also appear on posters and other types of printed propaganda from the 1940s, and 24 CPSA posters and 123 pamphlets, flyers, booklets and serial publications were examined.

Images from the 1940s appear more reasoned and less agitative, when compared with the naive linocut cartoons created in the 1930s, which contributes to the propaganda appearing more conformist. Although the papers from the 1940s look more professional, in comparison to better funded mainstream publications of the time, they are still relatively unsophisticated. Stylistic distinctions aside, the propaganda of each decade is also marked by the appearance of a number of different iconographic types defined by their characteristic clothing and associated objects. A number of types emerge in the images from the 1920s, and appear regularly thereafter in the printed propaganda from the 1930s and 1940s. The purpose of these types is to offer subject positions for the viewer to identify with and adopt, or reject.

The first and most important type is the worker, a representation which exists to awaken in the viewer an awareness of the self as a member of the working class. The changing representation of the worker from 1921 to 1950 demonstrates the CPSA's struggle to conceptualise who the members of the South African working class were. Initially the worker appears in the form of a clothed white male (figure 7). In images from the mid-1920s he is joined by the black worker, clothed or not (figure 8), who virtually replaces the white worker in the imagery from the 1930s (figure 9). The range of workers in the CPSA propaganda from the 1940s is broader (figure 10) and is the closest the party's visual representation came to giving visual form to the diversity of

South African workers, however, this conceptualisation did not include women workers.

A range of enemies of the worker, in the form of the capitalist (figure 11), priest, monarch and soldier, appear briefly in newspapers from the 1920s. These enemies are derived from socialist iconography and especially Bolshevik propaganda, in which satirical attacks on a set of “internal and external enemies of the new society” increased noticeably in the 1920s (Lane 1981:168). The same enemies make a strong appearance in the linocut cartoons from the 1930s (figure 12), alongside new enemies in the form of the politician, policeman, judge and the typical South African character the “good boy” (figure 13).

“Good boy” was a derogatory term used by the communists to refer to African teachers, religious ministers, officials and traders (Roux and Roux 1972:147), government-paid chiefs, agents of the Native Recruiting Corporation and agents of the Chamber of Mines (*Umsebenzi*, 25 April 1930:1). *The South African Worker* (30 March 1930:6) describes this “type” as “those cringing, servile, miserable tools of the scum of the Capitalist Class!”

Enemies all but disappear from the CPSA printed propaganda during the Second World War, with the exception of an occasional Nazi soldier or South African politician. Whereas the linocuts from the 1930s represent soldiers in uniforms as monstrous enemies, signifying only death,

destruction and repression, the CPSA’s Second World War propaganda sees the emergence of two types of soldier heroes: the African soldier and the Red Army soldier. Depictions of enemies provide an image of a negative “other” against which a positive identity of the self may be constructed. The common enemies provided communists with the opportunity to band together and develop a sense of group identity, of “us” against “them.”

The image of the procession with banners (figure 14) which emerged strongly in the linocut cartoons from the 1930s was an attempt at indicating solidarity, collective effort, and the strength of the working class. The lineage of the image of the procession with flags and banners can be traced back from Greek and Roman antiquity, to the graphics of the French Revolution, the international workers’ and socialist movements and through these to Soviet rituals and symbols. Whereas the image of the procession uses the de-individualised crowd to indicate solidarity, collective effort, and the strength of the working class, images of Lenin, Stalin and the worker condense the ideals of the working class into a single figure.

The communist leader appears in the printed propaganda from all three decades. Initially the leader is represented by images of Lenin (figures 15 and 16), who is joined in the newspapers of the 1930s by images of Stalin. Stalin gradually overtakes Lenin to become the communist leader who appears most frequently in the propaganda

from the 1940s (figure 17). Images of male leaders served to perpetuate a patriarchal order in which males were the sole occupiers of positions of authority and power.

Male authority and power are also reflected in the figure of the well-dressed “comrade gentleman” who first appeared in newspapers from the second half of the 1920s (figure 18). After fading away in the 1930s, comrade gentleman emerged as the primary subject in the photographs printed in *Inkululeko* (figure 19). Comrade gentleman’s dress is similar to that of male members of the British bourgeoisie and his image signifies trustworthiness, respectability, and assiduousness. While the worker is depicted as anonymous, comrade gentleman is individualised by captioning his image with his personal name. Ceiriog Jones (1997:64) asserts that the stories and pictures of African communists “helped to elevate these men to the status of political celebrities. They were, in a sense, the party’s showpieces.” The figure of comrade gentleman moves the conception of the self as part of a collective, which is a central tenet of Marxism, to a view of the self as an autonomous individual.

The CPSA’s printed propaganda contains few images of women and this absence is constant, despite the active involvement of women in the party’s activities. The absence of women run counter to the trend of showing women in Bolshevik propaganda, and the celebration of women’s efforts in Soviet, American and British war propaganda from the 1940s – all of which

served as strong sources of inspiration for CPSA propaganda. Apart from being represented as part of the family group during the 1930s and as party candidates in the 1940s, women do not appear as any of the other “types” which emerged in the party’s propaganda over the course of its existence. Despite the CPSA’s espousal of equal rights for all genders, and often voicing the need to increase female membership and to work among women, these values are not reflected in the iconography which developed in the party’s printed propaganda. The noticeable absence of women among the representations of the worker shows how far the party still had to move in its visual conceptualisation of the identity of the South African working class.

The absence of women in the CPSA’s printed propaganda is symptomatic of the inability of party members of all races to separate themselves from the strong patriarchal order of South African society at the time. Lazerson argues that in the 1940s “[c]onsciously or unconsciously, White CP members were the subject of fundamental contradiction. Notwithstanding their avowals to destroy the society they repudiated, it was a society in whose mores, processes, and values they were steeped” (Lazerson 1994:23). Similarly, Glaser points out that because South African “black opposition organisations” were mostly “male-dominated”, race and class issues were given preference over gender issues, and that this state of affairs “was consistent with, and reflected the patriarchal character of all of South Africa’s ethnic communities” (Glaser 2001:182).

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