

STANDING BY SWAPO - BRITISH CAMPAIGNING FOR NAMIBIA

By Randolph Vigne

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Background

Campaigning in Britain for Namibian freedom was very different from the great and worldwide work done to confront the apartheid regime in South Africa itself, or by anti-colonial groups supporting other African or Asian emerging nations.

First, there was a very small pro-Namibian lobby – virtually no expatriates, black or white, no old colonial servants, no links with British political parties or movements. Secondly, there was a vague notion that South West Africa was part of South Africa and did not need a separate campaigning group. Thirdly there was at the start no active United Nations body to give support to an infant non-governmental organization on Namibia nor was Namibia seen as a prospective member of the Commonwealth, never having been part of the British Empire. And fourthly it was hard to overcome the argument that the matter was before the World Court at the Hague and should be left to its judges to decide.

On the positive side, there was great enthusiasm and commitment among those who took up the Namibian cause. To some it was the 'Achilles heel' that would prove fatal to its apartheid rulers, to others a matter of conscience that the League of Nations had mandated 'His Britannic Majesty' to exercise the 'sacred trust' of bringing the former German colony to independence and South Africa, the surrogate, had shamefully neglected that duty. To most it was a simple matter of justice and human rights in which Britain as a permanent member of the UN Security Council had a duty to take the field against the South African government which had defied the UN's demand that, like all pre-1914 German colonies, it be placed under UN trusteeship preparatory to commencing the independence process. Overriding all this was the need to respond to the call of the major independence movement in the territory, the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) to support the struggle for freedom from South African occupation.

This was the background to the launching of the first, and for many years, the only external group campaigning on behalf of the oppressed people of Namibia.

Beginnings

When the Friends of Namibia, later renamed the Namibia Support Committee, came into being in London in 1969, the peoples of Namibia had been under colonial rule for 85 years. Of these 31 had been under the Germans, four or five as a British military protectorate and 50 under South Africa, albeit first as a League of Nations mandate conferred on His Britannic Majesty, and the rest in disputed South African occupation, which had been illegal under international law since 1966.

South African rule had been opposed by a remarkable Anglican priest, penniless and with no friends in high places, the Revd Michael Scott, who gradually forced the United Nations to face up to its responsibilities to the mandated territory it had inherited from the League of Nations but which South Africa refused to hand over to the Trusteeship Council to be prepared for independence.

It should be remembered that it was an action by South Africa that brought Michael Scott on to the scene, as the agent of the aged Herero paramount chief, Hosea Kutako, and his council. This was the referendum staged by South Africa in 1946 to bring about the annexation of the territory it had administered virtually as a fifth province for the past 25 years.

The referendum was a patent fraud – the questions were rigged, as was the number of voters and the means of voting. Such was the pressure brought to bear by Scott that the referendum was dropped, though South Africa continued to reject the UN's demand that it put Namibia under UN trusteeship. It also expelled Scott from South Africa.

All this was under the relatively mild government of General Smuts's United Party. Smuts and his predecessors had totally failed in its duty under the mandate 'to promote to the utmost the material and moral well-being and the social progress of the inhabitants of the territory'. Their plight worsened immeasurably two years later when the Afrikaner Nationalists took power in 1948. The constitution of 'South West Africa' was amended to exclude any reference to the mandate and the territory was given three seats in the whites-only South African parliament, both to increase the Nationalists' slender majority and to assert South Africa's ownership in all but name.

In response, the General Assembly of the United Nations began the long series of actions at the International Court of Justice to establish its sovereignty over Namibia, pending its independence.

This legal process, in which the Namibian people played no part, led inexorably to the appalling debacle at the Hague in 1966 in which the World Court found that Ethiopia and Liberia, the two surviving African members of the League who had brought the case, had no standing in the matter, and so refused to rule.

On 26 August 1966 SWAPO proclaimed the 'armed struggle' and its first insurgent force was engaged by South African police and troops at Ongulumbashe in Ovamboland. The same year the UN General Assembly at last terminated South Africa's mandate and the freedom process entered a new phase.

The infant political movements of the Namibian people had stood by while the World Court deliberated. Spurred on by the Old Location shootings in Windhoek in 1959, a forerunner of Sharpeville in South Africa the following year, and the 'wind of change' which brought independence to so many former African colonies and by long smouldering hatred of the 'contract labour' system in the territory, the Ovamboland People's Organization, founded in Cape Town by Namibian workers who had made their way there, became the South West Africa People' Organization and took the lead in the struggle for the freedom of their country from South Africa's oppressive rule.

SWAPO and SWANU, which travelled only along diplomatic paths, had few links among sympathizers outside their own country. Individual South Africans like Ray Alexander and Brian Bunting had visited the territory and been arrested and deported. It was at the request of SWAPO friends and affiliated members of the Liberal Party of South Africa in Cape Town that I visited the territory in 1961 to explore the possibility of setting up a non-racial political organization which would be allied to the Liberal Party. There were simply no whites willing to risk deportation or worse by supporting such a move, but closer links were forged with SWAPO, SWANU and the Herero chief's council, still led by Hosea Kutako.

SWAPO's relations with the Congress Alliance were less cordial at that time, partly due to the alliance forged with SWANU, whose President, Fanuel Kozonguizi, was favoured by Ruth First in her important and valuable book 'South West Africa', published in 1962. SWAPO nevertheless sent a strong delegation to the 'International Conference on South West Africa' sponsored by the AntiApartheid Movement and the Africa Bureau, held in Oxford in 1965 and chaired by the then Swedish education minister Olof Palme. I had left South Africa the year before and at the conference I was able to resume friendships with

SWAPO leaders, some of whom I had met on a visit to Dar es Salaam, then their exile headquarters, earlier that year.

I found myself a one-man support organization for the visits of the ceaselessly travelling SWAPO President, Sam Nujoma and his aides. Nujoma gave cautious support to the proposal that came from an old friend of Cape Town days, Andreas Shipanga, later to break with SWAPO, that we form an association to support the Namibian independence struggle. In 1968 Peter Katjavivi, whom I had met in Dar es Salaam where he had been SWAPO's deputy representative, arrived to open an office in London and the stage was set for the association the Namibians needed.

Any hesitation about setting up such a body was dispelled by a dramatic development – the Ongulumbashe prisoners and other SWAPO activists, led by Andimba Ya Toivo, were brought to trial in Pretoria and there was a very real threat that death penalties would be imposed on some or all of the 37 accused.

A Liberal Party colleague from Cape Town days, Diana Russell, flew over from the United States and, at a small meeting in the old AntiApartheid Movement office, urged united action to lobby against the trial by the small pro-Namibia group in Britain.

Friends of Namibia

In a downpour of rain, on 17 July 1969, the London group launched the Friends of Namibia at a public meeting in Red Lion Square. The veteran anti-colonialist Fenner Brockway MP had agreed to take the chair but, unwell, sent a young Scottish MP, Robert Hughes, later President of the AntiApartheid Movement and now Lord Hughes of Woodside, in his place. The guest speaker, the Secretary-General of SWAPO, Moses Garoeb, expressed strong support for this first Namibian solidarity committee, as did Kozonguizi, President of SWANU, who spoke from the floor.

It would not be true to say that a similar welcome came from the AntiApartheid Movement. It was perhaps revealing that the South Africans on the AAM committee were not in favour of a separate Namibian organization, whereas the British members, notably the chairman, John Ennals, gave their approval. It had proved hard for the Namibians to assert their independence from the South Africans at international conferences on apartheid. Their cause was primarily national independence, the expulsion of South Africa from their country, in line with the demands of UN General Assembly Resolution. 2145 which, in 1966, had called for South African withdrawal.

Nor, sadly, was the advent of the Friends of Namibia welcomed by the Revd Michael Scott, whose Africa Bureau now campaigned in a much wider field. It was in fact Canon John Collins's International Defence and Aid Fund and not the Bureau's publishing arm that commissioned the first, albeit brief, history of Namibia from the liberation perspective, 'A Dwelling Place of Our Own', published in 1973.

Our closest allies were, in fact, SWAPO, who fully endorsed our role in support of all genuine liberation movements and of individuals, many of them churchmen, campaigning for Namibian freedom. It was not until 1973 that the UN accorded SWAPO the status of 'sole and authentic spokesmen for the people of Namibia'. Before that we did what we could for SWANU members, often chary of our help. After one of their many splits, their former President, Kozonguizi, became a member of our committee. When Hosea Kutako's successor, Chief Clemens Kapuuo, and an aide visited England, we arranged his programme, at the request of the SWAPO representative in London, Peter Katjavivi.

We did all we could, as a committee and never competing with the AAM for membership, to provide a British voice on the Namibian question. We lobbied members of Parliament, organized parliamentary

questions exposing Foreign Office connivance at South Africa's breach of UN resolutions, interviewed a succession of Ministers of State, held a successful one-day seminar at Chatham House, for the media and business, and achieved a 'Private Discussion Meeting' there for Sam Nujoma, at that time not received by Foreign Office ministers, and appeared before the UN Committee on Apartheid at its hearings in London and Geneva. We published literature, most notably Ya Toivo's classic speech at the Pretoria Trial.

As events brought Namibia back into the headlines – the Contract Labour strike, the crucial Advisory Opinion at the World Court - we were frequently on call for Radio 4 and World Service news broadcasts. I remember a hurried briefing by Neville Rubin, one of our co-founders, before a Radio 4 debate after the Advisory Opinion, which made up for the disaster of 1966 and called for South African withdrawal. My adversary, speaking from the Hague, was Advocate Dawid de Villiers, who seemed to be in a dejected state and within my limited ranges as a layman among lawyers.

One aspect of our work, which Sam Nujoma, in particular, had urged us to pursue, namely engaging with British companies doing business with Namibia, was entirely unsuccessful. I recall an extremely discourteous reply to a request for a meeting we had put to the South West Africa Company, which had dominated Namibian trade even during the German period and had recently been acquired by Consolidated Goldfields. The Diamond Corporation and Barclays Bank were politely dismissive. In the case of the Hudson's Bay Company, conciliation having failed, we took to confrontation and our members and volunteers picketed the sale of Namibian karakul pelts, when Swakara 'Persian lamb' coats were all the rage. This lack of success had its positive side since it gave one of our founder members, the journalist Roger Murray, great expertise in this field, making him an authority on the economies of Namibia and its neighbours.

In this early period, our biggest public meeting, held at the Central Hall Westminster, was to publicize the Advisory Opinion. Peter Katjavivi and Bishop Huddleston were the main speakers and most of the preparatory work was done by the AntiApartheid Movement, our co-conveners, above all by Ethel de Keyser.

A major development in Namibia, the three-month Contract Labour strike of 1971-2, brought the world's labour movement over to SWAPO's side, and the Namibian struggle – led heretofore by a handful of liberal and left politicians, academics, churchmen and lawyers - achieved a new dimension in many countries of both east and west. The first major international conference on Namibia was held in Brussels in 1972, with the Friends of Namibia and the AntiApartheid Movement working harmoniously in the build-up to the conference.

Not without criticism, however, on the part of the AAM. SWAPO's military initiative had survived Ongulumbashe and the Pretoria Trial, with its life sentences for 25 and 10 years for the remaining 12. By the end of the 1960s SWAPO's guerrillas were operating in the Kavango region, Ovamboland and the Kaokoveld, despite heavy South African patrolling of the Caprivi Strip, their main entry point from Zambia. South Africa could no longer play down the military threat in the north, which raised SWAPO's reputation higher. A major breakthrough came in April 1974 with the collapse of Portuguese rule in Africa, opening the way both for the movement of activists to join SWAPO in Lusaka and later in Luanda, and enabling the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN) to penetrate the northern region from bases in southern Angola.

It was clear that the liberation struggle had entered a new phase, to which the Friends of Namibia had to respond to meet pressing new needs. The drive to achieve this response came from the AntiApartheid Movement, again from Ethel de Keyser, who pressed for the appointment of a new chief executive, Jo

Morris, who had brought Namibia into the headlines with her first-hand report on floggings of SWAPO activists in Ovamboland by South Africa's puppet chiefs. The role of the Friends must move on from lobbying and public relations to solidarity with SWAPO, now the 'sole and authentic spokesmen', in the struggle, and with SWANU divided and in disarray. A new constitution with new objectives was adopted and the name Friends of Namibia was changed to Namibia Support Committee.

Namibia Support Committee

The new 'solidarity' commitment of the NSC (the acronym was soon current) was not its only change of character. The Namibian freedom struggle entered a new phase and progressed at a new pace, with which the NSC had to keep up. SWAPO's move from Lusaka to Luanda and their respective rural bases, its closer association with the Soviet bloc after the non-alignment of earlier years, and the hardening of UN positions towards the South African occupation since the 1971 Advisory Opinion all meant a change of gear in our work. There was a parallel stiffening of British government attitudes towards the struggle – and not in favour of SWAPO.

Neville Rubin, African Law lecturer at London University, had taken part in the consultations at the Hague in 1971 and a founder member of the Friends, arranged for observers to attend political trials in Namibia and seized upon the appointment of Sean MacBride as the first active UN Commissioner on Namibia to tackle the question of the export of Namibian natural resources. The key issue was British importation of uranium, to be extracted by the Rio Tinto Zinc Corporation at its Rössing mine near Swakopmund.

In 1967, a year after United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2145 terminated the mandate, Resolution 2248 set up a UN Council for South West Africa, re-titled 'for Namibia' when the UN adopted the territory's new name in 1968, and an annually-appointed Commissioner, with his own staff and offices. It was not until MacBride's appointment in 1974 that either the Council or the Commissionership was to play a meaningful role. MacBride, a lawyer and former Irish foreign minister, later to share a Nobel Peace Prize for his work for Amnesty International, took up Rubin's idea of a decree forbidding the importation of Namibian natural resources except under licence from the UN Council for Namibia and, after much persuasion, UN Decree No 1 for the Protection of the Natural Resources of Namibia was enacted by the UN General Assembly in September 1974. The Decree became an invaluable tool in all attempts to force member states to address the question of their trading relations with South Africa in Namibia, which very largely related to the country's minerals. The member states most involved were, of course, South Africa's trading partners Britain, France and West Germany.

Britain, in particular, was developing a programme of building nuclear power stations in the early 1970s and the Rössing uranium was, we were told, essential for its furtherance. The Labour government that took power in 1974 continued, despite pre-election promises, to permit the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority to import Namibian uranium.

Rubin moved in 1976 to the International Labour Organization in Geneva. In Britain, the NSC, in its new format, took up the uranium campaign vigorously, under the leadership of a young former trade-unionist, Alun Roberts. The Campaign Against the Namibian Uranium Contract (CANUC), co-ordinated by the NSC, the AntiApartheid Movement and the Haslemere Group, fought hard against this flagrant breach of international law as well as of moral principle. Roberts was detained without charge in Namibia for 26 days in 1984, calling for the NSC's demand for Foreign Office action for his release, as we had done for so many Namibian prisoners. Roberts's book 'The Rössing File' took the message to all levels, as did public meetings, strategic conferences and days of action. The RTZ Annual General Meeting was a field day for NSC activists and supporters, each the holder of one share in the corporation and therefore able

to speak and vote. Seamen's and rail workers' unions were mobilized to halt the importation, and legal processes were sought in Britain and on the continent. All this played its part in the British government's decision in 1984 not to renew the contract with the Rössing mine for the supply of uranium to the UKAEA.

CANUC was the most publicly prominent of the NSC's 'sub-groups'. Closer to the everyday needs of SWAPO's rapidly increasing numbers in Angola was the NSC Health Collective which supplied a continual flow of medical 'kits' to the growing thousands of exiles in SWAPO's Health and Welfare Centres in Angola and Zambia, and into Namibia itself. After the massacre of SWAPO exiles by South African paratroops in the transit camp of Kassinga in southern Angola on 9 May 1978, £8,000 worth of aid was immediately airfreighted, in co-operation with sympathetic organizations, to the 600 injured in the raid.

The Health Collective supplied a Landrover and £9,000 worth of equipment to the SWAPO Women's Council in Angola, and books, study guides and lecture notes used in training health personnel. An international seminar was held in London in 1983 on 'Health care in an independent Namibia', jointly by the NSC and the SWAPO Women's Council, sponsored by the UN Council for Namibia. The conference book 'Namibia: Reclaiming the People's Health' was published in 1984.

Closely allied to the Health Collective was the NSC's Swapo Women's Solidarity Campaign which, working with the SWAPO Women's Council, supplied many basic needs to the SWAPO centres, from sanitary towels to literacy packs. The SWSC brought the plight of Namibian women to women's groups in Britain and the growing number of Namibian support organizations in Scandinavia, the Netherlands and West Germany, as well as in the US and Commonwealth countries.

In Britain itself the NSC had spread from London to other parts of England and Scotland, and forged links with church groups inspired by the Anglican Bishop-of-Damaraland in Exile, the Rt Revd Colin Winter, whose Namibian Peace Centre in the east end of London became a third centre of pro-Namibian activity with the NSC and the SWAPO Representative's offices.

The work of the NSC sub-groups, and its work for education, supplying schoolbooks and teaching aids for SWAPO's schools in Angola and elsewhere, find no place in the history books, which usually deal only with politics and war. Here too, in the forefront of the political struggle, the NSC was able to make a contribution.

The political process

The trajectory of the liberation process was extraordinarily irregular in the final years. South Africa produced its own 'internal settlement' after the Turnhalle conference of 1976, and the UN took an ever harder line towards South Africa, though repeatedly checked by a triple veto from South Africa's trading partners, Britain, France and West Germany. The United States moved from the leadership of the Contact Group with the four Western Security Council members which progressed as far as the mission of the UN Commissioner Martti Ahtisaari (MacBride retired in 1977) and the setting up of a UN Transition Assistance Group, frustrated by South African intransigence over UNTAG's proposed numbers. Henry Kissinger's failed 'shuttle diplomacy' was followed by a major setback, the advent of the Reagan Administration and its 'linkage' of Cuban troop withdrawal from Angola with a South African hand-over.

The scene had changed, however. At the end of the Contact Group initiative the UN Security Council had at last endorsed and strengthened the long succession of General Assembly resolutions. UN Security Council Resolution 435 of 1978 demanded South African withdrawal and the holding of free and fair elections 'under UN supervision and control'. The new obstacle was the flawed US doctrines of 'linkage' and 'constructive engagement', which gave the illegal South African occupation another lease of life.

While 'linkage' and the Reagan doctrine of 'constructive engagement' thwarted the enforcement of Resolution 435, the so-called 'low intensity border war' between PLAN fighters and the South African Defence Force became a headline story in the world's media and Cuito Cuanavale no longer an obscure dot on a map of what had been Portuguese Africa.

With Margaret Thatcher's government in Britain supporting 'linkage' and 'constructive engagement' the role of the NSC was clear, as it was in telling the story of the 'border war', very much at variance with the communiqués from South Africa accepted at face value by most of the Western media.

The NSC had won credibility by campaigning at international level - the Brussels conference was followed by such major gatherings as Dakar, convened by MacBride, at Unesco in Paris, where the AntiApartheid Movement took the lead and the NSC felt itself upstaged, Washington and Lusaka. The NSC had been recognized by the UN Council for Namibia as an associated Non-Governmental Organization and was able to stand by SWAPO in the councils of the Commonwealth, the European Union, UN agencies and foreign diplomatic missions. Unconnected, as we were, with the Soviet bloc we could not be faulted as Cold War partisans, and our first-hand knowledge, research and close contact with the SWAPO leadership enabled us to put forward a detailed rebuttal of South African claims and later of the arguments for 'linkage' to UN representatives as well to successive British Foreign Secretaries and Ministers of State.

At national level we campaigned for the release of Namibian prisoners, such as the Kassinga survivors held at Hardap Dam, and against death penalties threatening SWAPO activists, such as in the Mushimba-Shikongo case in 1977. We put the Namibian case at Labour and Liberal party conferences, at trades union and voluntary agencies as well as to parliamentary and Anglican church fact-finding missions to Namibia. Researchers in time to come will find the published NSC 'News Briefings' and 'Comment' sheets invaluable sources for the history of these years.

Our own major conference commemorated the centenary of the German occupation of their South West African colony in 1884. Held at the City University in London in September 1984, '100 Years of Colonial Oppression, 100 Years of Struggle' produced valuable studies by some 75 lecturers. When the UN General Assembly held its own symposium to mark the event, these papers were made available to the several hundred delegates. As 'Namibia 1884-1984: Readings in Namibian History and Society', they were published in 1988 jointly by the NSC and the UN Institute for Namibia, a flourishing further education centre set up by Seán MacBride in Lusaka. Much credit is due to the editor, Brian Wood, Jo Morris's successor as the NSC's executive secretary, for the range and effectiveness of NSC activities over many years.

At popular level the NSC held public meetings, led or took part in protest marches and pickets, ran workshops and seminars, held press conferences, especially for SWAPO leaders and arrivals from Namibia whose stories needed to be told, and hosted, jointly with SWAPO, the annual Namibia Day reception on 26 August.

In the 1980s we were assisted by local groups in many parts of the country, and collaborated with a second pro-Namibia N.G.O, Church Action on Namibia. We probably provoked the South African government to set up its own propaganda unit in Britain and the US, the Namibia Information Service, which tried to sell South Africa's 'internal settlement' plan to all comers, from government officials to primary school children.

In the last years, as 'glasnost' and 'perestroika' began to herald the ultimate failure of the Communist system and a new world order and the old certainties of Cold War positions began to fragment, it gave great satisfaction to the NSC that it was to us that the British media turned for information and for

contact with SWAPO leaders, as, militarily and diplomatically, the Botha government began to lose its grip on power over the Namibians. With the Foreign Office receptive and the media attentive, our credentials seemed at last to have been accepted.

It would be easy to overrate the importance of the NSC as a protagonist in the independence process. There was real recognition as time went on, witnessed by our presence at meetings of the UN Council for Namibia and the General Assembly, such as the 1984 commemorative meeting, when I had the honour to be nominated by SWAPO as rapporteur and the great pleasure of introducing from the podium the SWAPO Secretary-General, Andimba Ya Toivo, freed from Robben Island, to the delegates.

We were, I believe, a useful conduit between SWAPO and the media and had some value in putting the SWAPO case to Britain's legislators. Our role in supporting SWAPO materially was greatly strengthened by the funders of our projects, such as by the Swedish International Development Agency, the European Union, UN agencies and many more. The generosity of private people who were moved to contribute (we received no state funding of any kind) was most valuable too.

Like SWAPO ten years before us, we had grown from a mustard seed in 1968 and had, figuratively speaking, won a place at the top table when Namibia finally achieved its independence on 21 March 1990. The Friends of Namibia and then the Namibia Support Committee had helped right to triumph at last, to see a people freed from colonial overlordship and to win their birthright of national sovereignty. We had contributed also, by our long struggle on South Africa's flank, to bringing down the apartheid government itself. Perhaps our efforts were best recognized when we were asked by the government of the Republic of Namibia to set up an Anglo-Namibian friendship association in Britain and to call it the Friends of Namibia Society.

Randolph Vigne (1928-2016)

President, Friends of Namibia, 1969-74

Hon. Secretary, Namibia Support Committee, 1974-90

Founding chairman, Friends of Namibia Society, 1996.

The University of KwaZulu-Natal interviewed Randolph on 11 October 2004, available here <https://africanactivist.msu.edu/video.php?objectid=210-807-64>.