

PART THREE

THE COMMUNIST PARTY AND THE AFRICAN NATIONAL CONGRESS: THE SUBORNATION OF A NATIONALIST MOVEMENT

The South African Native National Congress was founded by a distinguished group of educated African leaders and Chiefs, meeting at Bloemfontein in 1912. They sought to create an inter-tribal association which would serve as an instrument to build a nation out of the country's many Black tribal and language groups. The first President was the Rev. John L. Dube, a most appropriate choice as the ethos of the SANNC was firmly Christian, conservative, reformist, and elitist. It sought to persuade the White authorities to lift — gradually if need be — the discrimination against “the civilized native”. In 1923 its name was changed to the African National Congress (ANC). It remained a small organization, sinking into near extinction during the 1930s while under the presidency of the distinguished lawyer, Pixley Seme. Seme's policy was to make the ANC a “self-help” organization to assist aspirant African businessmen, through “African Congress Clubs”. Unfortunately, such a plan far exceeded the ANC's very limited funds and skeletal organizational structure. He was also concerned with trying to maintain traditional African values at a time of increasingly rapid change.

The tragedy of the “old guard” of the ANC was that they were active at a time when inter-White relations were still far from settled, when deep fears and resentments still profoundly divided English and Afrikaans speaking South Africans. The various White governments naturally focused their attention on this problem. It was, at the time, a far greater threat to the stability of the country than the minor outbreaks of African discontent, which were suppressed with cold-blooded ruthlessness by Jan Smuts. Policies to reconcile the two sections of the White population were often explicitly at the expense of the non-White peoples: for example, the removal of Black voters from the common roll in the Cape Province in 1936.

The ANC, misdirected by Seme's sadly futile focus on self-help economics, played no effective part in the opposition to Hertzog's measure. A new, ad hoc, body, the All African Convention (AAC) played a more vigorous part. It is thus little wonder that when Dr. Alfred B. Xuma assumed the presidency in 1940, he set out to reinvigorate the ANC. He strengthened and streamlined the ANC's organizational structure, even paying for full-time organizers out of his own pocket; he introduced a new constitution, gave full equality to women members and sought to broaden the ANC's membership base. These efforts resulted, in the late 1940s, in the ANC's finances being on a sound footing for the first time, and a paid-up membership, by 1947, of 5,517. Xuma was, however, in all other respects, a member of the “old guard” — Christian, conservative, reformist, though he was not unwilling to cooperate if necessary with the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), as it was then called.

The CPSA had been formed in 1921, and had originally set out to woo the White workers. One of its early slogans was: “workers of the World unite and save a White South Africa!”. However, it soon began to change its focus and, in 1924, decided: “our