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Anti-Apartheid Heroes Return to South Africa From Resting Place in Russia

By Gabrielle Tetrault-Farber

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South African Arts and Culture Minister Nathi Mthethwa stands at the grave of J.B. Marks, an anti-Apartheid militant buried at Moscow's Novodevichye Cemetery.

Decades after having been laid to rest among eminent Russians, buried around the corner from writer Nikolai Gogol and Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, two South African anti-apartheid revolutionaries are finally going home.

A delegation of 20 people led by the South African Arts and Culture Minister Nathi Mthethwa gathered Thursday morning at Moscow's Novodevichye Cemetery to pay their respects to Moses Kotane and J.B. Marks, their compatriots who fought for equal rights, before the remains of the two men are repatriated to South Africa next week.

The delegation members, who included relatives of the deceased as well as a South African deputy foreign affairs minister and military personnel, proceeded through centuries of Russian history, patches of frozen snow crunching under their feet.

They bowed their heads in prayer at the graves of Kotane and Marks, encircled with decorative fir tree branches. They also paid a solemn visit to another of South Africa's political figures buried at Novodevichye: David Ivon Jones, the Welsh-born Marxist who headed South Africa's Labour Party in the pre-apartheid era.

It has been more than two decades since the demise of apartheid in South Africa, under which the racial segregation system drastically restricted the freedoms of the country's majority black population from 1948 to 1994.

Resistance to apartheid was often violently repressed. Much like the late South African President Nelson Mandela, Kotane and Marks fought for their countrymen's freedom.

Exile and estrangement were the leitmotifs of their lives. Drawn by the internationalist ideals of the Soviet Union, they found respite from persecution and support for their cause in Russia.

Kotane, a lifelong communist with peasant roots, served as the general secretary of the South African Communist Party (SACP) from 1939 until his death in 1978. In the early 1930s, Kotane was sent by his party to Moscow's International Lenin School, operated by the Communist International, for one year. Kotane returned to his homeland after his studies, but in 1963 fled to Tanzania amid widespread persecution of anti-apartheid activists. He returned to the country of his alma mater to seek treatment after suffering a stroke in 1968. He spent the last decade of his life in Moscow, dying there in 1978.

Marks served as chairman of the SACP in the 1960s. Like Kotane, he sought medical treatment in the Soviet Union in 1971, dying of a heart attack there the following year.

Kotane was also a member of the African National Congress (ANC), the political party that is in power today. He is recognized for uniting anti-apartheid political forces in their fight against the regime.

Kotane, along with Mandela, was one of the organizers of Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the armed wing of the ANC, which led attacks against the regime. In his famous "I Am Prepared to Die" speech in 1964, Mandela said that an armed militia had been created "only when all else had failed, when all channels of peaceful protest had been barred to us [anti-apartheid forces]."

Soviet Support

Kotane and his associates sought material and financial assistance from the Soviet Union to fight South Africa's racist government. A number of South African Communist Party members visited the Soviet Union in the 1950s, but the ties between anti-apartheid forces and Moscow were only consolidated in the 1960s.

"Russia, more than any other country, lent its support to the liberation struggle of the people of Africa, including South Africa, unconditionally," Mthethwa, the arts and culture minister, told The Moscow Times on Thursday. "Without Russia, we wouldn't be speaking of the demise of apartheid. We wouldn't be talking about freedom and democracy in South Africa."

The Soviet Union, a patron of socialists worldwide, funded the SACP and provided military

training and equipment to anti-apartheid militants throughout the Cold War, both in the U.S.S.R. and Africa.

"They did not only come to the Soviet Union for support," said Clarence Mini, chairman of the South Africa-based Moses Kotane Foundation, who was present at Thursday's ceremony. "They went to Western countries, including America and Britain, to ask for support, but they were turned down."

Observers have claimed that the Soviet Union's support of anti-apartheid forces was more self-interested than it was selfless. The Soviet Union's support of the opposition and the United States' endorsement of the regime, which the U.S. State Department later admitted had been an attempt to retain an ally against the Soviet Union in southern Africa, reflected the petty geopolitical point-scoring of the Cold War.

In his 1995 autobiography, Mandela dismissed the notion that Moscow's relation with anti-apartheid forces was a one-way street.

"There will always be those who say that the communists were using us. But who is to say that we were not using them?" Mandela wrote.

Behind the Scenes

The request to exhume, repatriate and rebury Kotane came from his widow, Rebecca.

"Mrs. Kotane had wished that we repatriate him," Mthethwa said. "The President of the Republic of South Africa [Jacob Zuma] had to respect that. This [request came from] a 103-year-old lady."

South African President Jacob Zuma raised the issue with President Vladimir Putin during an official visit to Moscow in August, during which he laid wreaths on the graves of his country's heroes. Mthethwa said that consultations with the Russian side over the logistics of the repatriations had gone smoothly.

Samuel Kotane, the couple's 67-year-old son, revealed his father's gap-toothed grin when asked about his mother's role in this international operation. Rebecca Kotane, who did not make the trip to Moscow, had succumbed to relatives' pressure and requested her husband's repatriation, according to her son. She had previously objected to having his remains removed from Russian soil, he said.

As an internationalist, Moses Kotane would be at peace anywhere, she thought.

The remains of Kotane and Marks will arrive at the Waterkloof Air Force Base on the outskirts of Pretoria on Monday. Kotane will be buried in his hometown of Pella on March 14, while Marks will be laid to rest in his birthplace, the town of Ventersdorp, on March 22. The South African government announced earlier this week that both men would be given official funeral honors.

Kotane and Marks never witnessed the fruits of their labor: the end of apartheid. Nor did they live to see their internationalist ideals crumble with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

"Moses led his people, but he couldn't reach the land of milk and honey, even though he could see it," Mthethwa said. "This is what happened to Kotane and Marks. I am certain they would be proud of what has happened in their country."

Contact the author at g.tetraultfarber@imedia.ru

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