

Reliving South Africa's Struggle

By [Danny Schechter](#)

Region: [sub-Saharan Africa](#)

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London: Thomas Wolfe wrote "You Can't Go Home Again" years ago, and its core truth keeps popping up in my life even as I tend to retrace some of my life journeys, in an endless walk down memory lane.

I am back in London, cold and wet as I remember it, to attend an event honoring those of us who went to South Africa on underground missions at my mid 1960's alma mater, The London School of Economics and Political Science. I was on political side of the College's split personality back in 1966-68.

This event marked my real "major" in what the Rolling Stones called "street fighting years:" imagining world revolution.

[Our group of solidarity stalwarts are now called The London Recruits.](#) There is now a book out from Merlin Press telling our story in the words of many participants, including myself. ()

Yes, I was an activist in those pre-journalism years, blamed by some in the then Fleet Street press for sparking the LSE's student "troubles" that soon morphed into an occupation and dramatic student protest. They dubbed me "Danny The Yank," in the spirit of the French Press that labeled Dany Cohn-Bendit, a student activist in Paris who sparked a real revolution as "Dany le Rouge (Danny the Red)."

In the mid 1960's the African National Congress (ANC) was all but smashed by the Apartheid state. Mandela began his life sentence on Robben Island in 1964 along with his fellow leaders, all convicted of sabotage in the infamous Rivonia Trial. They all expected to be hung and then to die there. He would not be released for 27 years.

Thousands more were later brutalized and rounded up. The resistance movement seemed crushed although top leaders like Oliver Tambo and Joe Slovo and many militants escaped into exile in Africa and London where they spent decades plotting their way back.

With their movement on the run, the ANC decided to recruit non-South Africans, mostly British Communists Socialists, anti-apartheid activists and this one American civil rights worker, to go on missions into South Africa to distribute flyers promoting the ANC, through the use of leaflet bombs to stir the local press and public.

I was one of the first to take part in this scary and desperate effort to keep the ANC visible at a low point in its 100 year history. This effort went on for five years while the ANC rebuilt its internal structures and armed wing, uMKhonto wi Sizwe (the Spear of the Nation.)

Later, some of these recruits got into weapons struggling by setting up a safari company that could cross borders. Some 40 tons of weapons were moved that way,, we were told at

the event.

Two of my colleagues, unknown to me at the time because of secrecy and compartmentalization, were arrested and jailed. I was naïve about the dangers at the time.

As we were meeting at the LSE preaching about people from one country acting on behalf of people in another: there was a news flash. Israel, a country known for chauvinism and arrogance was apologizing and promising compensation for the killings of 9 Turks intercepted on the high seas by the Israeli Navy which boarded and stopped a humanitarian flotilla to Gaza some years back.

At the time, Tel Aviv's propaganda machine blamed the victims for the crime, and Israel insisted it would never apologize.

Turkey, considered one of Israel's friends denounced their intervention, and broke relations. Now, to re-establish trade and diplomatic links, Israel has done what it swore it would never do—reversed itself in an act of contrition, reportedly brokered by a then visiting Barack Obama.

In some ways it was like apartheid government finally succumbing to world pressure and negotiating with the ANC, a movement that it had denounced for years as terrorists.

Back at the Little Theater at the LSE where I held forth in many a fierce debate back in the day, there were moving stories from the recruits about their adventures and fears. Only a few had ever left their country. Some had never even flown in planes before.

Many were working class blokes of the left persuasion who signed on at the inspirational urging of Ronnie Kasrils, then a part of the underground and later South Africa's outspoken Minister of Intelligence.

Kasrils spoke to his "alumni association" of once young recruits, his "army" of infiltrators and preached the message of value of international solidarity. This was example of an initiative that worked.

He is now active on behalf of the Palestinian cause and increasingly critical of the current ANC leadership. He certainly earned the right to speak out.

On one of my trips to South Africa, I visited him in his spy shop that featured pictures of Fidel Castro on the wall, and gifts from visiting intelligence chiefs including high-ups in the CIA and FBI that once tracked him. (His first book was called "Armed And Dangerous.")

Unfortunately, the event was poorly promoted, some believe, even sabotaged by the LSE's current Administration that had been caught up in a scandal after it was revealed that the School took money from Gadaffy.

It is also possible that our gang of gray-haired old timers were just not aware that that our event was scheduled on the last day of the term with many students eager to leave town. A nasty London-style rain shower and freezing weather were not exactly conducive to drawing a crowd.

One Palestinian student, one of fifteen or more undergrads that came, because of sponsorship by the LSE Student Union, spoke up. Only 30% of LSE student body is now from

the UK, probably because of unaffordable fees. (Ironically, the economists that the School graduated are now presiding over Britain's failing economy.)

The student asked if we had ever feared that our gesture of support could backfire and hurt the very people we went to help, a query reflective of the cynicism of these times, and an implied critique of the "white man's burden" that did so much to harm Africa in the guise of helping it develop.

Some of the recruits responded by reminding everyone they were invited. But others admitted that they too were initially wary, but went ahead anyway—and are now proud to have done so.

The two recruits who were jailed have since won medals from the South African government.

Meanwhile, back at the LSE's Economist book store, the featured volume in the window speaks to a crisis that I am sure owes some of its origins to the conservative market-based capitalist doctrines taught in an institution founded by Fabian socialists.

The book is not by a Brit but by the American economist Paul Krugman who once taught here. Its title is more like demand with the moral urgency that we once brought to the fight against apartheid:

"END THIS DEPRESSION, NOW!"

News Dissector Danny Schechter continued to be engaged with South Africa He produced the weekly South Africa Now TV series between 1989 and 1991, and helped produce the album "Sun City: Artists Against Apartheid. He is finishing a 5 hour TV series as a companion the forthcoming movie Mandela: The Long Walk To Freedom, due in theaters in December. Comments to dissector@mediachannel.org.

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