

THE EARLIEST VISITS OF ANC LEADERS TO THE USSR

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In November 1998 the deputy president of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, visited Moscow. The following year, in April 1999, president Nelson Mandela also visited Moscow. These successful visits marked a new stage in relations between the leading South African political organisation and our country.

Bilateral relations between Russia and the ANC, however, go back more than 70 years. The first visits by ANC leaders to our country can be observed in documents found by the author in Moscow in the State Archives of the Russian Federation (SARF) and in the Centre of Storage of the Documents of Youth Organisations (CSDYO).

In November 1927 Josiah Tshangana Gumede, who had shortly before been elected general president of the ANC, and James La Guma, one of the leaders of the Communist Party of South Africa, were invited to the USSR by the All-Union Society of Cultural Ties on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the October revolution.²

Prior to their Moscow trip, in February 1927, Gumede, La Guma and the representative of the South African Trade Unions Congress, D. Colrairie, attended the first international conference of the League Against Imperialism held in Brussels.³ This conference had adopted a resolution advancing "The right of self-determination through the complete overthrow of capitalism and imperial domination" proposed by the South African delegation.⁴

Working on material in the collection of the All-Union Society of Cultural Ties with Foreign Countries (VOKS) in the State Archives of the Russian Federation, I found two reports by the late Alfred Plate dated 29 November and 5 December 1927, containing information about Gumede's visit to the USSR.

In 1927 Alfred Plate studied at the Bauman Higher Technical College in Moscow and was invited to work at VOKS as an interpreter. Later Plate went on to become an outstanding scientist and professor of the Moscow State University. Some information on Gumede's

² A.B. Davidson, *Uzhnaya Africa: Stanovlenie sil protesta* (known in South Africa as *The rise of protest*) (Moscow, 1972), p. 420.

³ B. Bunting, *Moses Kotane. South African Revolutionary* (Belville, 1998), p. 36.

⁴ J. and R. Simons, *Class and colour in South Africa: 1850-1950* (IDAF, 1983), p. 389.

trip to the USSR was published in the ANC magazine *Sechaba*. However only now can we describe Gumede's visit on the basis of archival documents.

Unfortunately, I could not find those documents in the VOKS collection that contain information on the first days of Gumede's stay in Moscow. It is only known that Gumede and La Guma were late for the anniversary of the October revolution but they were able to participate in the Congress of the Friends of the USSR opened on 10 November 1927.⁵

We can assume that during the first days of the visit, Gumede didn't have either an individual program or a personal guide. In any event, Plate began his work with Gumede only on 20 November 1927, when he translated newspapers for the ANC leader. Indirectly this assumption is also supported by the fact that Plate mentioned buying a warm fur cap for Gumede during the second week of his stay in Moscow. Following the purchase of the hat, the ANC leader felt much better and his eyes stopped watering (because of the cold).⁶ We can imagine the feelings of an inhabitant of South Africa without any form of head-dress in November, when it is usually raining, and often snowing in Russia!

That same day the ANC leader visited the headquarters of the Comintern where he had a conversation with an Indian revolutionary, M.N. Roy, who was a prominent member of this organisation.⁷ Gumede, being a representative of the discriminated South African majority, paid special attention to national questions in the Soviet Union. This was visible in his discussions with representatives of the USSR. For example, on 21 November he visited the People's Commissariat of Education, where had a conversation which continued for 1½ hours with representatives of national minorities about the organisation of schools and the abolition of illiteracy. He was promised some brochures devoted to cultural work "among Negroes."⁸

On 24 November Gumede had a two-hour conversation with Kulbyshero, the Secretary of the Council of Nationalities of the Central Executive Committee of the USSR. During this talk Kulbyshero "described in detail soviet policy concerning former oppressed nationalities and national minorities."⁹ Gumede also told Kulbyshero that "Negroes in Africa" were deprived of their civil rights and promised to send the Secretary of the Council

⁵ *Pravda*, Moscow, 10 November 1927.

⁶ State Archives of Russian Federation (SARF), Collection 5283, List of files 8, file 62, pp. 253, 256.

⁷ SARF 5283, list of files 8, file 62, pp. 253, 256.

⁸ SARF 5283, list of files 8, file 62, pp. 253, 256.

⁹ SARF 5283, list of files 8, file 62, pp. 253, 256.

a book illustrating this. According to Plate, following this conversation, the ANC leader said that "it was as if a light had shone on him and illuminated him."¹⁰

After the visit to the Council of the Nationalities, Gumede and his guide visited the Committee of the North in the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee, where the ANC leader had an hour long discussion with its head, Peter Smidovich. They discussed cultural and economic work amongst the "backward nationalities" of the Northern Areas of the Soviet Union. Both these meetings evoked the unfeigned interest of the ANC leader: Plate mentioned in his report that after returning to his hotel, Gumede asked for the names of the persons he had met and made notes on these two conversations.¹¹

On 22 November the ANC leader visited the "Exhibition of the Art of the Peoples of the USSR" in the building of the Supreme Art-Technical Workshops (VHUTEMAS) and liked this exhibition very much. There the ANC leader noticed the draught of a hydro-electric power station under construction in Georgia in the Caucasus and said that he would like to visit this construction project. Maybe his expressed desire determined the further program for his stay in the USSR, or maybe Gumede already had preliminary information about a probable trip to Georgia, but officially he was only informed about such a trip the day before he left for the Caucasus.¹²

That day Gumede was received by Olga Kameneva, who occupied a chair of VOKS. She was a relative of two famous leaders of that period of the Soviet Russia - a sister of Leon Trotsky and wife of Leon Kamenev (both of them were CP Politburo members in the 1920s). The ANC leader's visit to Moscow coincided with the struggle between Stalin and his supporters on the one side and the "Trotsky-Zinoviev opposition" on the other. In fact, whilst Gumede was having his discussions with Kameneva, Communist Party meetings were taking place to denounce her brother and husband.

The next day, 23 November 1927, Gumede had a 1½ hour conversation in the mission of the Transcaucasian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic (ZSFSR) about the history of that region and the existing situation in the republic. As Plate mentioned, Gumede had a special interest in the economic, political and cultural conditions of formerly oppressed nationalities, and was also very interested in the agrarian question in the USSR.¹³

¹⁰ SARF 5283, list of files 8, file 62, pp. 253, 256.

¹¹ SARF 5283, list of files 8, file 62, pp. 253, 256.

¹² SARF 5283, list of files 8, file 62, pp. 253, 256.

¹³ SARF 5283, list of files 8, file 62, pp. 253, 256.

Gumede also visited an exhibition at the VHUTEMAS which was part of an "Exhibition of the Art of the Peoples of the USSR" which opened in Moscow on 11 November 1927.¹⁴ This exhibition was devoted to fine arts, theatre and cinema. On 23 November Gumede also visited another part of the exhibition in the Department of Folk art and Handicraft in the former Neskutchny Palace on Bolshaya Kaluzhskaya Street. The Presidium of the Russian Academy of Sciences is now housed in this building. That day Gumede also visited the Ethnographic Museum. Objects used by the peoples of the East and Far North of the USSR provoked some questions by the ANC leader who declared his desire to visit these regions.¹⁵

Gumede's visit was saturated with cultural activities. On the evening of 21 November 1927, for the first time in his life, Gumede visited a theatre and, as his guide later mentioned, the performance in the Bolshoy theatre made a profound impression on Gumede. Later Gumede visited the "Antigona" Chamber Theatre, the Music-Hall and Moscow circus.¹⁶

On 25 November, Gumede and Plate left Moscow for Tiflis (as the Georgian capital - Tbilisi - was called at that time). Their journey took three days: 26, 27, and 28 November. During the trip Gumede was very interested in the big cities they passed. He asked Plate about the development of industry in these cities and also asked to get postcards with views of the places they had travelled through. Gumede asked his guide numerous questions, for example, about the marriage laws in the USSR, conditions of teachers in the country-side, education in the national republics, the situation facing the Soviet oil industry and its position in the world market, etc. Gumede wanted detailed answers to all the questions. During the trip Plate translated newspapers for Gumede and also helped him to study the Russian alphabet. In the railway carriage they met the Latvian writer Linard Leitsen, who was writing a book about his impressions of the USSR. He asked the ANC leader about the situation in Africa and wanted to write about it in his book.¹⁷

The train arrived "awfully late" in Tiflis. (Gumede arrived at 7 o'clock on the morning on 29 November, instead of 7 o'clock on the evening of 28 November, as planned). At the railway station they were met by Konstantin Hoperiki, member of the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee of Georgia and Shalva Tsogareli, secretary of the chairman of the Central Executive Committee. An half hour after his arrival at his hotel, Gumede and his guide were taken to "the hills where all Tiflis could be observed from." (In all probability it was Mtazminda mountain).

¹⁴ *Pravda*, 11 November 1927.

¹⁵ SARF 5283, list of files 8, file 62, pp. 253, 256.

¹⁶ SARF 5283, list of files 8, file 62, pp. 253, 256.

¹⁷ SARF 5283, list of files 8, file 62, pp. 254, 256-257.

On the way there, Gumede met peasants who were going to Tiflis and back, and he decided to talk with them. The peasants were stopped. Gumede then asked them about the situation in the country-side before and after revolution, about the agrarian question and whom they would support should war come: the mensheviks (right wing Social Democrats, who ruled Georgia in 1918-1921) or the Soviet Republic. Hoperiki, who accompanied Gumede, even offered the services of his driver, who was not a Party member, as an impartial interpreter.¹⁸

Following their return to the city, Gumede, Plate, Hoperiki and Tsogareli visited the "Peasant's Palace", where they surveyed the dispensary, club, restaurant, hostel, canteen, museum, consultation rooms, etc. They also visited the editorial office of *New Village*, the largest Georgian newspaper targeted at peasants. There photographs were taken of Gumede with peasants and representatives of the administration of the "Peasant's Palace." (Half a century later these photos were published in the ANC magazine *Sechaba*). Then Gumede gave an interview to the Tiflis newspaper correspondents, and also to the Moscow *Pravda* representative.¹⁹

Afterwards, Gumede visited the Georgian State University, where he had an hour long conversation with the rector, Professor Glonti, with the help of English-speaking professors. During this talk Glonti touched upon the history of Georgia and its modern economic and cultural development. After the visit to the University, Gumede journeyed to the hydro-electric power station, located some seventeen kilometres from Tiflis. Plate later mentioned that this trip made a great impression on the ANC general president. He was astonished and said several times "How can capitalist press call the Bolsheviks the destroyers of civilisation?"²⁰

Following their return to Tiflis there was a dinner with Hoperiki, Tsogareli and the Vice-President of the Central Executive Committee of Georgia S. Todria, as well Bibineyshvili, the head of the Georgian State Publishing House. At Gumede's request, only Georgian national dishes were served. A great number of toasts "were proclaimed" and Todria detailed Georgian history from ancient times. After dinner Gumede wrote a few letters to South Africa about his impressions and then he and his guide went to look at Tiflis by night. They proceeded to the famous "sulphuric bath-house" about which the ANC leader had heard in Moscow.²¹

¹⁸ SARF 5283, list of files 8, file 62, pp. 258, 262.

¹⁹ SARF 5283, list of files 8, file 62, pp. 258, 262.

²⁰ SARF 5283, list of files 8, file 62, pp. 258, 262.

²¹ SARF 5283, list of files 8, file 62, pp. 258-259, 262.

On the morning of 30 November 1927 Gumede was given the local newspapers in which his interviews and pictures had already been published. His program for that day was very specific: Gumede "examined in full detail" the "Central Special Correctional Facility."²² It is interesting that at that time visits to prisons were apparently "a must" for all foreigners. The purpose of such visits was apparently to demonstrate the quality of the Soviet penitentiary system. Mention about visits to "correctional houses" can be found in practically all the reports of the VOKS during the 1927-1929 period.²³

During his visit to the "Central Special Correctional Facility", as prisons were officially called at that time, Gumede had conversations with both political and criminal prisoners. He even spoke in English to an American woman detained on a charge of espionage. During his talks with prisoners, Gumede was especially interested in the difference between the regimes in prisons before the Revolution and after.²⁴

Gumede and Plate then visited a similar establishment termed the "First Reformatory", which was much bigger than the previous one. There, under the direction of its head, they closely examined a club, an editorial office of a newspaper that was circulated to all the prisons of the Soviet Union, a hospital and spacious workshops. During the visit to the workshops two toys that were made there were presented to Gumede. The visit to the hospital, which was the central hospital for all the Georgian prisons, also made a great impression on the ANC general president: Gumede could not believe that only prisoners were admitted there, and asked whether there was any difference between this hospital for prisoners and those for free people. During his visit to the editorial office, Gumede also spoke with prisoners and even wrote a short article for their newspaper.²⁵ After dinner Gumede received correspondents of the local newspapers, wrote an article for the Georgian press, and sent a telegram to the editorial office of the South African newspaper *Abantu Batho*, and also began working on the article for that newspaper. He planned to send his Georgian peasant photographs to it.²⁶

There was no Georgian opera or drama in Tiflis theatres that night, so Gumede asked to visit the circus, because "Georgian pieces" were included in the program. A telegram arrived from Moscow saying he had to leave Tiflis the next day. Tsogareli therefore arranged a farewell dinner supper with the participation of Georgian students in honour

²² SARF 5283, list of files 8, file 62, pp. 259, 263.

²³ SARF 5283, list of files 8, file 62.

²⁴ SARF 5283, list of files 8, file 62, pp. 259, 263.

²⁵ SARF 5283, list of files 8, file 62, pp. 259, 263.

²⁶ SARF 5283, list of files 8, file 62, pp. 259, 263.

of the ANC president. During the dinner Gumede promised that he would return to Georgia to renew his acquaintance with "the new construction."²⁷

Because of his accelerated departure, Gumede decided that time was too short to visit Baku, as he would only be able to spend a half day in the Azerbaijan capital. Instead, Gumede thought that it would be more rational to visit a village, situated not far from Tiflis, and then to leave directly for Moscow.²⁸

Next morning, 1 December 1927, Gumede visited the village Digane, not far from Tiflis. There, the ANC leader had an hour and half conversation with the local executive committee chairman. They spoke about the cultural, economic and co-operative development of the country-side, about the elections of local authority bodies, about education, etc. In a speech to the peasants Gumede told them about "the slave conditions of the native population of Africa."²⁹ Then Gumede toured the co-operative. He also visited a local school, where he spoke with its principal, teachers and pupils. The number of the pupils of the school grew from 60 before the Revolution to 400 in 1927. All this made a great impression on the ANC leader, who said that the visit to the village had been a most interesting experience. His guide mentioned that during the talks Gumede had expressed a special interest to the conditions of the peasants - the representatives of the former oppressed nationalities. These two themes were constants in Gumede's visit. Before leaving Tiflis Gumede wrote an article about his impressions for the Georgian press.³⁰ At about 3 p.m. Gumede and his guide left Tiflis for Moscow. During the journey to Moscow Gumede spoke at length about his favourable impressions of the Caucasus.³¹

Gumede's accelerated departure was, probably, caused by urgent problems connected with the activity of the League Against Imperialism: when the ANC president returned Moscow on 5 December at 2 p.m., he was informed that he was expected to go to a conference in Brussels on same day. So at 21:35 o'clock Gumede, accompanied by Plate, arrived at the railway station to catch a train to Sebezh on the then Soviet border. Saying good-bye to Plate, Gumede asked him to convey his the gratitude to all the representatives of the VOKS for his warm reception.³²

²⁷ SARF 5283, list of files 8, file 62, pp. 260, 263.

²⁸ SARF 5283, list of files 8, file 62, pp. 260, 263.

²⁹ SARF 5283, list of files 8, file 62, pp. 260, 264.

³⁰ SARF 5283, list of files 8, file 62, pp. 260, 263-264

³¹ SARF 5283, list of files 8, file 62, pp. 260, 264.

³² SARF 5283, list of files 8, file 62, pp. 260, 264.

Following his return to South Africa, Gumede said of his visit to the Soviet Union that he had "been in the New Jerusalem."³³ (We must mention here that ideas of social transformation had attracted Gumede much earlier: twenty years before his visit to the USSR he already had contacts with the socialists in the Labour Party in Natal.)

On 27 February 1928, back in South Africa, Gumede was invited to a meeting of the Central Executive Committee of the South African Communist Party, where he spoke about his journey to the USSR. It was hardly accidental that following his return from Moscow, Gumede supported the CPSA slogan of an "Independent Native Republic" which was recommended, (if not imposed), on the CPSA by the Comintern, and was exposed to all kinds of accusations for this step. At the National Conference of the ANC in 1930, he called on his colleagues to repulse any aggression towards the Soviet Union, which was "the only real friend of the all subject races in the world."³⁴

In spite of the Gumede's firm intention to return to the USSR, he was never to visit the Soviet Union again, and direct ties between the ANC and Moscow were cut off for several decades. On the one hand, as Brian Bunting mentioned, despite the fact that Gumede was not a member of the Communist Party, "his close collaboration with it was to provoke the antagonism of more conservative elements in the ANC who finally brought about his defeat in the election for president at the 1930 ANC conference."³⁵ On the other hand, a sectarian approach to the problems of national-liberation dominated the Soviet leadership and therefore the Comintern on the threshold of the 1930s.

The next visit of ANC leaders to the USSR took place only in 1953, when the ANC Secretary General Walter Sisulu, the ANC Youth League Secretary Duma Nokwe and the Indian Youth League Secretary Ismail Bhoola visited the Soviet Union after their participation at the World Festival of Youth and Students in Bucharest in August 1953.³⁶

Documents of the Antifascist Committee of Soviet Youth (in the Centre of Storage of the Documents of Youth Organisations) show that representatives of the ANC were in USSR twice - the first time when they passed through the USSR during a trip to China, and then there was a longer visit to Moscow from 2-15 November 1953.

³³ Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, p. 36.

³⁴ Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, p. 47.

³⁵ Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, p. 36.

³⁶ Centre of storage of the documents of the Youth Organisations (CSDYO) collection 4, list of files 1, file 1684, pp. 109-116.

In July 1953 Ahmed Kathrada, the Joint Secretary of the South African Festival Committee, sent a letter to the leader of the Soviet delegation with a request to help South Africans to visit the Soviet Union.³⁷

Later, on 15 September 1953, Ismail Bhoola sent another letter to the Antifascist Committee of Soviet Youth. In this letter on behalf of the delegation of the South African youth Bhoola requested that representatives be given a chance to spend ten days in the Soviet Union. The representatives of the South African delegation wanted to spend some days in Moscow and visit Leningrad, Stalingrad, and the Volga-Don Canal, as these were evidently the best known places. (At that moment the delegation from South Africa was already on its way to China for a visit.)³⁸

The visit of Sisulu to China and his talks about the possible use of armed force against the racist regime is mentioned in Nelson Mandela's autobiography *Long walk to freedom*.³⁹ But Mandela does not write that Sisulu, Nokwe and Bhoola went to Peking from Moscow.

Bhoola mentioned in a letter that "it has been with great difficulties that our delegation has been able to leave South Africa, particularly Sisulu and Nokwe who managed to leave the country without a passport. This is the first time that Africans have been able to come directly out of the country."⁴⁰ Bhoola also mentioned the fact that all the members of the delegation were leading members of the South African national liberation organisations. In his conclusion, Bhoola expressed the warm thanks of members of the South African delegation for the hospitality rendered to them during their transit through the Soviet Union.⁴¹

Nokwe also sent a letter of appreciation and gratitude for the warm hospitality that was extended to South Africans in the Soviet Union and the attention given to them by the interpreters who accompanied them. That letter was sent from Peking through the All-China Federation of Democratic Youth.⁴²

³⁷ CSDYO 4, list of files 5, file 13, pp. 1-3.

³⁸ CSDYO 4, list of files 1, file 1684, pp. 113-114.

³⁹ Nelson Mandela, *Long walk to freedom* (Abacus 1995), pp. 184-185

⁴⁰ CSDYO 4, list of files 1, file 1684, pp. 113-114.

⁴¹ CSDYO 4, list of files 1, file 1684, pp. 113-114.

⁴² CSDYO 4, list of files 1, file 1684, pp. 113-114.

The trip through the spaciousness of our country made a unforgettable impression on the South Africans. Many years later Sisulu recalled some very friendly and noisy Latin Americans who were their fellow-travellers.⁴³

The earlier request of the South African Delegation was satisfied and a vast program was prepared for their visit to Moscow. The program for their two week stay from 2-15 November included visits to the Kremlin, Lenin Library, the All-Union Building Exhibition, the Museum of History and Reconstruction of Moscow, the Museum of Soviet Army, the Politechnical museum, the new building of the Moscow State University, the First Moscow Medical Institute, secondary school, planetarium, circus, etc. The South Africans also surveyed the conditions of work of young workers at the "Red October" confectionery factory. On 6 November they attended the October anniversary concert in the Tchaikovskiy Concert Hall, devoted to the anniversary of the October Revolution, and on November 7, they saw a parade and "demonstration of the working people" in Red Square. During the six evenings of their stay in Moscow, the South African delegation visited a number of theatres, for example on November 7, they saw a ballet in the Bolshoy theatre. On 8 November, they had an excursion around Moscow and saw a concert in the Large Hall of the Moscow Conservatory. But the program of the visit outside of Moscow differed from the program requested by the South Africans: they spent a few days in Azerbaijan.⁴⁴ (The programs of the visits of the delegations from African and Asian countries usually included visits to the "oriental" Soviet Republics).

On their return to South Africa Sisulu and Nokwe spoke at the ANC annual conference in Queenstown and "were greeted by the delegates with an ovation."⁴⁵ The report by Sisulu of their visit to the Soviet Union presented at a meeting to commemorate International Youth Day in Johannesburg was also received "with stormy applause."⁴⁶ Earlier, at the celebration of the anniversary of the October Revolution in Johannesburg, Ahmed Kathrada, speaking on the theme "Soviet Union, Friend of the People", "evoked frequent bursts of applause" when he "called for closer bonds between the peoples of the Soviet Union and South Africa, and "great enthusiasm greeted his announcement that two members of the African National Congress were that week-end taking part in the celebrations in Moscow."⁴⁷

⁴³ V. Shubin, *ANC: A view from Moscow* (Bellville, 1999), p. 33.

⁴⁴ CSDYO 4, list of files 1, file 1684, pp. 110-111.

⁴⁵ Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, p. 201.

⁴⁶ Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, p. 201.

⁴⁷ Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, p. 201.

Nelson Mandela writes in his book that some of the ANC leaders were not happy with the visits of Sisulu and Nokwe to "socialist countries" and even "expressed dismay."⁴⁸ But the Russian visit most probably helped raise the prestige of the travellers. For example, Duma Nokwe was elected ANC general secretary, and Walter Sisulu, banned by the regime from his duties in the ANC, in fact continued to be a leader of the ANC during its period of legal activity and after its banning in 1960.

According to the archives, the program of the visit of the ANC General Secretary and his colleagues to the USSR was not something special. By and large it was the standard program for foreign delegations, invited by the Antifascist Committee of the Soviet Youth. That visit was merely an episode in the history of bilateral relations between the ANC and Moscow. These relations were firmly established only ten years later, when the Soviet Union was visited in April 1963 by another ANC leader, Oliver Tambo.

⁴⁸ Mandela, *Long walk to freedom*, p. 185.