

Everyday Communists in South Africa's Liberation Struggle: The lives of Ivan and Lesley Schermbrucker

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Introduction

The book's title is quite intriguing and thought-provoking as it speaks of the influence that everyday communists had in South Africa's liberation struggle. Kirkaldy, as part of the Palgrave Studies in the History of Social Movement, highlights the role of Ivan and Lesley Schermbrucker, a married couple that was instrumental in the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA/SACP) during the apartheid era. In this refreshing dual-biography of Ivan and Lesley Schermbrucker, personal memories shared by close friends and family members and Lesley's recollections allow for the intriguing, uncovered stories of Ivan and Lesley. Born in 1921 and 1926, Ivan and Lesley sought to aid the Communist Party of South Africa which was also founded around 1921. This book follows not only the lives of Ivan and Lesley but also the formation, affiliations, and movements of the CPSA until the CPSA went underground and emerged as the South African Communist Party in 1953. Ivan joined the *Guardian* newspaper and served as its Johannesburg branch manager between 1947 and 1963 during which he became a member of the central committee of the CPSA.

The book also explores themes, tensions, and disjuncture not normally explored through the communist lens of two individuals and their lack of transnational experience during the apartheid era. The introduction is rich in background information. It captures

the fundamental aspects regarding both communism in South Africa and the lives of Ivan and Lesley during the apartheid era. It follows their lives from their early years until they married and looks specifically at how communism was intertwined in their everyday affairs. After Ivan's imprisonment, Lesley's involvement in the CPSA/SACP grew. Thus, the role of women within the central committee of the CPSA/SACP is also explored.

Chapters

The book is well structured. Chapter 1 provides a solid background that puts what is to come into perspective. The figures presented in the form of pictures, accounts, and explanatory notes clearly outline both the lives of Ivan and Lesley Schermbrucker's personal lives and those within the SACP.

Chapter 2 provides background information and context to both the lives of Ivan and Lesley Schermbrucker and that of communism in South Africa. The socio-political context within which Ivan and Lesley found themselves is crucial for understanding their stance as communists. The chapter titled 'The Socio-Political Context, Finding Communism and Ivan and Lesley's Early Years' provides a clear idea of what the author would cover in the chapter. The sub-topics highlighted in each chapter help the reader to locate the narrative within the apartheid era and come to terms with aspects such as the CPSA/SACP, ANC, transnationalism, African nationalism, and the role of women in the liberation struggle. Not only does this chapter provide an overview for the reader but also depicts the overlap between the lives of Ivan and Lesley and the changes to communism in South Africa. They both had to navigate "the changing directions in party policy, its blind loyalty to Stalinism and the Soviet Union, its linkages with other liberatory movements, transnationalism" and other aspects such as tension within the party. Ivan and Lesley, both as life partners and struggle partners are explored in this book, and their struggles through tightening repression in the forms of increased involvement, surveillance, and detention are highlighted. After Ivan Schermbrucker was detained, he along with Bram Fischer and 13 others was sentenced to imprisonment. Ivan underwent trial and was sentenced to five years imprisonment as a minor office bearer in the Communist Party.

Chapter 6, 'Women Picking up the Spear: Lesley's Increasing Involvement, Arrest, and Trial' details the role that Lesley played in the SACP up until her arrest and trial. Lesley, along with Violet Weinberg took the place of their husbands on the central committee of the SACP. During a visit to the Schermbrucker's house in January 1965, Bram Fischer said that he would like to purchase a house and had Doreen Tucker pass Lesley information

about available properties. Lesley also assisted Bram Fischer in opening a bank account at the Stock Exchange branch of Barclays Bank in the name M and W Wilson in which money was transferred to fund the house. In December 1964, after Bram Fischer decided to go underground, Lesley with the assistance of Violet and sympathetic friends such as Doreen Tucker, Luli Zampetakis, and others would be at the forefront. Their commitment to the party remained until her arrest on 18 November 1965. Apart from a brief visit from her children in December 1965, Lesley spent more than 300 days incarceration with no contact with her children. Even though she was called to give evidence against Bram Fischer after his re-arrest, she decided not to do so. This chapter goes on to iterate the challenges faced by Lesley and her two teenage children. The chapter also speaks about her unbreakable resolve as she did not testify against Bram Fischer and the consequences thereof.

The last two chapters detail the life in prison of both Ivan and Lesley and the aftermath of their imprisonment. Chapter 7 narrates both Ivan and Lesley's life in prison, and chapter 8 highlights the aftermath of the time spent in prison. Lesley was released from prison and placed under house arrest. Both Lesley and Violet Weinberg were not allowed out of their houses after dark. Two weeks after her release, she had to sell her house due to the Provincial Council expropriating the neighbourhood school grounds, and moved to Rustenburg Flats. In 1970 when Ivan was released from prison, he was also issued with a banning order that included house arrest. These two chapters highlight Ivan's nationalist focus and Lesley's changing ideologies. It also tracks their life in prison and follows their routines and movements. After Ivan and Lesley were released from prison, they went on to help those still in prison and often sought funds from overseas to assist those still in prison. Eventually, Ivan suffered three heart attacks and had to undergo a bypass operation in 1980. His health deteriorated until his death on 24 July 1981.

The book chapters provide comprehensive accounts of the subjects under discussion. The literary style of the book is narrative. The language enables the reader to follow the dual biography presented easily. The titles of each chapter and the sub0titles allow for a brief overview of the key aspects. The book displays an original lens on communism and the role ordinary communists played during the apartheid era.

Conclusion

The book comes across as a well-thought-through publication. The author has been able to trace the course of Ivan and Lesley Schermbrucker's lives through a communist lens in the South African liberation struggle: it portrays what everyday communists endured,

the effects of the apartheid era, and the emergence of democracy in South Africa. Alan Kirkaldy's book is an interesting read that compensates for the gaps that exist in South African historiography. Undoubtedly, the author's thorough research reflected in this dual biography is commendable.