

16 *Solidarity with Liberation in Namibia: An Analytical Eyewitness Account from a West German Perspective*

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When asked for an eyewitness account, one's own personal experience takes centre stage. In addition to drawing on that experience, I have carried out scholarly studies on the solidarity movement, particularly in relation to Southern Africa.¹ It is a different task to reflect on my own involvement. I had been active in the student movement, in the movement against the war in Vietnam, and similar work for some years, before Southern Africa became the focus of my attention. I remember being part of a campaign in Heidelberg in 1968, aimed at alerting people to the colonial wars in what were then the Portuguese colonies of Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau. That was my first stint of solidarity work with national liberation movements in Southern Africa.

In 1979, after completing my PhD, I got my first job as Executive Secretary of the *Informationsstelle Südliches Afrika* (Information Service Southern Africa) in Bonn, popularly known as ISSA.² That catapulted me into intense work in 'counter-information', writing articles for a monthly magazine and publishing solidarity literature, all efforts devoted to making the West German public aware of the reality of apartheid and colonialism, to propagating the aims of the national liberation struggles and the overwhelming case for majority rule, and to helping activists in the local chapters of a whole range of organisations to strengthen their hand when they had to argue their case during public events, as well as in everyday life. The move turned out to be much more decisive than I had thought when I started the job. Even though I took

1 R. Kössler and H. Melber (2002) *Globale Solidarität? Eine Streitschrift*. Frankfurt am Main: Brandes and Apsel. R. Kössler and H. Melber, 'The West German solidarity movement with the liberation struggle in Southern Africa. A (self-) critical retrospective', in Engel, U. and Kappel, R. (eds) *Germany's Africa Policy Revisited. Interests, images and incrementalism*. I also profited from perusing under the auspices of AACRLS, the archives of the German Anti-Apartheid Movement (Anti-Apartheid Bewegung, henceforth, AAB), now housed at Archiv für Alternatives Schrifttum (AFAS) in Duisburg. My task was to identify materials of potential relevance to the National Archives of Namibia. I could not carry out complete archival research, but this work has strengthened my insight immensely. Thanks to Jürgen Bacia at AFAS for his willing assistance and cooperation. After this text had been written, Hans-Georg Schleicher and I interviewed people who had been involved in solidarity work with the Namibian liberation struggle. These interviews were conducted in late 2010 and early 2011 under the auspices of AACRLS and are available at the National Archives of Namibia, file AACRLS.304.

2 ISSA website: <www.issa-bonn.org>; see also the journal website <<http://www.afrika-sued.org/home/>> {last accessed 6 May 2013}.

on a university appointment after barely a year, as a board member, I have remained close to ISSA ever since. In the capacity of a researcher and writer of scholarly as well as more journalistic contributions, I have followed developments in the region during the last three decades. In this way, my professional life has been closely enmeshed with my commitment to solidarity, and has remained so to this day. It is from this perspective that I would like to offer the following recollections and reflections.

When approaching the West German solidarity movement, one has to take note of a situation that today is hardly imaginable. In the divided Germany, official attitudes towards the anti-colonial struggles and national liberation differed starkly. The same was true of the presence of members and representatives of liberation movements. While in East Germany (GDR), support for liberation struggles was state sponsored and advertised as meritorious and a contribution to the future development of socialism and world peace, in the West it meant confronting your own government about collaborating with the perpetrators of apartheid and the last stalwarts of colonialism, and to be engaged in an uphill campaign for a reversal of those official attitudes (for more on the GDR see Winrow, 1990). As my experience is limited to the latter situation, my account is pointedly from a West German perspective. It leaves out what happened in East Germany, although the presence of the German Democratic Republic was an important reality that conditioned aspects of solidarity work in the West, not least amongst them recurrent insinuations that activists in West Germany were being paid or sponsored by the GDR. Of course, this was nothing new to those who had gone through the exciting years of the student rebellion of the late 1960s (Thomas, 2003). The student movement and left wing mobilisation in general were often accused of being traitors, or at least of inadvertently pursuing the aims of the enemy, epitomised in the routine quip encountered in street discussions, 'Why don't you go over there,' that is, to the GDR.

In this way, the solidarity movement that formed during the early 1970s, with respect to Southern Africa, profited on the one hand, from a social and political mobilisation that was unprecedented in post-World War II Western Germany, and on the other hand, had to operate in a difficult and, at times, even hostile environment. This was due in large measure to divided public opinion about Apartheid. There were certainly plenty of opponents of apartheid in West Germany, but there was not the level of public outcry that was found, for instance, in Sweden. For all its unquestionable impact, the broad anti-apartheid movement remained largely restricted to small committed circles and organisations of a few hundred members at best. A clear distance between activists and official West German politics always existed. In some situations, there was open confrontation. On several occasions, SWAPO accused the West German Government of being directly involved in efforts to destabilise the movement (Kössler and Melber 2002, p. 310).

Who were the people that came together and worked for solidarity with liberation struggles in Southern Africa? The membership of the broad anti-apartheid movement was drawn from roughly three main social groups. First, there were existing political activists. People who had been involved in the student movement of the late 1960s and during the early 1970s started to move into professional life, many of them becoming teachers, who tried to make an impact on the educational system and the outlook of