

# “Let people write their histories”



John Daniel is the Head of the Editorial Board at the Human Science Research Council (HSRC) who in his long career as a political science academic also spent six years in the 1980s as the Africa Editor of Zed Books in London. From 1996–98, Daniel was seconded to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission where he worked in the research department and he was part of the team that wrote the five-volume final report. The interview was carried out in Durban, South Africa, in October 2004.

*The Nordic Africa Institute (NAI): Please tell us something about the Human Science Research Council's work on history.*

John Daniel (JD): The Human Science Research Council (HSRC) recently produced an important new book on South African history commissioned by former minister Kader Asmal just before he retired. It is called “Every Step of the Way” and is doing extremely well. It is basically a new look at the whole history of South Africa, particularly the road to democracy in 1994. It became the first HSRC book on the South African non-fiction top ten list. The perspective is that of the oppressed, from the bottom up, it is a grassroots history book. It is targeted at secondary school children with an accessible style and lots of illustrations. It is for the video generations who don't like to spend time reading. The department of education bought 10,000 copies from us for distribution in secondary schools.

*NAI: In your own view, is there a lively history debate in South Africa?*

JD: Not nearly lively enough. History as a discipline has struggled during the last ten years. A recent conference in London talked about “the history crisis in South Africa”. The numbers of students are way down. It reminds me of a

period in the United States when the primary concern was the job market, getting a job. You only studied a job skill; history was not seen as being vocationally useful. I think it is much the same here. There is also a critical shortage of black South African historians. The University of Cape Town has produced some good black historians, but they all go to government. They are not going back into academia, which is then dominated by ageing white men or foreigners, good scholars but foreign.

Another aspect, in my opinion, is a certain reluctance to come to grips with the realities of South African history, particularly with regards to the region. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) for example, put tremendous emphasis on the external events in the region. It made some powerful findings but they were completely ignored.

*NAI: Could you give an example?*

JD: The majority of the people who died opposing apartheid were not South Africans, but Southern Africans. We estimated that between 500,000 and 750,000 people died in our region between 1978 and 1990 as a direct or indirect consequence of South African aggression. Most people do not know and most South Africans do not seem to care. We, South Africans, seem to think that we do

not owe anything to the region and we treat foreign Africans scandalously badly. There is a strong sense of xenophobia in this country. Despite all this talk about ideology, pan-Africanism and so on, the reality is that South Africans see foreign Africans as competitors. There is a reluctance to come to grips with this, one that I don't quite understand. I think our record today and the level of diplomacy in terms of trade relations is very good. The post-1994 regime is different from the pre-1994 one – not hegemonic or aggressive. The fact is that South African capital is penetrating the African market on a massive scale. There is a certain South Africanisation of the African market. The interesting question is not so much that it is happening, but what does it mean politically? But, to go back to my main point, there is certain reluctance to research about the region and about South Africa's role in the region.

*NAI: What about the history being written now, such as attempts by the South African Democracy Education Trust (SADET) and others.*

JD: I think it is an attempt to rewrite South African history. It is in many ways an answer to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report and is commissioned by the government. It was initiated by President Thabo Mbeki as he indicated his unhappiness with the state of the historical studies of the road to independence and on the role of the ANC. I think it is an attempt to rewrite history in terms of the government's interpretation. The book *The Road to Democracy*, has in my opinion, been a massive waste of resources. One of the main funders is Nedbank, which was the same bank that provided the hit squads with their credit cards to use in their operations in Mozambique. Now they are funding this new version of history. SADET spent several million Rand on this one volume, and is supposed to produce five. The method used is to publish by decades, and that poses questions such as, where do the 60s end and the 70s begin? How do you deal with "black consciousness"? At the end of the 60s or the beginning of the 70s? And how large a publication will the 80s become?

When talking about writing history today, one notes that there is an enormous emphasis on interviews. Capturing old politicians' stories before they die is popular, which is good. However, one needs to be aware that oral history is deceptive as people reinterpret. Memory is selective and people can lie. In my opinion, oral history is not for real archives or for examining data. And in today's Internet society, regrettably we see very little of precisely that, examining data and using records.

*NAI: What archives are there to examine?*

JD: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) generated millions of pieces of paper that were handed over to the national archives and have become extremely difficult to access. The golden age of access to information in South Africa is over. The first five years were fantastic, in part because of the TRC. The TRC had a certain degree of power – people could go into places and demand documentation – a power that should have been used much more. Now the door is slowly closing. The new government passed the Freedom of Information Act, which was an important piece of legislation, but they [the government] are not really giving people access. There is a natural tendency to close down. There are countless numbers of documents but they are very difficult to access, which is one of the reasons a project called South Africa History Archive (SAHA) was started at Wits. The project is conducting several interviews with people who worked with the TRC but is also trying to retrieve documents from them. Several persons with the TRC saved their documents. I, for example, kept photocopies of all of the amnesty applications that related to external operations. They weren't that many, and I have given those to the SAHA.

The state archives are busy classifying the material and have a big job in front of them. They are under-skilled and understaffed and I believe they will be applying the 30–50 years classification rules on a lot of the information. For some of it there is a good case, like when the TRC were conducting in-camera hearings – the interviewees

were making allegations that were untested. But material such as minutes from the State Security Council, cabinet papers and the like, should be open. I do believe that the situation is better than it used to be, but there is a lot of bureaucracy, inefficiency, and a suspicion on behalf of authorities that “knowledge is power so we will keep that knowledge to ourselves”.

*NAI: How do you reconcile yourself to history, is there a lot of ambiguity?*

JD: Of course there is no one history, history is determined by who you are, class, race, religion etc. And what we have to develop is a multiplicity of histories. I also believe we have to be very frank on what our predispositions are. From what perspective we write. It is impossible to write

just one history of any one country, let alone of South Africa: “let the thousand flowers bloom”. Let people write their histories. ■

### The Human Science Research Council

The Human Science Research Council (HSRC), established in 1968, is one of five science councils supported by the South African government. The focus is on the social sciences. HSRC receives an annual grant of R70 million from Parliament. It is a semi-state organisation, with its own guiding council of scholars and former government people and is autonomous in terms of day-to-day operations. HSRC has 130 researchers employed and 100 supporting staff. The publications department at HSRC produces a lot of material from both inside and outside the organisation.

## Vladimir Shubin



Vladimir Shubin is Deputy Director of the Institute of African Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, and Professor of African History and Politics at the Russian State University of Humanities, Moscow. He was a visiting researcher at the Nordic Africa Institute in early 2005. In April 2005, Professor Shubin received the South African national order ‘Companion of O.R. Tambo’, which is an order of peace, co-operation and active expression of solidarity and support awarded to foreign nationals for friendship shown to South Africa.

*The Nordic Africa Institute (NAI): What evoked your interest in Africa?*

Vladimir Shubin (VS): I went to Africa – to Egypt – for the first time in April 1960, while still a student of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations. It was the Year of Africa – 17 African countries in tropical Africa became

independent. Egypt was very active in Africa in those days and the developments on the continent were extensively covered in the local media.

My life thus became connected with Africa at an early stage. Soon after my first visit to Egypt and getting my MA in International Relations and Oriental Studies, I was conscripted and had to