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Author

Dandridge-Perry, Cheryl

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The Young Hostages of Apartheid

By

Cheryl Dandridge-Perry

CHILDREN OF RESISTANCE: *Statements from the Harare conference on Children, Repression and the Law in apartheid South Africa.* Edited by Victoria Brittain and Abdul S. Minty. London, Kliptown Books, 1988 146pp.

There is a distorted view that all children belonging to certain communities are "future" terrorists. Using this justification, the South African government has initiated massive state action against the children of the majority of the South African people. These children are considered a "threat" to the state and thus constitute a "security" problem, but more frequently they are treated as common criminals in a significant blurring of legal distinction between political and criminal action.

For this reason a conference on children, repression and the law in South Africa was convened with some urgency in Harare, Zimbabwe, by the Rt. Reverend Trevor Huddleston, C.R., under the auspices of the Bishop Ambrose Reeves Trust in September, 1987 (with the participation of the African National Congress), to try to inform the world about what is going on inside that closed society. *Children of Resistance* is a compilation of statements from this conference.

The first statement is that of Moses Madia, a twelve-year-old boy. It is a tale of brutality against Moses and other children he encounters in detention, a nightmare placed at the beginning of the book to set the emotional tone for the rest of the conference testimony. This is the primary experience of repression, multiplied thousandfold throughout South Africa, that articulates the reason for the conference and for the mass resistance inside South Africa. Moses' story of systematic, calculated assault on children randomly picked up is gut-wrenching because he did nothing wrong; he was merely with boys slightly older who fall into the age range targeted for assault by the state forces. His statement reflects the pain and helplessness of a young person who has experienced the fear of death and the violation of his utmost physical and psychological being by policemen, in a world where the police attack civilians and where there is no help or recourse, his own parents being the least able to help.

The "Background to the Harare Testimony" section which follows Moses' testimony is a short compendium of the important facts on apartheid, each building upon the last to illustrate that black children in South Africa "have to contend with structural deprivation throughout their lives" (p. 10). The commentary lists the long-term psychological

effects of apartheid policy on children and also the destructive function of guilt, fear and uncertainty within the family, especially over the detention of children.

However, the South African state apparatus is not only the national problem for the people of South Africa, it is a problem for the nationals and, especially, the children of neighboring states. In Angola, Namibia and Mozambique, children have been orphaned, maimed and killed in South African military action against the region, either directly by South African forces, or by South African-directed surrogates.

The scientific destruction of the human fabric of these frontline states is described in another booklet, *Children on the Frontline: A Report for UNICEF*, which complements *Children of Resistance* very well. The latter, however, supplies the human interest and longer analysis that flashes out this struggle. Sections of both books can be easily excerpted for 'activist' use in disseminating information about what is going on inside South Africa.

Children of Resistance is structured to convey a great deal of information in manageable form. The opening testimony detailing horrific assaults against youth is followed by hard information. By shifting the focus of analysis swiftly from "victim," the authors place the emphasis on the state repression, its historical roots, the strategies that sustain it internally and the arguments that sustain it internationally. The reader thus moves from specific victims (throughout the book there are short testimonies inserted in boldface type to provide experiential "people's" history) to an understanding of the daily assault upon the entire society which is the cause of national resistance and insurrection.

However, to merely acknowledge that 'the child is innocent' and that human rights violations occur in South Africa is not enough. It is necessary to understand the political issues at stake because the solutions are largely political. Frank Chikane, Secretary-General of the South African Council of Churches and vice-president of UDF, gives a good brief history of the progression of repression. He describes how hunger is used as a political weapon at the expense of the well-being of the entire Southern African region, and how children are put in a situation where, as Ruth Mompati later writes, they "got to know that when they see a policeman with a gun, that gun was no longer just meant for their parents, but it was meant for them too...." She further quotes a student:

We came out because there is no possibility of us remaining in school and being safe. We have no way of defending ourselves against the police guns which attack us in the schools, and that is why we have left our country to come and train....There are no children in South Africa (p. 133)

In other words, children have had to make survival decisions for themselves.

The section on "South African Legal Framework and the Child" provides brief facts on legal changes that have allowed the state to use mass detention as a strategy designed not to bring the detainee to trial or to be charged (this would be too expensive and involves embarrassing documentation), but to expose the children to fear and assault while in the legal limbo of detention and thus weaken them by instilling in individuals the sense that each is being watched, being "fingered" by the state. This terrorism is very effective on young children whose parents know that they have disappeared, but often cannot find out where they are being held. The sense on the part of young detainees, that one's imprisoners and assaulters can do anything they want to them without anyone else knowing, is reinforced by the fact that there is no obligation on the part of the state to provide a legal representative for children. The book states that children "as young as 9 or 10 are convicted without legal representation" (p. 50) and also that the young ones were repeatedly kept in isolation and "they remained in detention the longest," and "as the older comrades were released, these youths were left behind" (p. 80).

The testimony of the Detainees' Parents Support Committee (DPSC) expands the idea of the entire nation of South Africa as a "larger prison." Detention is designed to break down communal loyalty through trauma and to then use feelings of guilt and isolation to create informers. The DPSC further describes detentions as hostage-taking, a function of collective punishment, and states that some of the ugliest actions occur in the rural areas and homelands where the acts receive little publicity and the people have limited access to support. This statement by the DPSC is important because it deals directly with one of the most vicious aspects of current apartheid: the increasing number of "disappearances" and assassinations by death squads.

The list goes on: Don Foster, Professor in Psychology at the University of Cape Town, tersely sets out the main types of torture used on detainees and the goals of this activity, while Dr. Wendy Orr discusses medical ethics and the international medical community, wondering why Dr. Lang (instrumental in Steve Biko's death) has been promoted, and why South Africa is still permitted to be a member of the World Medical Association. The section on "Exile and Escaping from Apartheid" involves the international medical community because there is an increasing number of traumatized South African exiles all over the globe. Dr. Freddy Reddy, a psychiatrist in exile who works with the children who come out, vividly describes the process of exile:

The child...has no papers of identification, may be wounded through torture, depressed by losing his parents, or not giving

parents information about his whereabouts, not taking farewell from his mother or his brothers and sisters. He is in flight, continuously in a state of anxiety...waiting to reach an unknown destination, not knowing whether he is going to meet friends or foes, not knowing whether he is going to be arrested by police, not knowing whether he is going to die on this journey (p. 94).

Not surprisingly, the explosion of Soweto in 1976 occurred in the black schools. Black education, as the National Education Crisis Committee (NECC) report describes, historically was designed to serve the needs of white society. The report states clearly that apartheid education has an adverse effect on whites, too, deforming their understanding of their own society and their ability to see true black living conditions. The NECC (now banned) describes its inception and history, a catalogue of aborted discussions with the stated educational apparatus, and of detentions and disruptions -- another chronicle of the government's refusal to listen to significant, organized groupings of the South African people.

The final section, the "International Law of Human Rights," connects the crime of apartheid with the notion of crimes against humanity and with the Nuremberg statutes. Richard Falk extends the discussion into the concept of assaults on children as a new "crime of state." Here he briefly introduces the text of Article 19 of the Draft Convention on the Rights of the Child being prepared by the United Nations. He mentions the use of "clients" by powerful states as a means of getting around domestic or international legal barriers and discusses the process for people of a country to reclaim the law when the state has perverted the law. He argues that international law "permits law to be reclaimed by the people of South Africa and elsewhere as an instrument of their struggle." Further, he states that

the struggle against apartheid has become the first shared global enterprise on behalf of human rights and in opposition to official racism....The way we respond as individuals and societies to the international call to end apartheid tests our humanity in this last portion of the century in a manner that is true of no other issue. We can no longer turn away without ourselves suffering adverse consequences (p. 121).

This idea of international culpability in allowing such state abuses to occur is a timely interjection of ethics into the international arena.

Nicolas Haysom describes a "process of pacification by war" in South Africa (which, nevertheless, defines itself as a democracy). Here, legal process and legal supervision are excluded from the exercise

of emergency powers, which give members of the security forces immunity against their unlawful actions, thus "avoiding accountability to precise legal standards and procedure. This is a prescription for law and order without law" (p. 55). Haysom further describes the vigilantes, who enjoy "at least a license to operate provided by the police or the defence force," and are able to function outside the law, thus achieving an unimpeded level of violence and terror. However, this, and the continued assassination of people, is only "the tip of an iceberg of clandestine right-wing violence." The militarization of South Africa is given a giant boost by the little-known Joint Management Centres. These supersede the civic authority in certain ways because they are responsible only to the National Security Council and are regarded as the "most important decision-making body in the country."

Structural changes in South Africa, moving from the colonial-inherited infrastructure to the current highly repressive state machinery, are not so well understood by ordinary people in western countries, although their well-informed governments choose to turn a blind eye. This is because in western countries themselves, domestic opposition is increasingly being controlled using the argument of external security threats among the domestic population, which enable governments to employ broader powers of local control than people who see themselves as democratic will normally tolerate. This 'subversion' concept manipulates vague, alarmist terms such as 'terrorism' and 'communism' and is a convenience for the political interest of western governments as well as governments like South Africa.

Frank Chikane refers to this process when he describes the 1977 Defence White Paper and P.W. Botha's concept of a total onslaught from beyond South Africa's borders:

This 'total onslaught' needed a 'total national strategy....' The 'total onslaught' which South Africa was said to be facing was presented as a communist conspiracy.... This formulation has two advantages for white South Africa. Firstly, it allows all criticism of apartheid to be dismissed as communist. Secondly, it creates a condition which makes both white South Africans and the West see South Africa as the last bastion against communism, the protector of Western Christian values. It created a serious contradiction for the West, so that any attacks on apartheid by them would be said to be of assistance to the Soviet Union (p. 29).

It is this tendency in the West which has enabled South Africa's war on children to endure so long. The argument that the external threats of communism and terrorism have corrupted the children enables the South African forces to arrest entire schools. It gives the illusion of

legality to the government coercive machinery because it uses language that western governments have made familiar, even comfortable, to their own citizens.

Francis Meli of the ANC addressed this issue in a speech in Los Angeles in which he said that it was not a case of "helping those poor South Africans." The States of Emergency show that South Africans are helping themselves. However, they are also liberating others (the West) by laying bare the sustained nature of western support for the South African regime. The notion that our freedoms are interdependent reveals apartheid as merely an extreme version of a disease already entrenched in the West.

Exposure of this contradiction helps to correct the skillful propaganda about external threats to South Africa put out for Western consumption by the South African regime. The political analysis that accompanies the testimonials in *Children of Resistance* is an essential part of this demystification effort. Throughout the book there is constant reminder of the role of South African government policy in what is occurring. In the face of such accusation by so many civilians, responsible community leaders and professionals, and given the stature and credibility of their international supporters, it would be very difficult for the South African regime to claim that it acts in the interests of its people. *Children of Resistance* shows yet again that this regime is unquestionably at war with its own people.