The history of the international anti-apartheid movement (AAM) has already been established as a recognized field of research as several conferences on the subject have shown,[1] and as the South African president has stated.[2]

It is necessary to record the history of anti-apartheid movements in Nordic countries, but it is probably even more important for the peoples of Southern Africa to have access to these records to be able to understand their own history; this history is also part of their national heritage. For people in South Africa who for generations were denied their own history, as well as access to the history of the solidarity with their struggles, the history of the anti-apartheid movement takes on profound importance.[3]

Policies and debates about possible intervention strategies were a long-term issue in Danish foreign policy. For over thirty years, from 1960 to 1994, Southern Africa was a matter of concern, discussion, initiatives and efforts both for small groups of grassroots activists and for large-scale activist movements, for press coverage, and in periods of heated debate in parliament.

Christopher Morgenstierne’s book constitutes the Danish part of the large-scale project on Nordic solidarity history by the Nordic Africa Institute (NAI): “National Liberation in Southern Africa: The Role of the Nordic Countries.” Both researchers and librarians at the NAI in Uppsala, Sweden, have a long tradition of dealing with the history of solidarity.[4] With Tor Sellström as the coordinator, the institute has published a comprehensive book series on Nordic solidarity with Southern Africa.[5] Morgenstierne’s book concludes this series.

The foreign ministries of the different Nordic countries have officially funded the research projects behind all of these books and the researchers have had access to official, classified material. Furthermore, the authors themselves can draw on their own experiences in solidarity work. As I see it, however, the coordination of this series has been less successful than the coordinator’s own research. The format and the extent of the different contributions are rather dissimilar. On the other hand, there were real differences in the historical and foreign policy settings of the Nordic countries and these clear variations are presented in these books.

Even more than the other books, Morgenstierne’s rather slim account of Danish solidarity history restricts its discussion to the treatment of domestic political issues. The brief descriptions of the relationship with the national liberation movements in southern Africa leave out many of the more problematic and sensitive issues. Developments in southern Africa do not form a topic of analysis in their own right in the book. The liberation movements and their representatives hardly figure as agents of history in this account, nor do the liberation movement’s internal problems come into view.[6] In fact, the author clearly states that this is not the aim of the book.

The Danish resistance against the German occupation during the Second World War is seen by the author as a starting point for the tradition of solidarity with anti-colonial and anti-racist struggles, while the country’s NATO membership obviously was a restraining factor compared to Sweden’s neutral situation. After the consumer boycott initiatives against apartheid of the early 1960s, Danish official involvement was to a large extent centered around the budgetary “Apartheid Appropriation” that was institutionalized by parliamentary decision in 1965 and rose to considerable amounts in the following years. The funds were expended mainly via Danish and international NGOs and other agencies, while a rather
modest institutionalized Foreign Ministry “Apartheid Committee” also dealt with applications and project proposals.

Danish official interventions against apartheid took two forms. First, trade, diplomatic, cultural, and sports sanctions came rather late. The other, more constant, form of Danish intervention was that of support to refugees, scholarship funds, and humanitarian organizations. In a formal sense, this support was more humanitarian than political and it went to education, to health activities and to construction and other support of refugee camps. And the practice of this support was that a Danish or international NGO was the project holder administrating the support and carrying out activities. At times, this was in collaboration with a national liberation movement, but Danish funding was never given in cash to such a movement.[7]

The official policies of support were, from the mid-1960s, mainly laid out by Social Democratic foreign ministers and were not changed fundamentally in periods when liberal administrations were in power. One reason for this, according to Morgenstierne, was the separation between the administration of the support on humanitarian grounds on one side, and the political debate on the other. In this the author finds a “flexible response.” The rationale behind this, I think, is typical of social democratic tactics fixed on parliamentary constellations.

Only from the mid-1980s had the popular anti-apartheid movement grown strong enough to push further and influence the middle ground of the Danish political scene. NGO and trade union activity stopped the huge import of South African coal for Danish power plants. From 1986, Denmark was the first Western country to impose very restrictive unilateral trade sanctions against South Africa. In some limited areas of politics the conservative-liberal minority government faced a united opposition majority in parliament. It was this majority that forced sanctions through and Morgenstierne is probably right in suspecting that this political change would have been harder to achieve had the social democrats been responsible for government instead of being in opposition.

Morgenstierne outlines Danish policies, building his project on several years of research in the archives of the Danish Foreign Ministry and in Danish NGO archives. The critical use of the source material is solid and many well-defined, if limited, conclusions are made. Morgenstierne’s research results include a chronological account of Danish anti-apartheid aid and he outlines interesting connections between the different kinds of support. However, Morgenstierne’s use of selected sources has steered the investigation rather too narrowly. Moreover, the author’s broad political outlook on the wider public debate is not very convincing. Only a few connections are drawn to broader Danish political reality and almost none to the actual situation in Southern Africa. The author makes a clear distinction between popular boycotts and official sanctions. Heavy weight is placed on foreign ministry initiatives whereas other reasons for the breakthrough on sanctions policy get fewer pages. He focuses objectively and adequately on official foreign policy of the 1960s and 1970s, but the important NGO campaigns of the 1980s remain somewhat under-researched in Danish solidarity history. The writing style at times is somewhat distant and objectivistic and the author does not really express his own commitment—although that might implicitly have been part of his contract.

In retrospect, everybody will agree that apartheid was a bad thing. Therefore, international solidarity with South Africa can today appear uncontroversial. Periodically, it was actually a rather unproblematic and rewarding task to raise public opinion on this issue. Support was easy to mobilize just after the Sharpeville massacre in 1960, and after the Soweto uprising in 1976 and the murder of Steve Biko in 1977. The suppression of the township rebellions in the mid-80s was also met by broad condemnation all over the world. But to maintain a sustainable movement for support over long periods of time from the 1950s to 1990s, often in the face of pressure from established circles, demanded great persistence.

The development of a historiography of solidarity has just begun. After the victory over an evil and powerful regime, anti-apartheid veterans who had engaged in the struggle through many years of hardship might feel a justified need for enjoying the sweetness of triumph, and it has to be said that some of the internal accounts of the freedom struggle and solidarity history have been rather uncritical. Others, like Morgenstierne’s, on the other hand, have had an artificial “objective” approach or have applied a purely empirical methodology. Critical research in this field has barely started and the writing of this history in itself can be seen as an ongoing form of solidarity that is still needed. Even after these three books from The Nordic Africa Institute, there are still his-
stories left to be written, and they will not necessarily be simple ones since there were divisions within the AAMs, Western governments, and the African National Congress (ANC) itself. For instance, it is my impression that the Nordic organizations, especially the Danish, were somewhat more independent in their relations with the ANC than the British AAM.

As in the Danish case, social movement activists often have tended to frame their demands in national terms as a way to appeal to policymakers. Even the researcher is often stuck in a tradition of nationalism or localism. However, in many cases, the persistence of national identities within global social movements may not reflect national limits to activists’ visions, but simply a realistic understanding that the institutional frameworks through which political aspirations must be channeled are still primarily national ones. In a world where global goals often still must be met through national states, activists may think globally, but act locally, working in both spheres, using both identities simultaneously and strategically, as for instance Abdul Minty has expressed his role as an exile and leading member of the British AAM.[8]

The anti-apartheid movement of the 1970s and 1980s was a truly transnational social movement. Yet what was it actually that enabled the anti-apartheid movement’s comparatively small organizations, which for most of their existence were rather unpopular in government corridors of power, to be capable of exerting considerable international influence? As Ann Seidman has documented, activists developed a global anti-racist identity that transcended, even challenged, state borders. Participation in the movement changed the way many activists viewed politics at home and added a global dimension to discussions over any kind of discrimination.[9] Kader Asmal, a founder member of both the British and later Irish AAM and a Minister of Education in post-apartheid South Africa, has pointed to some of the same reasons for the strength of the anti-apartheid movement.[10]

One source of this strength was the relationship between the national AAMs and the freedom movement within South Africa. Although they had a special relationship with the ANC, the AAMs were neither conceived of, nor did they act as, exclusively ANC support groups. The Danish South Africa Committees, for instance, on several occasions stressed their independence to the local ANC office. The AAMs were regarded as national NGOs even if in many respects the AAMs were actually part of the liberation of Southern Africa. Most AAMs showed determination to ensure that they had a broad domestic appeal. The AAMs’ essential quality was to be mass movements inside their own country. From the beginning, their aim was to educate people about the evils of apartheid.

The International Defence and Aid Fund was set up in England for this purpose. As Morgenstierne proves, it was one of the most important sources for Nordic government funding during apartheid, despite the fact that it also worked to expose the hypocritical duplicity of Western governments. Guided by considerations for the domestic business community and strategic interests, governments continued to give practical support to apartheid in the form of trade. Working for sanctions therefore was another essential element in the international anti-apartheid movement’s strategy.

Morgenstierne’s work can hardly stand alone, but should be valued in the light of other Danish contributions in this area. In a recent book in Danish, Patrick Mac Manus, a former chairperson of the Danish Anti-Apartheid Movement[11] has stated that LSA/SAK found itself in a “distributing frame” between the irritability and aversion of the established political system and the strains stemming from the organization’s own wildly-growing, partly uncontrollable mobilization of engaged youth.[12] The activities of the movement alternated between the levels of the desk and of the street, between blockades and conferences, between the paroles of street theater and substantial approaches to government. The aim was to bring the liberation struggle into ordinary peoples’ everyday lives by creating a broad form of participation that exceeded the narrow forms of the traditional political system. Mac Manus estimates that the movement succeeded in the sense that only very few Danes were not moved by the basic optimism of the freedom struggle and international solidarity. The detection work and later the supervision of sanctions (a task the Danish government did not perform) required skills in statistics, business accounting, and corporate structures.

Even if there was broad understanding for actions that aimed to discredit any kind of support to the illegitimate South African regime, it was the clear desire of the Danish anti-apartheid movement committee to avoid forms of action that, if generalized, could have isolated the movement. This often became a theme of
discussion between leadership and activists. Also the contrast between those that favored political broadness, the common touch, and real influence and those that pursued socialist perspectives and the widening of the anti-apartheid agenda to support other kinds of liberation movements or the saving the world in general, lead to internal conflicts. Lack of patience and expressionistic attitudes to politics among the activists sometimes put the leadership in the role of a social worker. In its precise aims and means, the solidarity organizations had to be very focused. Their objective was to undermine illegitimate power structures of state and capital, not to destroy the basis of life for the people. In the case of SAK/LSA in Denmark, undisciplined protests in 1989 gave the right wing an excuse for demanding severe counter action; at one point, twenty-one members of the movement were arrested in a police raid and the police tried to use harsh internal security laws.

A somewhat different view on the Danish AAM can be found in a conference paper by Steen Christensen entitled “The Danish Debate on Support to the African Liberation Movements.”[13] Based on his long experience as an international social democratic leader, Christensen’s centrist position places the subject of solidarity in a Cold War context. It is useful to be reminded how late in the stage for the struggle for democracy that liberal and conservative parties were against any kind of efficient support for the anti-apartheid process. Like Morgenstierne, Christensen emphasizes parliamentary politics. Hence the importance of grassroots organizations might be somewhat underestimated, which could also be the case with the debate over sanctions and the role of the Danish left in this political struggle against de facto private sector support of apartheid. Christensen’s pragmatic realism does not highly value leftist idealism as a factor in the mobilization of the liberation struggle, which might help to explain the rather unobtrusive role of the Danish social democrats in the important area of popular street-based solidarity work.

An entirely different interpretation can be read into a contribution to the same conference by Morten Nielsen. Nielsen writes from his background as long-time leader and organizer in the, at times, very strong Danish anti-apartheid movement. Nielsen offers a rather rough debating piece from the grassroots level.[14] He has the audacity to ask some inconvenient questions, which official interpretations and most media have allowed us to forget under the “hail-fellow-well-met” attitudes prominent after the new regime was installed in South Africa. Against his background as an activist, Nielsen provides a range of strategic explanations as to why the solidarity movement managed to get broad popular support, and he throws light on the consequences of the small-minded tactical considerations of the Danish political parties. Nielsen seems to think that others have stolen the palm of victory in the anti-apartheid struggle, which ought to belong to the popular movements. This kind of mistrust is quite normal in post-conflict situations, and in this case is at least partly justified. In my conversations with certain people from the Danish Foreign Ministry and the Danish social democratic labor movement, their role in the liberation of Southern Africa often seems rather exaggerated.

However no single agent can claim ownership over history, and that goes for the solidarity movements too. Without the long term structural changes in South Africa and abroad, which brought parts of business into opposition to apartheid, and without Gorbachev’s dismantling of the threat of offensive communism, the national compromise that constituted victory over apartheid would have been far from certain.

An issue not treated by Morgenstierne or any of the other authors in the NAI book series is subsequent post-1990 transitional aid. After 1990–and especially after 1994–political solidarity changed to other, more official and direct forms of aid, even if many of the former international anti-apartheid organizations continued their activities as private aid organizations, consultants, friendship societies, contact organs, or service providers.[15]

> From time to time, official interest from the wider world in the new South Africa has been rather high. From the Nordic Countries, this official interest has at times been marked by a turbid compound of philanthropic aid and business interests.[16] During the transformation process under which the former liberation movement consolidated its power over society, the Nordic governments succeeded in establishing support by following up earlier forms of popular solidarity with a policy of ongoing aid and by pointing out their own national merits in a favorable light. The NAI book series should also be assessed against this background. Goodwill was extended, which has already been shown to be worth its weight in gold. This development has hardly been to the disadvantage of South Africa, but it has probably been even better for the donor countries, representing a kind of
“Janus Head” of solidarity.[17] In situations when the level of aid for Southern Africa appears to be rather modest, a strategy where the proud traditions of earlier times are used to complement the image of the donor countries might be to their advantage.

In solidarity history, it has already been shown that it is possible to build the historical narrative, that the anti-apartheid support by the Nordic countries was especially protracted, loyal and heroic. Since there are also material interests behind this view, it must be the task of the critical social scientist to scrutinize this phenomenon.

The Nordic Five (including the Netherlands) were unique in the Western World in offering government funds for the liberation movements. This had great importance and was acknowledged in Southern Africa. Nevertheless, despite the fact that Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark can all call attention to particular areas where they came first with support for anti-apartheid activities, it was only after prolonged political pressure from domestic solidarity movements that the Nordic countries in the last few years before 1990 became genuine pioneers regarding sanctions policies against the apartheid regime. This change of policy, which domestic business opposed to the end, has, together with transitional aid, now been shown to be an asset for Nordic export industries.[18]

Trade delegations from Nordic countries headed by cabinet ministers and members of royal families repeatedly have visited the new South Africa to discuss the mix of aid and exports. Sometimes even former sanctions-breakers and de facto enemies of the freedom struggle have been embraced by the South African government in a way that distorts the history of solidarity.[19]

It is an intriguing question whether the documentation of the history of Nordic solidarity has played any role in the competition for export goodwill and political influence of small states. For some this might seem trivial, others might see it as pure speculation, but actually it is worth an independent historiographical study in its own right. For example, there were real differences in Danish and Swedish foreign policy. Sweden’s policy was more independent during the time of apartheid and still is. Sweden directly supported the ANC; Denmark only indirectly and discreetly. Moreover, Swedish aid follow-up has at times been substantial.[20] But there were also differences in the way in which history was used, in the possibilities, levels of consciousness, and resources allocated for the purpose.

Contributions to the Nordic solidarity history series from each individual country were funded by respective foreign ministries, but Sweden had the most glorious past, the most laurels to gain, and most money for the project. In short, the Swedes had a better opportunity for taking their history seriously. The product of the Norwegian part of the project is a good-quality anthology edited by the experienced Africanist Tore Linn Eriksen, which examines most sides of Norwegian support for Southern Africa.[21] The Finnish contribution is a decent empirical representation of the policy of that country.[22]

As I mentioned, Morgenstierne’s Danish contribution is limited in size and scope with its main emphasis on critical analysis of foreign ministry archives, while the strong Danish NGOs receive less attention. Danish voices later expressed the suspicion that the Swedish side of the project was not directly unsatisfied with the rather low Danish profile. Probably from the beginning there was a certain animosity or lack of interest in the Danish Foreign Ministry towards a project which partly consisted of the history of popular movements’ oppositional achievements.

Among the Swedes there was greater harmony between NGOs and the Foreign Affairs Department. The experienced and hard-working Swedish coordinator of the overall program was adequately financed over several years enabling him to focus mostly, and with good workmanship, on writing three quantitatively strong volumes as well as collecting a massive amount of archival material from the Swedish side.[23] The departmental intrigues which are likely to have surrounded this project will probably remain a mystery, but Danish frustration at being “taken hostage” in a joint Nordic institution, which they seemed unable to use in the same way as the Swedish part could,[24] was clearly expressed at the program’s conference at Robben Island.[25]

In October 2003, the results of the project were used once more at a conference on Swedish solidarity history organized, among others, by NAI, the Olof Palme International Centre and Swedish trade unions.[26] There is little doubt that the history of solidarity will be used intensively also after South Africa’s anniversary of 10 years of freedom, as happened at the celebratory AAM conference in Durban in October 2004.[27]

Against this background, there is a profound need
for some kind of continuation of the solidarity movement and for a continued engagement from the former activists in order to uphold the pressure for a fulfillment of the ideals of the liberation struggle. To relate openly to this is an important mission for solidarity history. Regardless of the setting and despite its shortcomings, Christopher Morgenstierne’s work must be respected as a valuable and useful contribution. As I see things however, it might have been a better solution if NAI and the Nordic governments had, to a greater degree, sponsored the efforts of former AAM activists to write their own independent histories. The book can be ordered directly from the homepage of the Nordic Africa Institute, which also provides a brief introduction to the work and its author.[28]

Notes
[1]. In this book review, I draw from a paper presented at the AAM Conference organized by the University of KwaZulu-Natal in October 2004: www.ukzn.ac.za/aam2004/AAMCONFpapers/Stolten,HE.doc


[4]. The Simons Papers, for example, now located at the University of Cape Town, were organized by Annica van Gyllswyk at NAI’s library. At the moment, NAI is building a database of the archives of the Nordic anti-apartheid NGOs.


[6]. See Reinhart Kessler’s review of the series, entitled “A Situation Where You Could Show Some Decency”: Nordic Relations to Liberation in Southern Africa,” written for a (hopefully) forthcoming NAI publication on Nordic solidarity history, on which I am working, at the moment, together with Henning Melber.

[7]. Morgenstierne’s summary of his work “African Freedom Struggle– in Denmark,” written for the same upcoming NAI publication mentioned in footnote 6.


[13]. Steen Christensen, “The Danish Debate on Support to the African Liberation Movements and the General Danish Political Debate in this respect,” paper presented at the conference Collective Memory and Present Day Politics in South Africa and the
Nordic Countries, Conference of Historians, Africanists and Development Researchers, Copenhagen August 22-23, 2002 organized by Hans Erik Stolten as part of an NAI project.


[17]. In 2002, Sweden, for instance, exported 3.31 billon rand to South Africa and imported 736 million rand, according to the South African Yearbook 2002-03, p. 333.

[18]. Udenrigsministeriet (Danish Foreign Ministry), Markedsorientering Sydafrika and Sydafrika Markedsprofil, 1995.

[19]. For example: Address of the President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki to the Chief Executive of the biggest Danish industrialist, AP Miler-Maersk, Jess Sderberg, at the opening of the South African Maritime Training Academy, Simonstown, September 9, 2003.

[20]. Take, for instance, the official state visit of the Swedish prime minister, where a jumbo jet was filled up with a delegation several hundreds strong and spearheaded by some of Sweden’s best pop-stars all of which appeared nevertheless as something of an overkill and partly a failure.


[22]. Soiri and Pekka Peltola, Finland and National Liberation in Southern Africa.


[24]. Even if NAI has a joint Nordic Program and Research Council, the Director and the Swedish Foreign Ministry are the ultimate decision makers.


[27]. The International Anti-Apartheid Conference, October 10-13 2004, in Durban was supported by the NAI.

[28]. See: www.nai. uu.se/webbshop/ShopSE/index.html


URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10573

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