

LFP/227/5171/9

Your Concern and Mine

The South African Treason Trial. By LIONEL FORMAN and SOLLY SACHS. *Calder*. 18s.

It is a familiar enough assumption that those who have lived in Africa for long are either so captivated by it that they become great bores in talking of its enchantments, or so alienated by its extremism that they never wish to hear it spoken of again. I belong, I'm afraid, inescapably to the first group. And for this reason I find myself sometimes frustrated, and often annoyed, when what seems to me a vitally important issue is either not understood or not even known to exist. This is very unfair of me, I know. For it is obvious that the Press in this country can only give to South African events the amount of space that their international importance warrants. News items from the Union have to compete with sputniks, Presidential malaises and Nato Conferences on equal terms. And so it is not surprising that, after the first few moments of excitement, news of the South African treason trial dwindled and disappeared into the dusk, even *before* those on trial had been able to make themselves heard.

It is for this reason, especially, that this first book about the trial is so greatly to be welcomed. For here, in concise form, and without the infringement of any *sub judice* regulations, is a history of the trial up to date. And, in addition to the history, a few chapters of great interest and significance on the background to the trial without which it would be hard for the outsider to understand what it is all about. In other words, if you haven't had time to read the Press reports, or if your memory is dim, or if you want to understand the realities of what is going on in that dusty drill-hall in Johannesburg, here is your book. It is written by two South Africans: one of whom is himself standing trial on a charge of high treason, the other (Solly Sachs) a political exile in this country, because of his courageous and persistent fight for a trade unionism free of the colour-bar. Both, therefore, are uniquely competent to write about their subject. But, necessarily, because they are in isolation from one another, there is a certain lack of unity in the book itself. It is also true to say that, just because Lionel Forman is a lawyer, there is a quality not quite of flesh and blood about some of the figures he describes. But what is lacking in 'roundness' is there in other ways, particularly in the general impression of the trial as seen from the prisoner's cage through all those weary hours and days and weeks and months of the

preparatory examination. And certainly for anyone who knows the South Africa of the past ten years or so, there is recaptured much more than this. There is, for instance, the kind of politeness one so often associated with the police: 'Don't threaten me!' he shouted. 'Just don't threaten me! You're just a prisoner like any other prisoner and I'll break your bloody neck!' Words familiar enough to the ears of an African schoolboy without a pass, or another detained in the charge-office and questioning the sergeant about his arrest, but on this occasion used in a European context. There is the recapitulation (so vivid to me) of those events—often taking place on a Sunday morning—in the Trades Hall at a Congress meeting, or in the open air on 'Freedom Square' before the blitz on Sophiatown. And, especially and uniquely alive to me, there is the description of that gala day at Kliptown when the 'Freedom Charter' (a copy of which, beautifully illuminated, hangs near my desk at Mirfield) was proclaimed and passed by a crowd which looked and felt more like Epsom on Derby-day than a gathering of political significance.

The book simply states facts, and is in large measure (as it must be) a summary of the deadly monotony of each day, broken occasionally by an outburst of temper or of laughter or of sheer fantasy. I wonder if there has ever been a trial in the British courts anywhere in the Commonwealth in which witness after witness has been compelled to admit that he does not understand the language he is using and (in one case) that he is a convicted fraud, using his very fraudulence to convict others?

But the purpose of the book is more important than the book itself. For it is designed to draw attention to these quite simple facts: First, that 156 citizens of the Commonwealth of South Africa were, at the time of writing, on trial for high treason: at this moment, after the release of 65, there are still 91. Secondly, that high treason (defined in Roman Dutch South African law in very wide terms) is a capital charge. Thirdly, that because the prisoners, although on bail, are tied hand, foot and finger to the courtroom, £100,000 is needed for their defence and the support of themselves and their families. (And the proceeds of the book's sale will go to the Christian Action Defence Fund.) Finally, that these prisoners (my personal friends in many cases) are your concern and mine, because, whatever the final result of the trial may be, it is the symbol of something infinitely grander than itself. It is the symbol of a South Africa standing at the point of no return. For if these prisoners are declared guilty, then to love freedom is treachery and to proclaim it is high treason. And we are their fellow-citizens in a multi-racial Commonwealth whose latest rallying-cry for Africa is Partnership. Partnership in *what*?

TREVOR HUDDLESTON

from your
newsagent

This England