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Obituary:

Neville Alexander (22 October 1936 – 27 August 2012)

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Neville Alexander, the South African revolutionary, educationist and acclaimed linguist, died in Cape Town, South Africa on 27 August 2012 following a long battle with cancer. He was 75. He was born in Cradock in the Cape Province. His maternal grandmother was a freed slave from Ethiopia, who was sent to South Africa. Neville attended a convent in Cradock, where he was taught by German nuns. He moved to Cape Town in 1953, where he enrolled for a BA at the University of Cape Town (UCT).

He was radicalised by contact with a teacher, Ronnie Britten, a member of the Teachers League of South Africa, an organisation affiliated to the Unity Movement of South Africa (UMSA). He joined the Peninsula Students Union, an affiliate of UMSA, where he was educated not only in the ideology of the national struggle but was introduced to the writings of Karl Marx and Leon Trotsky. He later enrolled for an MA degree at UCT, studying German and wrote a thesis on Silesian Baroque drama.

He won a scholarship to study at Tübingen University in Germany, where he joined the German Socialist Students' Union. Since UMSA had asked him to remain open to new ideas he made contacts with students from many parts of the world, including Algeria and Cuba. He witnessed the Sharpeville massacre from Germany. On his return to South Africa, he came into conflict with his comrades in UMSA when he began proposing the transposing of guerrilla warfare to South Africa. He was suspended from the organisation and together with Namibian activists founded the Yu Chi Chan Club and subsequently the National Liberation Front.

While these organisations discussed the overthrow of the state, concretely they did not engage in any overt acts against the state. By the end of 1963 their organisation was infiltrated by spies and a number of their members were detained, charged and convicted of conspiracy to commit sabotage. Neville Alexander was sentenced to ten years imprisonment on Robben Island. The savage sentences meted out to Alexander and his comrades provoked international condemnation. I. B. Tabata, President of UMSA, who was on a tour of the US, initiated the establishment of the Alexander Defence Committee (ADC) with the aim of providing funds for the legal defence and family support of political prisoners in South Africa. Several branches of the ADC were opened in Canada and across Europe.

Imprisonment on Robben Island brought Alexander into contact with leaders and members of the other organisations of the liberation movements. Although Nelson Mandela, was almost always the spokesperson for the prisoners to negotiate with the authorities, there was always a very democratic process to come to that decision beforehand. On Robben Island the prisoners educated themselves and Alexander had this to say about the process of education:

“We taught one another what we knew, discovering each other’s resourcefulness. We also learned how people with little or no formal education could not only themselves participate in education programmes but actually teach others a range of different insights and skills. The “University of Robben Island” was one of the best universities in the country. It also showed me that you don’t need professors’

In 1974, Alexander was released from prison, banned and placed under house arrest for 5 years. In 1977 Steve Biko, the leader of the Black Consciousness tried to meet Alexander in Cape Town as part of a process of building unity among the liberation movements. Alexander, because of the rigorous restrictions on his movements imposed by the authorities was unable to meet Biko and he regarded this failure to meet the Black Consciousness leader as “one of the most tragic moments in my life’ By the end of his house arrest in 1979 he had completed his book *One Azania. One Nation The National Question in South Africa*, the central theme of which is that any national movement

which has the wrong conception of who constitutes the nation of South Africa will flounder on the rock of opportunism. The book was widely discussed and raised much controversy.

Once his ban ended, Alexander restarted teaching at the UCT. He became involved in the South African Committee on Higher Education (SACHED), an important centre for alternative education and was appointed Cape Town director in 1980. The key idea behind this group was "Education for Liberation. In the early eighties, he also became associated with the Cape Action League and the National Forum, the latter was formed to co-ordinate opposition to the introduction of the tri-cameral constitution. On the language front, in 1989 he co-led a study which concluded that South Africa would remain a multi-lingual society in spite of the emergence of English as a national means of communication in a post-apartheid society. In 1990 he wrote a book "Education and the Struggle for National Liberation in South Africa" in which he reiterated that efforts put into education would lead to the liberation of South Africa.

In 1990 headed the Workers Organisation for Socialist Action (WOSA) which was created to promote working class interests. It advocated working class leadership, anti-imperialism and anti-racism. It was one of the most prominent organisations in South Africa to identify with the theory of permanent revolution. WOSA participated in the first democratic elections in 1994 from which the ANC was to emerge triumphant.

In 1993, Alexander was made director of the Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa. This independent research development unit in July 1994 organised the first national conference on primary school curriculum initiatives with a series of proposals made to the government to reform the educational system. In 1996, a committee chaired by Alexander was put up to prepare a blueprint for language planning, which was submitted to the Minister for Arts, Culture, Science and Technology in 1996. He became a member on the interim board of the African Academy of Languages (ACALAN), which was founded to be the official language policy and planning agency of the African Union. In 2004 he co-chaired a newly-created Steering Committee for the implementation of the Language Plan of Action for Africa in Yaounde, Cameroon. The goal of this plan was - and still is - to establish a reference frame to assess all governmental interventions pertaining to language infrastructure.

Neville Alexander delivered the fourth Strini Moodley Annual Memorial Lecture at the University of KwaZulu, Natal in May 2010. Strini Moodley was a leader of the Black Consciousness Movement. He concluded the lecture as follows "I think I have spoken and speak, in the spirit of Strini Moodley and his comrades when I express the hope that we will find unity in action even as we try to find new ways of seeing the struggle for another world and another South Africa." The revolutionary thinking and passion that pervaded Neville Alexander's life is evident when reading through that address which you can read at <http://socialistresistance.org/?p=3878>