

REVIEW OF WIKIPEDIA ARTICLE

Reviewer: Steven Friedman

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Title of article: Oliver Tambo

This article is a poor and at times misleading portrayal of a key figure in the African National Congress's fight against apartheid.

While the article gives a skeleton summary of Tambo's life, it barely mentions that he was the President of the ANC during much of its period in exile and thus a pivotal figure. It also barely mentions his close relationship with Nelson Mandela and the role which the two of them played in turning the ANC from an ineffectual organisation which relied mainly on pleading with the white government to one which mobilised against it and ultimately played a key role in its defeat. It eccentrically devotes considerable space to the fairly unimportant links between the ANC and the Italian town Reggio Emilia and ignores three decades of international action against the apartheid government.

The quality of the article is substantially worsened by the fact that it concentrates almost exclusively on Tambo's role in 'terrorist activity' – this manages to convey the impression that he was primarily engaged in acts of violence. This is a gross distortion. While it is possible (not certain, as the article suggests) that Tambo did, in his capacity as ANC president, need to approve acts of violence, he was never in direct control of the ANC's military wing. His role was political and portraying him in this light is a little like portraying the President of a country which went to war as a soldier. In effect, one of the key influences on the thinking of the ANC from the 1940s to his death in the early 1990s is turned into a violent bomb thrower who had nothing else to offer. In reality, Tambo played a similar role to Mandela in fashioning ANC strategy and ensuring that it fought against a system rather than against white people.

It is also difficult to understand the article's choice of subject matter. Having ignored Tambo's contribution to the ANC almost entirely, it reports that he did badly in a poll of largely white television viewers conducted by the national public broadcaster. Why is this of greater interest than his position on non-racialism or his contribution to ANC tactics or his influence on Mandela and other key ANC figures? Why is it more important than the fact that he was head of the ANC when the first contacts between it and the apartheid government occurred in the mid-1980s (Mandela was then in prison and so unable to contribute much to ANC strategy)?

The fact that the article fails to provide an understanding of Tambo which would be taken seriously by anyone who is knowledgeable about the ANC is perhaps not surprising since the article pays no attention to any of the published material on the ANC and on Tambo. Besides ignoring Tambo's biography, it plays no attention to the wide range of literature on the ANC during the exile period which would provide insight into Tambo and his role. Oddly, it doesn't even bother to consult Mandela's Long Walk to Freedom and its insights on Tambo.

There are many references which could contribute to an adequate article – only a few are mentioned here:

Luli Callinicos - Oliver Tambo: Beyond the Engeli Mountains

Nelson Mandela - Long Walk to Freedom

Hugh Macmillan The Lusaka Years: The ANC in Exile in Zambia

Patti Waldmeir - Anatomy of a Miracle: The End of Apartheid and the Birth of the New South Africa

Scott Thomas – The Diplomacy of Liberation: The Foreign Relations of the ANC Since 1960