

### A CHAIN OF VOICES

André Brink

Faber & Faber, 1982; hardback £7.95  
ISBN 0 57111 874 7

Brink is concerned with the ways in which history is made, with the effect an individual can have upon it and with the limitations placed by it upon the exercise of individual will. In his most recent novel, *A Chain of Voices*, he sets out to investigate the clash between two histories, that of the Afrikaaner and that of the black slave.

The novel is set in 1825, a time when the Afrikaaner farmers felt themselves threatened by the growing jurisdiction of the English from the Cape. Rumours that they will be forced by the English to free their slaves create a general tension in both Afrikaaner and slave communities and drive the Afrikaaners to extremes of cruelty in attempts to shore up the power that they feel is being undermined.

*A Chain of Voices* is Brink's most ambitious novel to date, with the consciousness of each character, black and white, female and male, explored in turn. The chain of events that leads to tragedy is centred on two characters, Nicolaas van der Merwe and Galant his slave. Galant is the most powerfully expressive of all the characters, the metaphors he uses reverberating

with repressed passion, while Nicolaas tries feebly to recreate the golden age of childhood equality that Galant has learnt is only a figment of the white imagination.

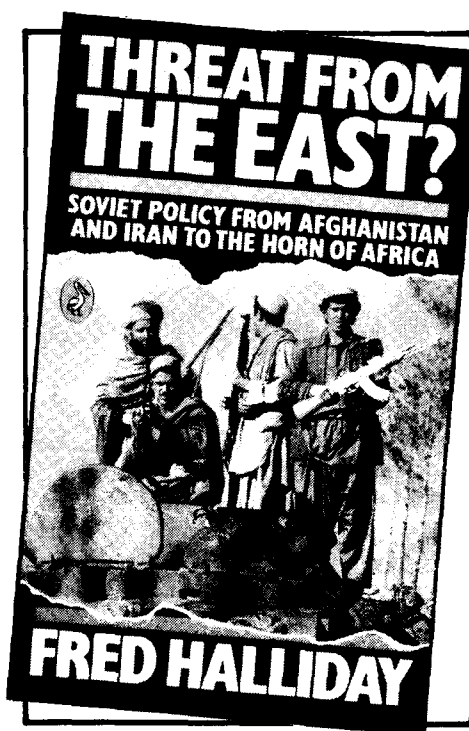
Yet while Brink's concern is to investigate the particular relations of power between white and black and man and woman, his undeniably powerful analysis is weakened by a central, unquestioned belief.

As in his other historical novel, *An Instant in the Wind*, the sexual act between white woman and black man takes place outside history and politics; it is expressive of a sentimental wish towards union of black and white and in both cases, despite a careful investigation of all other aspects of the relationship, it remains unconvincing. In both cases, too, the results of such a union fall outside the time-span of the novel: the sexual act is presented as a whole in itself, ahistorical, transcendental and perfect. So, in *A Chain of Voices*, the vigorous articulation

of each character in the face of the historical circumstances that both forge and constrain their individual consciousnesses, is undermined by being put in opposition to a sexual act that is essentially free of both speech and conflict, and that recreates the golden age that elsewhere Brink has shown to be a sentimental dream.

*A Chain of Voices* is a powerful depiction of a period in the history of South Africa. It shows the roots of the conflict between Afrikaaner and English and the ultimate irrelevance of that conflict to the black majority. Both aspects are important for an understanding of present day South Africa. Yet the vision at the core of *A Chain of Voices* reduces the conflict between historical forces to one between individuals who are unable to communicate. Brink has produced a powerful and gripping historical novel, but he has not produced a political one.

Sarah Lefanu



### THREAT FROM THE EAST?

Fred Halliday

Pelican, 1982 pbk £1.75  
0 1402 2448

After his valuable studies of social and political change in the Arabian peninsula, Iran, and Ethiopia<sup>1</sup>, Fred Halliday takes up the question of the impact made by Soviet foreign policy on events throughout this Arc of Crisis that curves from Afghanistan through

the Middle East to the Horn of Africa. As the title indicates, he builds his analysis round an examination of Reagan's extravagant claim that 'The Soviet Union underlies all the unrest that is going on. If they weren't engaged in this game of dominoes, there wouldn't be any hot spots in the world'.

I thought Halliday's polemical device of 'knocking down an aunt sally' cramped his analysis considerably. Even though the reds-under-the-bed claim is a standard propaganda line against any attempt, foreign or domestic, to change the established order, it does not form the substance of serious foreign policy analysis by the US administration, let alone by experienced West European governments which are more realistic in their assessments. True to character, this aunt sally is not a worthy target for sustained attack. Moreover, by assembling his arguments to 'knock down' the view that the Soviet Union is a threat to Western interests, he is diverted from developing a more rounded and positive critique of 'the connection between regional political developments and Soviet policy in the area' which he claims as his central theme.

The book is, however, a rich cornucopia of firsthand information on events and policies in a part of the world which has become a focus of the new 'cold war'. It is, of course, a great pity that Halliday was not able to draw on a study of the Palestinians, similar to his

<sup>1</sup> *Arabia without Sultans*, 1975; *Iran: Dictatorship and Development*, 1979; *Revolution in Ethiopia*, 1982.

extensively researched studies of the four Arc countries 'that are normally singled out as cases of Soviet instigation', in view of their crucial role in the area. From his empirical analysis Halliday concludes that, although the Soviet Union acts in its own interests as a major world power, it cannot be regarded as a threat to Western interests; firstly, because domestic factors have been the main cause of political upheaval in the Arc and, secondly, because the Soviet Union has largely failed to win reliable allies there. He further concludes that, on the contrary, it is the United States which is the chief external catalyst of popular explosions of 'unrest'.

Though Halliday views the Soviet Union's role in the Arc of Crisis more sympathetically than that of the United States, he tends to equate the role of the two superpowers both in attempting to extend their influence in the region and in dangerously exaggerating each other's influence. Certainly he does not see the source of conflict as basically a confrontation between imperialism and national liberation within the capitalist world system, on the one hand, and between imperialism and socialism, on the other. Indeed, he is critical of 'vulgar Marxist explanations of American foreign policy in terms of a quest for raw materials and markets' and of 'persistent left wing and Third World exaggeration of the role of the United States', and he seems uncertain whether 'the USSR is a 'socialist' country in any precise sense of that word'. This lack of theoretical definition weakens his analysis, in my opinion, though it is understandable in view of the paucity of up-to-date Marxist analysis of neo-imperialism and 'actually existing' socialism on which political writers like Halliday can draw.

While it is true that policy decisions in the Arc now have a predominantly national basis, the context in which they are taken has been historically shaped by imperialism which still exercises immense economic and

military power through the role played by Western governments and multinationals in the production, purchase, and sale of oil, the recycling of oil funds, technology exports, arms sales, and military bases. Their support for reactionary regimes has been and still is a key factor adversely affecting the domestic balance of class forces. The creation of Israel in Palestine, as a direct consequence of anti-semitism in Europe, and its development as an economic and military strongpoint for neo-imperialism has been a determinant factor impeding the Palestinians' right to nationhood, in particular, and Arab national independence, in general. Thus, imperialism is still a fundamental cause of conflict in the Arc.

To be sure, a new historical element of nationalist conflict between nation states and within nations has now emerged in this region, as in other parts of the Third World, as the Pax Imperialistica has become weaker in the 1970s. This represents a stage of development comparable to that of 19th century Europe but exacerbated by the existence of the two world systems of imperialism and socialism.

In the basic confrontation between imperialism and national liberation, the Soviet Union as a socialist country is a natural ally against imperialism and yet Halliday asserts, correctly, that it has won few permanent allies. This, however, misses the fundamental point that the Soviet Union has at times been able to give crucial assistance to those fighting to achieve national liberation, from Nasser's Egypt to the Palestinians. In this sense, the Soviet Union is a threat — to imperialist interests — from the East! Certainly some Soviet acts of intervention in Third World affairs have alienated potential allies for socialism, but the main reason why the Soviet Union's alliances have proved temporary or limited is because the Arc countries have in the end opted for continued incorporation in the capitalist world system rather than for socialism.

The expulsion of the Palestinians from Lebanon by Israel with the passive acquiescence of the Arab states and the negotiation of at least a temporary solution to the crisis by the United States to the total exclusion of the Soviet Union has marked the end of an era of postwar hopes — and in too many cases illusions — that the rising tide of national liberation would lead to socialism. To my mind, the persisting strength of imperialism is well demonstrated by Britain's ability both to accommodate aspirations within the capitalist world system — example, Carrington's initiative on recognition of the PLO — and to mount a show of strength — example, the successful Falklands exercise in organising a 'rapid deployment force' as the modern instrument of gunboat diplomacy.

Perhaps the Arc will cease for a period to be a focus of the new cold war? International tension has only developed when conflict within the capitalist world system has also involved a clash between imperialism and socialism in active alliance with forces opposed to imperialism, and has only reached the state of threatening a third world war when there has been a 'defection' — or the perceived possibility of one — from capitalism: Korea, Nasser's Egypt, Vietnam, Cuba. Quite evidently, there has been no such state of tension over the Israeli invasion of Lebanon — nor, indeed, over the Falklands. (There is no symmetry between the systems, it appears, since East-West tension did not become critical when internal political developments in Poland in 1981 could have led to the restoration of capitalism if martial law had not been imposed.) Now that the process of national liberation has largely run its course, with the important exceptions of Palestine and Namibia, the new stage of political liberation and economic development will present new challenges to imperialism and capitalism and to Soviet foreign policy.

Jenny Warren

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