

Molodoi Malady

The Komsomol (Soviet Young Communist League) is 70. Born of revolutionary élan in November 1918 as a 'fully independent organisation' based on the principle of 'complete freedom of action', it vied for youth favours with surviving organisations like the YMCA, Boy Scouts and Jewish Maccabee.

By the early 1920s it had the field to itself (all its rivals being banned) and was tied hand and foot to the Communist Party, which appointed YCL leaders at all levels and used it as a transmission belt for its policies. If that weren't enough to ensure control, the Party arbitrarily removed Komsomol leaders whenever it wished, including the mass arrest and execution of virtually the entire Komsomol leadership during the Stalin purges.

Of the first seven Komsomol leaders, six were shot and one spent 16 years in a labour camp: an appalling fact that has only just been revealed in the Komsomol monthly *Molodoi Komsomol*.

Today the Komsomol is in crisis, a victim of *perestroika*. Accused by many, including party leaders and its own members, of being full of cynical young careerists and privileged bureaucrats, its leader Victor Mironenko admits that 'no one believes in the Komsomol any more'. It has lost 4m members in the last couple of years.

For long the Komsomol had a monopoly of state facilities for youth activities – the media, club premises, sports amenities and theatres – so it was only possible for young people to engage in non-approved activities by setting up an unlawful club and meeting clandestinely. That is precisely what has been happening over recent years.

The Komsomol, therefore, is increasingly being pushed to the margins of Soviet society, becoming a sort of atheistic Scout-Guide group. Whether it will regain authority will depend on Komsomol leaders being able to champion the ideas and causes that inspire youngsters today. ●

Jim Riordan

Beating The Bans

November's launch of the latest alternative South African newspaper, coming as it does hard on the heels of the closure of a fellow independent weekly, seems to point to a headstrong, even foolhardy, determination to find the cracks in PW Botha's armour of press law.

The *Vrye Weekblad* (Independent Weekly), the first Afrikaans newspaper to declare its commitment to 'a non-racial, democratic and united South Africa', seeks to attract the readership of those swelling numbers of Afrikaners it believes are losing faith in their apartheid government.

If it succeeds, it could complement the Johannesburg-based *Weekly Mail*, which is largely targeted at the English speaking, liberal to left market. But the odds are stacked against it; white Afrikaners have displayed a determined shift to the right in recent local elections, and the *Weekly Mail* was recently banned for four weeks.

The *Vrye Weekblad*, and other alternative newspapers like it, are ranged against a government that has the power to ban any publication for up to three months if, in the opinion of the relevant government minister, it promotes organisations like the outlawed African National Congress, or if it encourages what he believes is 'subversive activity' – including civil disobedience, strikes or general disorder. Discretion lies entirely with the minister, and he is obliged only to serve two warning notices prior to banning.

Weekly Mail's banning was the third; *New Nation*, the 35,000-circulation, black-readership weekly, and *South*, The Cape Town-based, working-class newspaper, have both suffered three-month bans.

Since the press restrictions were made law in August 1987, official warnings have come thick and fast. Recipients

have included a small Eastern Cape community newsletter, an academic journal and the organ of the anti-military conscription movement. The effect has been to provoke a nationwide 'Hands Off The Press' campaign, an international outcry and renewed determination by alternative newspapers and their teams of lawyers to find loopholes in the law. But it has also resulted in some inevitable pre-publication censorship; a three-month closure could spell financial defeat for any newspaper lacking large-scale economic backing.

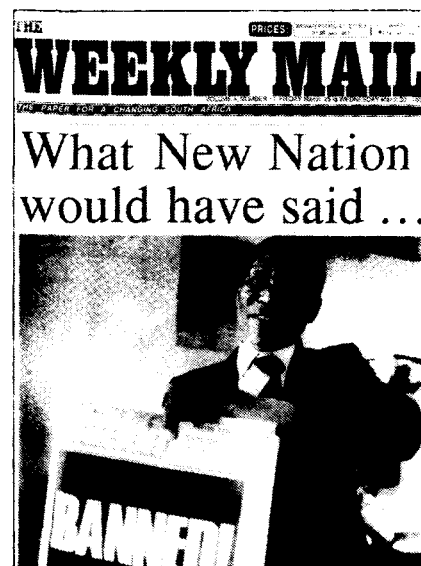
South Africa's alternative press – a broad term loosely referring to a range of newspapers, news agencies, magazines and community, student, trade union and church publications – are distinguished from the mainstream press by their independence from major commercial interest groups.

Innovations in newspaper technology, which introduced desktop publishing and laser printing, brought the production process within the reach of small, undercapitalised groups.

The alternative press emerged partly in response to the growing monopolisation within the newspaper industry: four major corporations – Media Times Limited, the Argus Group, Perskor and Nasionale Pers – owned and controlled all the country's newspapers. They also emerged to challenge spreading state control; their commitment is to the provision of an alternative order –

social, political, economic and cultural.

Efforts have been made to extend that commitment to include newsroom politics. The first alternative paper, *Grassroots*, launched in Cape Town in 1980, deliberately set out to be an agent of political change, and its



Gagged but not giving in

advocacy journalism was a catalyst in local community organisation.

Today, *Grassroots* looks set to become another victim of Botha's offensive. One of the first newspapers to receive an official warning, it has had several editions banned and seized. And in the latest attack one of its journalists was shot by an unknown assailant and soon after her discharge from hospital was detained under state of emergency legislation. ●
Maira Levy

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Stuart Hall

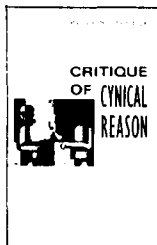
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