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## Kotane, Moses (1905 –1978)

Lucien van der Walt

2009

Moses Kotane was a South African communist and nationalist credited with uniting the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) at a time when it was disjointed and overtly racist. Under his leadership, the chasm between the CPSA and the African National Congress (ANC) was bridged, making him a national hero in both South Africa and the Soviet Union.

Kotane was born in rural Rustenburg in 1905, the second of 11 children. His parents were Tswana-speaking African farmers and influential members of the community. Kotane started working in Johannesburg and Krugersdorp at the age of 17. There he was employed variously, working as a photographer's assistant, domestic servant, mineworker, and baker. Despite a limited formal education Kotane read widely, and attended a CPSA night school in Johannesburg in the 1920s. He was initially skeptical of communist doctrines, but also found the main nationalist party, the ANC, something of a disappointment when he joined in 1928.

That year, Kotane also enrolled in the African Bakers' Union, which was affiliated with the new Federation of Non-European Trade Unions (FNETU), a body that was closely linked to the CPSA and headed by T. W. Thibedi. Kotane joined the CPSA, a

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Retrieved on 9<sup>th</sup> October 2021 from [lucienvanderwalt.com](http://lucienvanderwalt.com)  
Published in the *International Encyclopaedia of Revolution and Protest*, Blackwell, New York, online edition

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commitment that would shape his life. He ascended the ranks quickly in FNETU as well as the CPSA, becoming a full-time party official in 1931, and then studying for a year at the Lenin School in Moscow.

Kotane joined the CPSA at a time when it was being restructured under Communist International pressure. This was the period of the New Line, characterized by purges and expulsions in order to “Bolshevize” the party. At the same time a two-stage approach was adopted, prioritizing the attainment of majority rule in a “Native Republic” over socialism. After the expulsion of Thibedi, Kotane and J. B. Marks became the most prominent African communists in the country; both were champions of the two-stage approach, and Kotane, in particular, exhibited a strongly nationalist streak, as evidenced by his famous statement, “I am first an African and then a communist.”

In 1939 – when the CPSA had finally recovered from the New Line and was becoming a significant force – Kotane was elected general secretary of the party, a post he would hold until his death. He was committed to the revival of the ANC, and became a member of its executive committee in 1946. Like Marks, W. H. Andrews, and other prominent communists, he was arrested in the aftermath of the 1946 African mineworkers’ strike, backed by CNETU.

In 1948 the National Party (NP) came to power on a platform of racial apartheid, Afrikaner nationalism, and anti-communism; the CPSA was banned but reformed as the underground South African Communist Party (SACP) in 1953. Kotane was subject to bans and restrictions on his activities, but he continued to be active, taking part in the ANC-led mobilizations of the 1950s and attending the Bandung Conference. Along with Nelson Mandela, Joe Slovo, Oliver Tambo, and others, he was a defendant in the 1956 Treason Trial.

Detained in 1960 and 1962, he left South Africa in 1963 for Tanzania, where he acted as ANC treasurer in exile, and where

he was reelected to the ANC’s national executive committee at the Morogoro conference of 1969 – part of a substantially increased communist representation. He was involved in the ANC and SACP armed wing, *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (MK; “Spear of the Nation”), which received much of its support from the Soviet bloc, in large part due to the SACP. In the meantime, the SACP moved its central executive committee to London, and Kotane was centrally involved in party activity. He later suffered a stroke, and went to Moscow, where he died in 1978.

### References and Suggested Readings

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