

So what's new about our Russian friendship?

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Exploring our links with Mother Russia has practically assumed the scale of a national pastime. **MARK GEISSER** reports on the latest in a growing line of public entertainments aimed to prove that, deep down, we've always been the best of friends.

MANGOSUTHU BUTHELEZI walks into a marquee on the Oppenheims' Brenthurst Estate, followed by a phalanx of bearded Russian orthodox priests, and tries to slide past Walter Sisulu, who is chatting to Gavin Relly. But Relly catches him, and, like a benevolent but firm schoolmaster, looks on while the two shake hands. Meanwhile, in a corner, African National Congress member Joel Netshitenzhe chats in Russian to a visiting 10-year-old from Moscow.

The "new South Africa" meets the "new Russia". Given the fact that South Africa and Russia are two of the largest mining nations, it's not surprising that all this glasnost is happening at the opening of an exhibition arranged by De Beer's Centenary AG, currently on view at the Oppenheimer library at Brenthurst.

The exhibition is entitled *Transvaal, Transvaal My Country* — a Russian folk song dating from the Boer war — and it traces the relationship between the two nations from 1720 to the present day.

Until recently, the most direct contact South Africa had with Russian culture was down the barrel of an AK-47. Now, ever since the explosions of the "new" in Russia and South Africa, we've had circuses and dance-troupes, ballerinas and virtuosi — not to mention an ever-increasing stream of returned ANC cadres who are fluent in Russian and prefer Tchaikovsky and Dostoevsky to mbaqanga and Mphahlele.

And so this exhibition, put together by Russian and South African diplomats and scholars, is the culmination of a year of frenzy in Russo-South African interaction. Emphatically "Russian" and not "Soviet", it is particularly comprehensive in its retelling of Russian involvement in early South African history, including, for example, a letter dated 1886 from the chief of the Pondos to Czar Alexander III asking for protection from Britain, and the fascinating correspondence between Leo Tolstoy and a then-Johannesburg-based Mohandas Gandhi on the subject of human rights and discrimination in South Africa.

Most interesting is the exhibition's documentation of Russian support for the Boer war effort: Afrikaner pleas for help; the cover-page of a 70 000-strong Russian petition of support; a *bratina* (or fraternity drinking cup) sent to the Boer forces, as ugly and as massive as the Voortrekker monument; Russian songbooks, written at the turn of the century, called *The Marseillaise of the Boers* and *The Martial Song of the Boers*.

This last item features, on its cover, a depiction of happy tribal Africans in the foreground and relegates a rather savage-looking komman-



Ek verlang na die ou Transvaal ... The poster specially created for the exhibition of Russian contacts with South Africa since the 18th century

do of Boers to a back corner — evidence, perhaps, of how confused the romanticised Russian pro-Boer sentiment was, and a portent, certainly, of the shift in Russian sympathy from oppressed Boers to oppressed blacks that would characterise Soviet-South African relations for the rest of the century.

In his opening speech, Harry Oppenheimer made some very astute observations about the "international imperialism" that precipitated "Russia's involvement with both the Anglo-Boer war and the ANC", and spoke at length of the importance of Soviet support for the South African liberation movement. But what is astonishing about this exhibition is the way it glosses over what is undoubtedly the strongest link between our two countries: the ANC-SACP-Soviet friendship.

In a Russian-made promotional film accompanying the exhibition, the ANC is not even mentioned: the narrative skips from Stalin's severing of relationships with South Africa to the present, where "an approach based on sanctions is no longer called for" — skilfully associating sanctions with Stalinism and neglecting to mention something that the exhibition itself documents: the fact that the two countries had full diplomatic relations from World War II until 1956.

The exhibition does include a couple of pan-

els with photographs of early South African Communist Party cadres who visited Russia and an etching of SACP leader David Jones' funeral in Moscow, but all it sees fit to depict of Soviet-ANC relations is one photo of Oliver Tambo with Mikhail Gorbachev and another of Mandela with Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze. And these two photos are symmetrically counterpoised with another two, on an opposite panel, of FW de Klerk and Pik Botha with Soviet officials.

There is also another strange oversight: after the ANC link, South Africa's strongest connection with Russia must surely be the tens of thousands of Jewish immigrants who brought borscht, blinzles and other elements of East European culture to these shores at the turn of the century and who kept up a vigorous communication with the Motherland until at least World War II. But the only reference to Russian Jews is a photostat of a photograph of industrialist Sammy Marks.

And so, while this exhibition is impressive in its recording of fascinating historical minutiae in the relationship between Russia and South Africa, its glossing over of the ANC and Russian Jewry — the former clearly ideologically motivated and the latter possibly just careless — renders it historically incomplete.