



**Kurzfassung** von Dr. Klaus Freiherr von der Ropp

### **The Key Role of US Ambassador Nathan Princeton Lyman in the Birth of the Accord on Afrikaner Self-Determination – A Personal View**

*Klaus Freiherr von der Ropp was head of the Bonn liaison office of the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik from 1975 to 1999 and has decades of experience as a freelance consultant on Southern African issues. In this Kurzfassung, he shares his memories of the "Accord on Afrikaner Self-Determination between the Freedom Front, the African National Congress and the South African Government/National Party", which was signed 30 years ago. The current situation in South Africa shows that the Accord and its content have not lost their relevance.*

At the very beginning of this paper, I need to say that in Southern Africa, my role was that of a mere observer for the past 60 years, without any official function. This has provided me with a maximum of political freedom. To mention just two examples in this regard: I was able to support my two dear friends, Van Zyl Slabbert and Breyten Breytenbach, to organise the historical meeting between high-level representatives of the then still banned ANC/SACP alliance and a group of dissidents from South Africa, the majority of whom were Afrikaans-speaking and white, in Dakar, Senegal, in July 1987. And, furthermore, I often could critically discuss with esteemed British and US diplomats, including Sir Robin Renwick and US Ambassador Nathan Princeton Lyman, and later also with Soviet/Russian officials. Discussions also included the developments in South Africa and its neighbouring countries, as well as the amateurish policies in the southernmost part of Africa of my own country, i.e. Germany (West). Most of these officials knew that after October 17, 1978, my government had been excluded by the British and

US governments from the negotiations concerning the future of Namibia and South Africa.

I do not want to elaborate on the role of the most outstanding British ambassador, Sir Robin Renwick, one of the main architects of the South African transformation process. Renwick was supported by his US counterpart, Bill Swing, who was content to act in a junior partner capacity. Renwick was indeed a very successful "interventionist" ambassador. However, he lacked an understanding of the fears of the Afrikanervolk to be overpowered in a new South Africa by a large black majority, the latter culturally totally alien to it. Perhaps Renwick would not have understood Slabbert's warning to the ANC/SACP alliance in our meeting in Dakar that "revolutionaries must convince white South Africans, particularly Afrikaners, that there is life beyond apartheid"<sup>1</sup>.

However, the US ambassador Nathan Princeton Lyman, who succeeded Renwick as the most influential foreign diplomat in Pretoria in the early 1990s, would have understood Slabbert's remark very well. When I met Lyman, I was always very impressed by his profound knowledge of his host country. And unlike Renwick, he was a modest man. I was also fascinated by his knowledge of West Germany's ambivalent yet politically correct role in Southern Africa. On several occasions, I was proud to tell him that there were also a few constructive voices in Bonn. One example was Chancellor Helmut Schmidt's remark to US Vice President Walter ("Fritz") Mondale during their meeting on May 21, 1977, in Bonn. Mondale had engaged in a dispute with the South African Prime Minister John Vorster in Vienna the previous day. The following day he asserted that the West must do everything in its power to force Pretoria to abolish Apartheid. Schmidt's response was the laconic question, "And replace it with what?" Furthermore, I presented Lyman an interview with Egon Bahr, another leading Social Democrat and a key figure in German foreign policy: In 1977, Bahr had stated that as a system of "one man one vote" was not feasible in South Africa, "a hitherto unknown solution of peaceful co-existence with special protection for minorities had to be developed" (Geschke and Mack, 1977, p. 8, own translation). I could also inform Lyman that Otto Graf Lambsdorff (1986, p. 32), the powerful chairman of the German liberal party (FDP) and, like myself, a member of the ancient German Baltic minority in Kurland

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<sup>1</sup> Only due to the support of Slabbert and Breytenbach, I could publish my unconventional reports on the Dakar meeting in the "progressive" media in South Africa. Die Suid Afrikaan, April 1988, pp. 34-36; Democracy in Action, July 1989, pp. 14-15; Vrye Weekblad, October 27th, 1989.

(Latvia)<sup>2</sup>, had pleaded for "copper bottomed guarantees of existence" for all Afrikaners in a paper published in 1986. Taking Schmidt's question and Egon Bahr's interview as starting points, Lambsdorff proposed the establishment of a "toevlugsoord" (refugee settlement) in the sense of a "boerestaat" (Afrikanerstate) for those Afrikaners who did not see a future for themselves and their children in the post-Apartheid South Africa. In response to a question from Lyman regarding the view of the West German conservative parties CDU and CSU, I had to reply that the closeness of the ANC and the SACP in the days of the Cold War had led CDU and CSU to try to promote an alternative liberation movement, in this case Inkatha.

In his understanding of the complexity of the South African dilemma Lyman was a unique diplomat. But, other than probably all his colleagues in Pretoria, he never insisted on white South Africa's, particularly the Afrikaners', unconditional surrender. In his numerous and intensive talks with General Constand Viljoen, Lyman always made it clear that he respected Viljoen as a man of honour and a patriot. In the concluding sentences of the sub-chapter "Courting a Troubled General" in Lyman's book *Partner to History: The U.S. Role in South Africa's Transition to Democracy*, his respect for Viljoen is obvious: "His dream of a Volkstaat was all but dead. But he played his role on the magnificent plain of South Africa's transition. And, in my view, he played it heroically" (Lyman, 2002, p. 180). This represents a strong contrast to the prevailing "world opinion" of the time, which viewed the new hero of the Afrikaner Volk as a racist and a mere troublemaker on South Africa's promising journey away from 350 years of an often brutal system of white minority rule to a Western-style democracy. In one of our talks, Lyman asked me how German media saw the general's role. My response was that the highly respected liberal weekly "Die Zeit" had recently referred to Viljoen as a "bloodhound", and that this viewpoint was in line with contemporary "world opinion". But Lyman was not persuaded by my argument and immediately stood up and shouted at me: "What nonsense, the general is a patriot!"

Lyman's and Viljoen's discussions must have concentrated on the issue of the Afrikanervolk's survival in a post-Apartheid South Africa. Viljoen, for very good reasons, insisted on copper bottomed guarantees of existence for his Volk. Continuously he made the point that Afrikaners must get their own state, politically

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<sup>2</sup> Those families who refused to be resettled in October 1939 were later relocated in Siberia.

independent from today's South Africa. I had the privilege of informing both Lyman and Viljoen that, in his aforementioned paper, Otto Graf Lambsdorff saw this as a very possible outcome of the South African drama. It is hardly known that before publishing his paper, Lambsdorff had consulted his friends Van Zyl Slabbert and Gavin Relly, the CEO of Anglo American. By the way, Slabbert, upon reading Lambsdorff's paper, spoke for the first time of "sacrificial" partition. There must have been endless debates on Lyman's point of view that such a solution was no longer feasible as even in the Western Cape the economic development had made South Africa an ethnic melting pot.

When Viljoen realised that Lyman was not able to agree to the creation of an Afrikaner Volksstaat, he made it clear that big parts of the South African Defence Forces were loyal to him and were prepared to fight for Afrikaner survival. It is also worth noting that Lyman was aware of the fact that South Africa possessed six complete nuclear bombs of the Hiroshima type, and a seventh was under construction. Nukes are not only military, but also political weapons!

Few people in South Africa and abroad apparently know that a meeting between Viljoen and the US Assistant Secretary of Defence, Charles Freeman, and the latter's team of senior American military officers took place in the US Embassy on February 11, 1994. In these discussions, the Americans warned Viljoen to look for an UDI<sup>3</sup>-style solution by pointing to the existence of their huge and mysterious airbase Thebephatshwa, situated in the southernmost region of Botswana, near Molepolole. After the meeting Viljoen declared the preparedness of his "Vryheidsfront" (Freedom Front), to participate in the first general elections. However, this only applied on the condition that a way was found to give Afrikaners in the new South Africa the opportunity to keep their right of self-determination. The following deliberations between the ANC, Viljoen's Vryheidsfront and the government of President Frederik Willem de Klerk resulted in the conclusion of the "Accord on Afrikaner Self-determination" between the Freedom Front, the African National Congress and the South African government/the National Party. One of Lyman's collaborators – I never learnt her surname – told me later that general Constand Viljoen and Cyril Ramaphosa, Secretary-General of the ANC, were immediately prepared to approve it. On the other side the de Klerk government hesitated to do so. Upon being informed of de Klerk's "No", Viljoen informed Lyman

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<sup>3</sup> UDI stands for unilateral declaration of independence.

that now he had no other choice than to take up arms. But Lyman could convince de Klerk to give in. Consequently, on April 23, 1994, the Accord was signed by General Constand Viljoen and Thabo Mbeki, the national chairman of the ANC, and Roelf Meyer, Minister of Constitutional Development and Communication, in the West Wing of the Union Building, Pretoria.

Present at the ceremony were, among others, US Ambassador Nathan Princeton Lyman, probably UK Ambassador Sir Anthony Reeve, Walter Sisulu, Aziz Pahad, Abraham Viljoen, junior diplomats from different (not German) embassies, and Minister of State Martin Cullen (Ireland) and myself as EU observers. Being German there were two facts that struck me in particular: the German ambassador, Hans Christian Ueberschaer, had turned down the official invitation to attend the ceremony. He did not want to be seen in the "company of racists", as he told me. On the other hand, in the company of Viljoen I met the Russian Ambassador, Jevgeni P. Gusarow. He wholeheartedly congratulated the General on having signed the Accord.

During the preceding negotiations on the Accord, both Lyman and Viljoen had intensive talks with, among others, Van Zyl Slabbert and Breyten Breytenbach, and with me in the capacity of an advisor, particularly on the key issue of the protection of ethnic minorities. Lyman and Viljoen were aware that three of us had been at the Dakar conference and had met the ANC in follow-up meetings. In separate sessions, we discussed the situation of the German-speaking communities in southern Tyrol and eastern Belgium. But these two cases did not convince me. Unlike the Afrikaners in South Africa, these two communities exist in established constitutional states and in established democracies. Instead, I discussed with Viljoen, and later Lyman, the constitutional status of the "Russlanddeutsche", a German-speaking community originally numbering 2.5 million, which had resided in Czarist Russia and later in the USSR for over two centuries. Lyman knew perfectly well<sup>4</sup> that between the two World Wars, they had inhabited their "Volga Republic". However, only a minority of approximately 20-25% actually lived in this Volga Republic. The remainder had settled in what are known as "language islands", spread over the large country (Russia and later the USSR). Even for the latter, the Volga Republic had also provided schools, educational institutions of all levels, publishing houses, and other such facilities,

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<sup>4</sup> Lyman's profound knowledge of Russian/Soviet history is to be explained by the fact that his own family had emigrated from the USSR (Ukraine) to the US in the 1920s.

i.e. offered them an opportunity to preserve their German identity in an environment that was not necessarily hostile, but nonetheless foreign. This partly promising development of far-reaching (internal) autonomy only came to an abrupt end when Germany attacked the USSR in a final act of grandeur in June 1941.

Thanks to his most sensitive diplomacy, Ambassador Nathan Princeton Lyman was able to prevent the Cape Republic from falling into total destruction. As Egon Bahr had warned in his aforementioned interview of July 1977: a (civil) war in the mineral-rich Republic of South Africa could potentially escalate into the third World War. It is therefore less understandable that even more than 30 years after this agreement was signed, not all aspects of this agreement have been implemented, partially due to disagreement among the Afrikaners. As in the late days of Apartheid South Africa, the country is again threatened by total collapse and destruction. As the British Economist (2022) correctly pointed out in its mid-December 2022 issue: instead of fulfilling its long-time promise of a better life for all, the governing African National Congress (ANC) has achieved a "bitter life for all". As a consequence, the possibility of a civil war breaking out at any time cannot be ruled out. And as Otto Graf Lambsdorff predicted years ago, such a war will not be limited to the borders of the Cape Republic.

## **Acknowledgement**

The author dedicates this paper to Lieutenant-Colonel ("Kommandant") Peter Stark, who, along with numerous other South Africans and Namibians, saved him from dying of thirst and exhaustion in the Namib desert on December 13, 1975, at 11:45 local time.

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