

## Simons, Ray Alexander (1913–2004)

*Nicole Ulrich and Lucien van  
der Walt*

Ray Alexander Simons was born Rachel Esther Alexandrowitch in Latvia in 1913. She was drawn to communism at an early age and became involved in Latvia's underground communist movement in her teens. Alexander left for South Africa in 1929. The exact reasons for the family's emigration are not very clear, but the oppressive atmosphere of anti-Semitism and political repression doubtless played a role. The decision was a fortunate one, for Latvia became a fascist state in 1934, and the Nazi occupation of 1941–4 led to large-scale massacres of Jews, including Alexander's two half-sisters and their families.

Alexander remained dedicated to the communist cause and joined the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) within a week of her arrival. Trade unionism occupied most of her activism. She was involved in a wide range of unions, usually amongst African and Colored workers, and contributed to a regular column on trade union affairs in the *Guardian*, a paper affiliated to the CPSA. Alexander is perhaps best known for leading the Food and Canning Workers' Union (FCWU), which she helped establish in 1941. In 1955 the FCWU affiliated to the South African Congress of Trade Unions

(SACTU), which was linked to the CPSA (reconstituted as the underground South African Communist Party, SACP, in 1953), and the African National Congress (ANC), from its inception.

Intent on ridding the union movement of radical ideas, the apartheid government banned and harassed communist trade unionists and Alexander was served with the first of a series of banning orders in 1953. In spite of such restrictions, Alexander continued to participate in political campaigns and was involved in the establishment of the Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW) in 1954. Alexander participated in drawing up the Women's Charter and planning the 1956 Women's March to Parliament (but was unable to attend due to her banning orders).

Despite her backbreaking political and trade union work, Alexander was married twice and raised three children. She had, however, the support of a very tender marriage with Jack Simons, a radical lecturer at the University of Cape Town that lasted for 54 years (until Simons's death in 1995). Growing repression compelled Alexander and Simons to leave South Africa in 1965 for Zambia, where they lived for most of their 25-year exile.

Alexander and Simons were among the first whites to become members of the ANC and they continued their activism whilst abroad. In the late 1960s Alexander co-authored *Class and Colour in South Africa, 1850–1950*, the definitive but not altogether reliable CPSA/SACP version of struggle history in South Africa, with her husband. She also participated in the exiled section of SACTU, contributed to the Communist Party's journal, the *African Communist*, and attended International Labor Organization conferences. She remained a staunch and uncritical supporter of the Soviet Union throughout her life.

Alexander and Simons returned to South Africa in 1990, after the legalization of the ANC and SACP. She died on September 12, 2004 at the age of 91. Her lifelong loyalty and enormous contribution to the workers' struggle and the national liberation struggle was recognized by the ANC's National Executive Committee, which awarded her the ANC's highest honor of *Isithwalandwe* (literally translated it means "the one who wears the plumes of the rare bird").

#### References and Suggested Readings

- Alexander, P. (2000) *Workers, War and the Origins of Apartheid: Labour and Politics in South Africa*. Cape Town: David Philip.
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- Simons, R. (2004) *All My Life and All My Strength*. Johannesburg: STE Publishers.
- South African History Online website (n.d.) Rachel Esther Alexandrowitch. Available at [www.sahistory.org.za/pages/people/alexander-r.htm](http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/people/alexander-r.htm) (downloaded November 1, 2006).
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SEE ALSO: Communist Party of South Africa, 1921–1950; South Africa, African Nationalism and the ANC