The World That Was Ours
Hilda Bernstein
Heinemann, 246 pp., 42s.

Of the many recent books on the hated apartheid system in South Africa this is easily the most gripping for the ordinary reader. It does not set out to make a deep analysis of the roots of apartheid. Yet, in its vivid portrayal of the personal experiences of the Bernstein family it cannot fail to arouse the anger of any reader.

Hilda (the author) and Lionel Bernstein (popularly known as Rusty for his ginger hair) came to know each other because of their common concern with the fight for racial equality. They first met as members of the Labour Party League of Youth, but soon broke away because it rejected Africans as equals. Before the world war both joined the Communist Party (then legal) which, in the author's words, was '. . . the only political party that had no colour-bar, and unified diverse racial and social groups'.

From the outset of their political life they were completely integrated with the African struggle for liberation, and in 1946 both were arrested for assisting the strike of African mine-workers. Towards the end of the war (though the vote was confined to whites) Hilda was elected to the Johannesburg City Council. In this capacity she was able to visit the broken-down African shantytowns and realised even more the need to change these terrible conditions.

Earlier books have portrayed the vile character and consequences of apartheid. What is different in this one is the simple but penetrating narrative of the experiences of one family, while at the same time entwining this with a political appraisal of the nature of the struggle against it. It frankly describes the uncertainty and torturing fears of the author about the fate of her husband, and the disturbing impact on the two children—the girl Toni and the boy Keith.

Who can review with equanimity the events of the past 20 years since the 1948 'Suppression of Communism Act' in South Africa? It led to Sharpeville in 1960, to the infamous Treason Trial which lasted for four years, and to the Rivonia Trial of 1963 at which Nelson Mandela and other African leaders were given savage sentences.

If these experiences arouse hatred for the apartheid system the courageous struggle against it also creates unbounded pride and respect for those who resisted. The description of the crowd outside the court at the trial of Nelson Mandela (when he was first remanded on bail) is an inspiring expression of the spirit of revolt:

'So we moved, in a unit, a solid mass; we were not separate people but a single living whole . . . singing contempt of the court, its trappings and flunkeys, singing defiance of the police, their arms and power, singing belief in the future, in freedom, in the possibility of happiness. Each of us felt enlarged and released, as though the sound of the singing alone could liberate us from the sorrows and terrors of our lives and lift us above the possibility of defeat and despair.'

There is no space to describe all the stages of the struggle of the Bernsteins, finally left with no alternative but to launch on a hazardous escape from South Africa. Many other courageous fighters have been forced also to take this course. All of them have played a noble part in the struggle in South Africa, and are still waging the fight from outside. I know of no
other book which has such a high quality of convincing the Labour and progressive movement outside South Africa to redouble their efforts in solidarity action with those still in South Africa who are waging a brave struggle against a system equally as vile as, and in some respects even worse, than that of Hitler fascism.

IDRIS COX

The Zinoviev Letter

Lewis Chester, Stephen Fay and Hugo Young
Heinemann, 219 pp., 30s.

The authors of this book wrote an enlightening article in the Sunday Times last December. In it they finally exposed the gross swindle perpetrated on the British public in 1924 by the Tory Party leaders, with the help of Foreign Office and other officials and that of a group of Russian Whites, monarchists thrown out of their own country in the Civil War, who were professional forgers.

The ‘Zinoviev Letter’ purported to be a document addressed by the then President of the Communist International, Zinoviev, to the leaders of the British Communist Party, giving them all kinds of nonsensical instructions, including a group addressed to a non-existent ‘Military Section’ of the Communist Party of Great Britain.

The thing stank. Anyone who was not an ass, or a member of the more brainless part of the Establishment, could see it was a forgery. It was ruthlessly exposed by our Party, by the Soviet Government, the Communist International, the General Council of the TUC and such famous non-Communist MPs as E. D. Morel. But Mr. Ramsay MacDonald, then Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary of the first Labour Government, professed to be in doubt, much to the disgust of his colleagues.

As a result, the bombshell—more accurately, stink-bomb—was exploded by the Foreign Office, in collusion with the Tory leaders, during the election campaign. As a result, there was a big rally of the ‘passive voters’ against Labour—a fact which the newspaper commentators, then and now, and the authors of the book, tend to overlook. The Labour vote went up, compared with the 1923 elections, from 4½ million to just over 5,400,000. But the Tory vote went up from 5,500,000 to 7,800,000: part of this was due to a loss of nearly 1,400,000 by the Liberals, but part of the increase represented the other illiterate voters terrified by this ‘Red scare’.

The authors have added to their discoveries of 1966 a large number of speculations as to who did what, in the Intelligence Service, the Foreign Office and the Tory Party. This is useful to have on record. But the essential thing is that the same blackguardly clique of well-bred public school men who had launched the ‘Piggott forgeries’ to break the Irish leader Parnell in the ’80s, who had sworn blind that the notorious Jameson Raid against the Boers in South Africa in the ’90s had been launched without the knowledge of the then Premier, Lord Salisbury, and in 1921 had forged entire issues of Pravda for circulation through British official channels in Soviet Russia, were still at work in 1924, as they were many years later, when the postwar Labour Government vouched for the forged ‘M Plan’, which was used to blacken the reputation of the German Communists.

It is a pity that, with all their researches, the authors are silent about these facts, which put the ‘Zinoviev Letter’ in its proper historical perspective.

ANDREW ROTHSTEIN.