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978-1-107-04648-1 - Collective Violence and the Agrarian Origins of South African Apartheid, 1900–1948

John Higginson

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Collective Violence and the Agrarian Origins of South African Apartheid, 1900–1948

This book examines the dark odyssey of official and private collective violence against the rural African population and Africans in general during the two generations before apartheid became the primary justification for the existence of the South African state. John Higginson discusses how Africans fought back against the entire spectrum of violence ranged against them, demonstrating just how contingent apartheid was on the struggle to hijack the future of the African majority.

John Higginson is Professor of History at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. He is also a research Fellow in the College of Human Sciences and the department of history at the University of South Africa in Pretoria, South Africa. He is the author of *A Working Class in the Making: Belgian Colonial Labor Policy, Private Enterprise and the African Mineworker, 1907–1951* (1989). He has written numerous articles and book chapters on South Africa and the regional economic system of southern Africa.

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University of Massachusetts, Amherst



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Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	<i>page</i> vi
<i>Preface</i>	vii
PART I. THE ASHES OF DEFEAT	
1. Introduction	3
2. The Etiology of Guerrilla Organization in the Western Transvaal, July 1900 to December 1902	33
3. Peonage or Empire?: The Reconstruction of White Supremacy	69
4. Milnerism, the “Chinese Labor Experiment,” and the Advent of <i>Het Volk</i>	105
PART II. SIDESTEPPING THE KING’S WRIT	
5. Ministering to the Dry Bones of White Supremacy: From Union and the 1913 Natives Land Act to the 1914 Rebellion	133
6. A Glass Brimming Over: The Failed 1914 Rebellion in Rustenburg and Marico	155
7. Turbulent Cities, Smoldering Countryside, 1914–1922	183
8. After the Rebellion, Before the Pact, 1919–1924	234
PART III. A HOOFDLEIERE OR BOERE REPUBLIC?	
9. The Pact, the Depression, and the Stillborn Republic, 1924–1933	261
10. A Thousand Little <i>Hoofdleiere</i> , 1934–1948	307
<i>Epilogue</i>	355
<i>Bibliography</i>	367
<i>Index</i>	383

Figures

4.1. African peasants of some means somewhere in the Northern Cape in flight from the advancing war theater circa April 1900.	<i>page</i> 127
4.2. African scouts and teamsters with British troops and officers somewhere in Rustenburg circa December 1900.	127
4.3. Boer prisoners of war at the “Ram Camp” for the most incorrigible of the inmates in Bermuda circa January 1901.	128
4.4. Afrikaner farmers from Rustenburg attempting to sell bags of maize and pumpkins at the corner of Commissioner and Market Streets after the forlorn harvest of 1905.	128
7.1. Rustenburg landlords on horseback in Citizens Reserve Corp circa 1913.	231
7.2. Cotton on rail cars at Boschoek circa 1925.	231
7.3. African women picking cotton in Rustenburg circa 1922.	232
7.4. Meeting of chiefs from Rustenburg and Marico and government officials just before the outbreak of popular African protests against those chiefs who colluded with white farmers in the expropriation of African land and cattle.	232
10.1. Adolescent African girl using a single-furrow plow in Rustenburg circa 1938.	352
10.2. Gathering of Afrikaner farmers at Rustenburg Farmers’ Cooperative circa 1937.	352
10.3. Armed reenactors at the 1938 Centennial Commemoration of the Great Trek.	353
10.4. Afrikaner women with Boer republican flags at the 1938 reenactment of the Great Trek.	354

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[More information](#)

Preface

Picture a nearly deserted siding or freight station in South Africa's arid western countryside a year after the catastrophic Anglo-Boer War. The ruins of farmhouses burned by advancing British troops could be seen for miles in any direction. Two young Boer men are leaning on the front wall of the station with a look of menace and bewilderment etched on their faces. They appear to have no better place to be and nothing better to do. Both probably had been soldiers in what they would have called the "Second War of Liberation" or *Derde Oorlog van Vryheid*. They might have also spent several years behind the barbed wire of a British prison camp thousands of miles away in India or Bermuda.

The train is several hours late. The English-speaking stationmaster, with his watch fob prominently displayed on his waistcoat and a bad case of nerves, is walking swiftly to the point where the train will come to halt. Tired of watching out for the late train, the two young men turn their heads in the opposite direction to see an African peasant farmer driving a wagon loaded down with bags of winter wheat and citrus fruit. The African is driving parallel to the rail line but in the opposite direction. Where is he going? To whom do all those bags of wheat belong – to him, to his landlord? Is he going to sell the wagon's contents without the supervision of a white farmer or general dealer?

In the brief time it took for driver and wagon to pass the station, the two young men grasped that they had lost more than a war. Prewar white supremacy had also been burned in the fires of war, along with 3,700 square miles of farmland. The two young men and thousands of other Boer men and their families had lost a way of life articulated and defined by the transactional primacy of white skin, if only temporarily.

Once again, their expectations had been displaced by circumstances over which they had little or no control. They yearned for a time when failures and disruptions would cease and their psychological discomfort with everyday life radically, and perhaps violently, effaced. That time arrived in 1948, upon the

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John Higginson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

election of D. F. Malan's National Party and its policy of apartheid. Apartheid defined everyone's existence in South Africa for two and a half generations. Then it unraveled in a paroxysm of state terror and popular violence. Those sullen young men holding up the train station's wall could not have foreseen the details of this turn of events, but their smoldering aspirations certainly anticipated it.

As this book goes to press, South Africa is facing another defining moment. Corruption in high places, particularly among the more exalted strata of Jacob Zuma's African National Congress Party (ANC) government, has threatened to compromise the fulfillment of the promises of South Africa's first truly democratic election in 1994. The failure of Zuma's government to ensure the speedy delivery of public services and shore up failing public schools appears to have overshadowed the collateral damage of the previous generations in the upcoming elections. Or has it? As Julius Malema, the former ANC Youth League leader and his new political grouping, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), gain more purchase among the most economically disenfranchised black South Africans, the disfiguring legacy of apartheid has become more prominent in public political debates.

Malema and his Economic Freedom Fighters promise to nationalize the country's gold, platinum, and diamond mines and to redistribute South Africa's farmland among landless agricultural laborers and labor tenants once they are in power. Will a violent white attempt to turn the clock back to the days of "grand apartheid" in the 1960s seem not as harebrained as it did in 1994 and 2002, when *Boeremag* (Boer Peoples' Power) militants blew up several residential sections of Soweto, destroyed rail lines and bridges, and attempted to assassinate Nelson Mandela? Will South Africa's businessmen and multinational corporations throw in their lot with the weakened remnant of the Afrikaner far right and proto-fascist political parties such as the *Boeremag* (Boer Power) and *Afrikanerweerstand beweging* (Armed Afrikaner Union) in the wake of an EFF victory at the polls? Or will business interests compel such parties to fold themselves into the less notorious opposition party, the Democratic Alliance (DA)? Such outcomes appear unlikely. Most of the potential *voetgangers* or foot soldiers of any attempt to undo the present political order are now relatively affluent city dwellers. Paradoxically, any such attempt to upend the present government would also have to have a visible measure of popular African support. South Africa's future has thwarted the experts before, however. Only time will tell.

I owe the completion of this long-overdue book to a large fund of generous people and institutions in South Africa, Western Europe, and the United States. I am greatly indebted to the College of Human Sciences at the University of South Africa (UNISA), the Five College History Seminar, the Five College African Studies Council, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Social Science Research Foundation, and the University of Massachusetts

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-04648-1 - Collective Violence and the Agrarian Origins of South African Apartheid, 1900–1948

John Higginson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface*

ix

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I would like to convey a special thanks to many people in South Africa who saw fit to take pity on or derived amusement from an eccentric foreigner who spent much time in their country. That I spent so much time trying to discern why South Africa's modern history had been conceived as a mirror of white remembrance burnished by a deep but opaque tradition of collective and interpersonal violence must have convinced them I was a bit soft in the head. Among those who stand out are Dr. Paulo Sousa Affonso-Pinto, Russell Ally, Chico Tshabala Bento, Belinda Bozzoli, Rachel Browne, Sakhela Bulungu, Greg Cuthbertson, Rochelle Kapp, the late Bernard (Ben) Magubane, Zine Magubane, the late Phillip Masia, Selby Mathé, the late Congress Mbata, Michael Ndi Mcethe, Neva Seidman Mokgatle, Seth Mokgatle, Ishmael Moroka, Ntabiseng Motsemme, Susan Ntete, Jacqueline Pateguana, Vinha Pinto, Neil Roos, Charles Schutte, Elinor Sisulu, Max Sisulu, Lynda Spencer, Flora Tembu, Kenneth Tshabalala, Dr. Khanyi Tshabalala-Pinto, and Charles van Onselen.

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[More information](#)

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