

Book Review: The Afrikaners: Biography of a People

David T. Jervis

Department of History and Political Science, Saint Leo University, Saint Leo, FL 33574-6665

Giliomee, Hermann. *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People*. Charlottesville, Va.: University of Virginia Press, 2003. 560 pp. \$39.50 (paper).

South Africa's population dynamics have given that country a complex and fascinating history. While a number of studies have examined its African majority, fewer have investigated its Coloured, Asian, English, or Afrikaner peoples. Hermann Giliomee, a long-time observer of South African affairs, a historian at the University of Stellenbosch, and an Afrikaner, himself, has written this text to shed light on his people. He hopes to tell their story "with empathy but without partisanship" (p. xiii). Critics might dispute that contention, especially after reading the portions of the book dealing with apartheid and its aftermath. Yet even those critics would have to agree that this is an important text, because it provides an informed and insightful insight into a group that is central to South Africa's contentious history.

Who are the Afrikaners? The first recorded use of the term ("Afrikaander") to describe a European occurred in March 1707, but a self-conscious Afrikaner nation is a relatively recent phenomenon. "Afrikaner" was still being used in multiple ways into the early 1900s, e.g., to describe all who had been born in the country, to refer to a South African patriot, or to refer to Dutch-speaking South Africans. Only in the first third of the twentieth century did it begin to be used in an exclusivist sense to describe a people of a certain race and culture. Readers familiar with the country's history will recognize this as the time following the Boer War, when there was lingering bitterness about the policies of the British. While some Afrikaners, e.g., Jan Smuts, urged cooperation between the two white groups, others emphasized the need to promote Afrikaans culture through the creation of separate social institutions. Accordingly, the first half of the twentieth century saw efforts to promote Afrikaans as a written language (it only became one of the country's official languages in 1924, along with Dutch and English), its use in schools, and the development of an Afrikaans press. Numerous Afrikaner self-help organizations, e.g., banks and insurance companies, were also developed as was a political party, the National Party.

This text is useful because it provides a different perspective on much of the conventional wisdom about Afrikaners. For instance, Giliomee presents a very different view of Afrikaner politics through the 1980s than was commonly assumed in the West. One element of the Western view was that a threatened Afrikaner population would retreat into a figurative ethnic *laager* (a term derived from the

Great Trek of the nineteenth century and referring to a unified, defensive formation) if the West imposed sanctions or otherwise tried to pressure it. Yet as *The Afrikaners* makes clear, the Afrikaners have long been a fractious people. Giliomee devotes an early chapter to the "fractious frontiersmen" of the late eighteenth century. In the twentieth century, the National Party suffered one split in 1932, when some members defected to form the Purified National Party, and a second in 1982, when conservative members broke with the NP to form the Conservative Party. Nor were Afrikaner intellectuals a monolithic force; they differed about the meaning and implementation of apartheid at its outset and later, about its morality and retention. Similarly, the Western belief about the power of the Broederbond, i.e., as a secretive organization pulling the strings of Afrikaner society behind the scenes, is overstated. That organization had little influence on the development of the apartheid ideology, although it did become somewhat more powerful in the 1960s as Prime Minister H.F. Verwoerd used it to advance his policies. However, the Bond's influence was declining again by the late 1970s.

Giliomee also presents novel interpretations of both the onset of apartheid and of the government's decision to abandon it. The sources of apartheid were multiple and complex. The idea had developed in the Dutch Reformed Church in the 1920s. Debating its missionary efforts toward the country's African and Coloured communities, the Church concluded that these were separate communities in need of separate churches. This concept was soon extended to education, as the churches were largely responsible for the education of Africans, and Afrikaner intellectuals pressed to have the idea extended to secular domains. From this perspective apartheid did not derive primarily from racist motives: while not ignoring these, Giliomee argues that it sought not so much racial superiority over Africans as racial survival against Africans: "Afrikaner nationalists argued that their survival as a volk was inseparable from maintaining racial exclusivity, and that apartheid was the only policy that systematically pursued that end. But apartheid with its racist outcomes was not a goal in itself; political survival was" (p. 470). Apartheid also contained an element of trusteeship for Africans. Discussing the idea in Parliament, future Prime Minister Daniel Malan argued, "I do not use the term 'segregation,' because it has been interpreted as a fencing off, but rather 'apartheid,' which will give the various races the opportunity of uplifting themselves on the basis of what is their own" (quoted at p. 475).

These ideas were not that unusual in the 1940s: apartheid was based on “mainstream Western racism, ranging from a superficial color preference to a pathological abhorrence of race mixing, which was still widespread in both Europe and the USA” (p. 495). To justify its 1949 law banning marriage between whites and non-whites, for example, the South African government pointed to the fact that thirty American states had similar laws. It was only in the 1950s and 1960s, a result of decolonization and the American civil rights movement, that Western attitudes began to change. In South Africa, however, these attitudes, or at least defense of apartheid, persisted for decades. As late as 1984, close to 80% of Afrikaners continued to support the key elements of apartheid: homelands for blacks; segregated residential areas, schools, and public facilities; a ban on sex between whites and blacks; and separate voter roles for the country’s Asian and Coloured communities.

The desire for survival also explains why apartheid ended when it did. For President F.W. de Klerk, “Pragmatic survival instincts preceded morality in [the] decision to abandon apartheid” (p. 637). Only in 1997, after he had left the presidency, did de Klerk apologize “in a spirit of true repentance,” telling the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that “Apartheid was wrong” (quoted at p. 651). Giliomee describes South Africa’s transition process as a “Surrender Without Defeat.” Yet in another challenge to conventional wisdom, he criticizes de Klerk for not having managed the “surrender” better: that “he and his negotiators would manage to retain so little despite a position of relative strength places a serious question mark over his leadership abilities” (p. 638). The reasons for de Klerk’s failure are many. He needed to act before the end of the 1994 parliamentary session, because he had promised that the 1989 whites-only election would be the last to exclude blacks. The process was slowed by extensive violence and further complicated by the widespread conviction, later essentially discounted by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, that a “third force” of government security forces and certain black leaders was fomenting violence between blacks. This allegation linked de Klerk with both the violence and a discredited military, but he could not abandon the military as he needed its support to realize his negotiating goals. Another factor was the defection of traditionally pro-government forces, e.g., the business community and white civil servants, after the ANC renounced nationalization and promised to pay the pensions of those civil servants who were entrenched in the new South Africa.

Giliomee is no apologist for apartheid, arguing that “[n]othing could ever compensate for the psychological damage it caused.” Still, “in terms of impersonal developmental data the performance of the NP government that ruled between 1948 and 1994 was comparatively impressive” (p. 666). The economy had grown by an annual average of 4.5% between 1948–81 and, while whites had done better than the other population groups, those, too, saw their economic situation improve. Black disposable personal income in-

creased 84.2% between 1960–80 (although from an admittedly low base), while white disposable income increased by only 47.6%. By 1980 black income was 10.6% of whites; it had been only 8.5% in 1960. Interestingly, the groups which did best in economic terms during the apartheid era were the country’s Asian and Coloured populations: disposable income among Asians increased 160% between 1960–1980 and nearly 97% for Coloureds in the same period. Reflecting the trusteeship element of apartheid, the number of African children in schools increased 250% in the 25 years following the initiation of apartheid. Finally, contrary to the notion that South Africa was a police state, it actually had fewer police per thousand in the population (1.4) in the early 1980s than the U.K. (2.4), Northern Ireland (5.7), or the Soviet Union (16.0). Similarly, the country’s military spending, at 13% of the national budget in the 1980s, was not as high as that of countries such as Zimbabwe (17%) or Israel (25%).

While Giliomee’s depiction of the status of blacks was not as dreadful as commonly portrayed, the situation for many people in the new South Africa is not as good as commonly assumed. Many South Africans are experiencing tough times as a result of increased crime, growing income differentials, higher unemployment, and an AIDS epidemic. There are also particular problems impacting the Afrikaner community. As one Afrikaner business leader remarked in 2002, “It is not to spread panic when one says the Afrikaner people are in a crisis with red lights flashing along their survival path” (Ton Vosloo quoted at p. 658). Some of the problems are the inevitable consequence of a broadening of political and economic power. Thus, the number of Afrikaners in the civil service had declined from 44% to 18% between 1994–99. Affirmative action programs were making it difficult for Afrikaners to find or maintain jobs. There was a decline in the use and teaching of Afrikaans, as more and more schools emphasized English-medium instruction. The National Party, long dedicated to promoting the community’s interest, had left the Government of National Unity in 1996 and was crushed in the 1999 elections, winning only 20% of the Afrikaner vote. Even the Broederbond had been transformed, changing its name to Afrikanerbond and accepting members who were neither white nor male. As a result of changes such as these, Giliomee concludes that by 2000, “it appeared as if Afrikaners had become a minority linguistic group rather than an organized ethnic group with myths of origin and kinship, capable of mobilization as a potent force” (p. 665).

Afrikaners have responded to these new realities in different ways. Some have chosen to leave the country: as many Afrikaans-speakers as English-speakers emigrated in 2001, the first time that had ever happened. Others appear to have a longing for the past. About 65% Afrikaners (as opposed to 36% of white English-speakers, 25% of Zulu speakers and 18% of Xhosa speakers) agreed with the statement “There were certainly some abuses under the old apartheid system, but the ideas behind apartheid were basically good” in 2000

(p. 655). Despite their current travails, however, Giliomee believes his people can have a role in their country's future. If they are able to "come to terms with...history, to nourish and replenish [their] love for language and land and to ac-

cept the responsibility to hand over their cultural heritage to the next generation," then "they would become a part of a new, democratic South Africa in their own special way" (p. 666).

