

Afrikaners are seen by many, especially outsiders, as a curiosity – ‘white Africans’ – or, in a less forgiving manner, as the architects and practitioners of the violent system and racist ideology of apartheid. Having surrendered political power in 1990, the Afrikaners enjoy a passive minority status in post-apartheid, democratic South Africa (although some, especially farmers, make claims of ethnic cleansing against them). Their identity is increasingly being called into question. It is clear, at least to this reviewer, that there is no reason for South Africans to give Afrikaners – or shall we say the white minority – any special treatment. The apartheid apparatchiks – functionaries and ideologues alike – are disappearing. Many of their offspring, with no personal experience of apartheid, choose to disengage from political life, preferring to focus obsessively inward, or explore greener pastures elsewhere, mainly in English-speaking Commonwealth countries. In fact, a minority of this Afrikaner minority makes common cause with the nation’s reconstruction and development project. This is despite the many encouraging examples of Afrikaners who dedicated themselves to the promotion of a non-racial, democratic South Africa. Outstanding examples include political dissidents Bram Fischer, Beyers Naude and Frederick Van Zyl Slabbert, poets Breyten Breytenbach and Antjie Krog, former president and Nobel laureate FW de Klerk, and former rugby captain Francois Pienaar.

Are outsiders justified in their view of the Afrikaners as an odd, and shrinking, collection of white people in Africa? What about the view that they created a strong state and economy without which a transition to democracy would have been imperilled? There is a vibrant literature – academic and popular – dealing with this matter. Apart from its dramatic content, there is the desire amongst thoughtful South Africans for a deeper understanding of the forces that mould the Afrikaners in the attempt to recover from centuries of imperialism, colonialism and racist violence. In so doing, there is the possibility of identifying some historical lessons, as Moeletsi Mbeki tries when he argues that Afrikaner nationalism severely impeded growth and development for centuries and that African nationalism – evident in the behaviour of the ruling African National Congress (ANC) – is poised to do the same.¹

Giliomee, a well-known and revered academic in the university environment of the Western Cape province of South Africa, produced his ‘Afrikaners’ in 2002 to critical acclaim from mainly liberal white academics. Several years later – in 2009 – he published an updated version of his book, evidently because he felt that more recent events had to be captured as part of the historical journey of the Afrikaner people.

Giliomee states at the outset that he offers a biography (or life story) of the Afrikaner people of South Africa – an ethnic group he characterises as the

The Afrikaners of South Africa – Settlers or Africans?

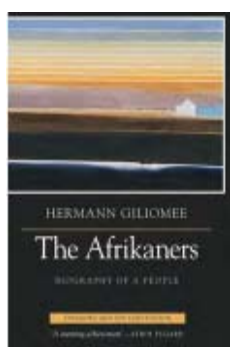
Anthoni van Nieuwkerk

The Afrikaners: Biography of a People

by Hermann Giliomee Hurst and Company, expanded and updated edition, 2011, 715 pages with bibliography and index, ISBN 978-1-84904-148-5.

first anti-colonial freedom fighters of the twentieth century to take on the British empire, and who became, through their system of apartheid, the polecat of the world. Giliomee aims to tell the story ‘with empathy but without partisanship’ (p. xiii). And as he put it towards the end of his magnum opus – ten years in the making – ‘History had happened to the Afrikaners. Their forebears were both colonisers and a colonised people. They had defeated blacks in war but had suffered a shattering defeat at the hands of the British; they had known poverty and contempt for their culture; they had won power and had experienced the corruption of power’ (p. 662).

This review focuses on the second edition of the book, which contains two extra chapters reflecting on the relationship between the Afrikaners and the ruling ANC. Giliomee’s epic saga is organised into nineteen chapters, densely packed with facts, figures, and liberal use of references to historical and other studies in the social sciences that appear to underwrite Giliomee’s point of view. It is worthwhile to outline briefly the key arguments with which Giliomee interprets historical turning points. The book opens with a sketch of the Dutch East India Company, the largest trading enterprise of the seventeenth century and its instruction to Johan Anthonisz (Jan) van Riebeeck to establish a refreshment station at the Cape of Good Hope on 6 April 1652, which was meant to service the shipping trade between Europe and the East. Although we can’t do so in this review, the history of the first batch of Dutch arrivals is a story worth examining in great detail, as it shaped subsequent socio-economic and political developments. The soldiers and sailors who became farming ‘free burghers’ at the Cape also became slave-owners and colonisers. As Giliomee points out, in the Western Cape, ‘... almost every European family of standing owned slaves’ (p. xiv). Slaves were imported from 1658 onwards, from Angola, Mozambique, Madagascar, and further afield from Indonesia and India. Commandos, made up of burghers and Khoikhoi, formed the fighting force that established European control over the land and seized or recovered stolen



stock. Farmers indentured the indigenous people’s children and destroyed their culture.

The burghers who lived in great isolation in the interior went to great lengths to maintain their links with the Dutch Reformed Church with its Calvinist creed. They guarded against social leveling with their slaves and servants, but admitted some into the family’s regular devotions and developed other paternalistic practices. Giliomee argues that these burghers, together with their slaves and semi-free servants turned the Dutch language into Afrikaans, ‘one of the genuinely multi-racial achievements of the new colony’ (p. xiv).

Between the mid-1820s and the mid-1830s, the British – who wrested the Cape Colony from the Dutch – ushered in a near social revolution, ending all statutory discrimination and ultimately also slavery. But they did so after first abolishing all the institutions to which the burghers had become accustomed. The peaceful revolt of Afrikaner frontier farmers that came to be called the Great Trek was partly a rejection of the social leveling these reforms seemed to bring about. The result of the trek was the dispersal of the Afrikaners across South Africa. The trek destroyed any chance of the Afrikaners establishing themselves in a land that was ‘all their own’. In many areas, the trekkers encroached on the land of indigenous people and soon were embroiled in many disputes when they forced those who lived there to work.

When gold was discovered in Witwatersrand in the mid-1880s, the scale tilted against the Africans, as well as the trekkers and the republics they had founded in the Transvaal and Orange Free State. To establish its dominance over all of South Africa and also to secure a more efficient exploitation of the gold deposits, Britain crushed the Boer republics in the Anglo-Boer war of 1899-1902. Fighting the twentieth century’s first anti-colonial war, the Afrikaners were one of the first people to experience the horror of total war and concentration camps for civilians. One-tenth of the Boer population perished and almost all the farms were devastated.

For Giliomee, three aspects of the history of the Afrikaners during the past hundred years stand out. The first is their relative economic backwardness. He analyses this aspect with reference to the heritage of more than two

centuries of subsistence farming, the devastation of the war, the Afrikaners’ late and often traumatic urbanisation and their lack of industrial skills. This gave rise to the problem of the poor whites. The voters who supported the National Party in the 1920s and 1930s were mainly less successful farmers, semi-skilled or unskilled workers, civil servants on the lower rungs, teachers and clergymen.

Secondly, Giliomee highlights the divided nature of the dominant white group, the British-Afrikaner rivalry for status and symbolic power, and the rise of Afrikaner nationalism. On the latter aspect, he notes the various rival interpretations by historians of liberal, Marxist, and nationalist orientation, and adds his own, blended, approach (with a particular emphasis on religion, the role of Afrikaner women, and the relationship between nationalism and language). This is a critical aspect of the book, given the later argument that apartheid was a nationalist project.

Coming to the apartheid era, Giliomee argues that the main ideological influences were not Nazi racial dogmas but the established practice of segregated schools, the theology of the Dutch Reformed Church, racial discrimination in the USA, imperialist ideas about indirect rule and trusteeship, and emerging theories of social conflict in plural societies. This sounds like an over-complicated mix but Giliomee points out that Afrikaner nationalists applied apartheid with a mixture of political zeal and ideological bigotry that went beyond their economic interests. For him, the explanation for this behaviour lies not in their Calvinist beliefs or racial obsessions but in their preoccupation with ethnic survival. Afrikaner nationalist leadership of the mid-twentieth century was obsessed with the idea that the NP’s surprising victory of 1948 was a God-given chance to secure the future of the Afrikaners as a small white people on the African continent. Fighting to ensure survival was seen as a personal responsibility, a higher calling. In many ways, the nationalist obsession with survival became intertwined with the apartheid project as a policy aiming at the maintenance of ethnic groups and cultures.

In Giliomee’s reading, apartheid failed because the plan was imposed, because whites lacked the numbers to make it work and because the world had changed. If the reader searches for a moral judgement rather than this kind of technicist approach, it is only fair to point out that he comments, in his introductory chapter, that the fight against apartheid was perhaps the single most burning moral cause in the world during the 1970s and 1980s.

Giliomee’s epic comes to an end in the final chapters of the book where he examines the Afrikaner retreat from apartheid, and the ‘decision’ to abandon exclusive white power.

Does the book stand as a biography of the Afrikaner people – an interpretation of 350 years of Afrikaner history presented in one book? In some

ways it does. One would have to search hard and far to find a better formulated and balanced account of the broad experiences of a group of people known as the Afrikaners. In other ways, the book disappoints. To start with, the book runs into 700 pages, and the edition we reviewed – published by Hurst – is printed in an exceptionally small font, making for awkward reading. Not anyone’s average weekend read, then. It does not really work as an academic work either, despite a very comprehensive footnote and referencing system. The reason for our scepticism is that the book lacks a theoretical and methodological grounding. The chosen historical approach is a hidden affair, and one gets the sense that Giliomee uses his biography to do battle with liberal, Marxist and nationalist historians, making one wonder where he fits in, beyond what appears to be an eclectic approach.

A further shortcoming relates to the biography’s silence regarding the impact of the Afrikaners beyond the borders of South Africa. For one thing, the ‘great trek’ resulted in Afrikaner footprints (and cultural legacies) as far afield as Namibia, Botswana, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Kenya. More dramatic is the legacy of violence left behind in the southern African region as a result of the Afrikaner-controlled security establishment’s implementation of a policy of regional destabilisation – a cynical and brutal effort to curtail the activities of the liberation movements as pressure mounted to relinquish minority rule. Sadly, the mandate of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission excluded an exploration of this dimension of apartheid rule. At the time of writing this review, one of the apartheid apparatchiks – a medical doctor – was in court defending his contribution to the security forces’

chemical and biological warfare programme of the 1970s and 1980s.

Perhaps the biggest problem relates to Giliomee’s distance from – or should one rather say closeness to – the subject matter. This becomes clear when he deals with the contemporary historical setting, particularly the part of the story relating to the Afrikaner elite’s decision to give up political power, and how that shaped the post-apartheid relationship between the white minority and the black majority. Giliomee admits – bravely so – that to write objectively about the immediate past is difficult. He says that recent events touch a historian (like himself) more deeply, perhaps because he was involved in some of the recent developments as a ‘participant-observer’. The final chapters of the second edition of the biography therefore work less well than the previous sections and chapters. Giliomee passes judgement

on the behaviour of the ruling ANC and its attitudes towards Afrikaans-speaking whites (‘Afrikaner’ as an identity label has seemingly become an anachronism in post-apartheid South Africa) and he ends his epic saga on a bitter note – an unfortunate closure, given his brilliant portrayal of the motive forces that drove the Afrikaners on a remarkable and disturbing journey through history. It is for the reader to turn to other, perhaps less emotive and more instructive, analyses of the place and role of the white minority in democratic South Africa.

Note

1. See his 2009 publication entitled ‘Architects of Poverty: Why African Capitalism Needs Changing’ (Pan Macmillan, South Africa).

