

South African History [Apartheid]

Written by Administrator

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After the Second World War, in 1948, the NP, with its ideology of apartheid that brought an even more rigorous and authoritarian approach than the segregationist policies of previous governments, won the general election. It did so against the background of a revival of mass militancy during the 1940s, after a period of relative quiescence in the 1930s when black groups attempted to foster unity among themselves.

The change was marked by the formation of the ANC Youth League in 1943, fostering the leadership of figures such as Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo and Walter Sisulu, who were to inspire the struggle for decades to come. In the 1940s, squatter movements in peri-urban areas brought mass politics back to the urban centres.

The 1946 mineworkers' strike was a turning point in the emergence of a politics of mass mobilization.

As was the case with the First World War, the experience of the Second World War and post-war economic difficulties enhanced discontent.

For those who supported the NP, its primary appeal lay in its determination to maintain white domination in the face of rising mass resistance, to uplift poor Afrikaners, to challenge the pre-eminence of English-speaking whites in public life, the professions and business, and to abolish the remaining imperial ties.

The State became an engine of patronage for Afrikaner employment. The Afrikaner Broederbond co-ordinate the Party's program, ensuring that Afrikaner nationalist interests and policies attained ascendancy throughout civil society.

In 1961, the NP government under Prime Minister HF Verwoerd declared South Africa a republic, after winning a whites-only referendum on the issue. A new currency, the Rand, new flag, anthem and coat of arms were formally introduced. South Africa also withdrew from the British Commonwealth, and a figurehead president replaced the Queen (represented locally by the Governor-General) as Head of State.

In most respects, apartheid was a continuation, in more systematic and brutal form, of the segregationist policies of previous governments. A new concern with racial purity was apparent in laws prohibiting interracial sex and in provisions for population registration requiring that every South African be assigned to one discrete racial category or another.

For the first time the coloured people, who had always been subjected to informal discrimination, were brought within the ambit of discriminatory laws.

In the mid-1950s, the government took the drastic step of overriding an entrenched clause in the 1910 Constitution of the Union so as to be able to remove coloured voters from the common voters' roll. It also enforced residential segregation, expropriating homes where necessary and policing massive forced removals into 'coloured group areas'.

Until the 1940s, South Africa's race policies had not been entirely out of step with those to be

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found in the colonial world. But by the 1950s, which saw decolonization and a global backlash against racism gather pace, the country was dramatically opposed to world opinion on questions of human rights.

The architects of apartheid, among whom Dr HF Verwoerd was pre-eminent, responded by elaborating a theory of multinationalism. Their policy, which they termed 'separate development', divided the African population into artificial ethnic 'nations', each with its own 'homeland' and the prospect of 'independence', supposedly in keeping with trends elsewhere on the continent.

This divide-and-rule strategy was designed to disguise the racial basis of official policy-making by the substitution of the language of ethnicity. This was accompanied by much ethnographic engineering as efforts were made to resurrect tribal structures. In the process, the government created a considerable collaborating class.

The truth was that the rural reserves were by this time thoroughly degraded by overpopulation and soil erosion. This did not prevent four of the 'homeland' structures (Transkei, Bophuthatswana, Venda and Ciskei) being declared 'independent', a status which the international community declined to recognize. In each case, the process involved the repression of opposition and the use by the government of the power to nominate and thereby pad elected assemblies with a quota of compliant figures.

Forced removals from 'white' areas affected some 3.5 million people, and vast rural slums were created in the homelands, which were used as dumping grounds. The pass laws and influx control were extended and harshly enforced, and labor bureau were set up to channel labor to where it was needed.

Industrial decentralization to growth points on the borders of (but not inside) the homelands was promoted as a means of keeping blacks out of 'white' South Africa.

In virtually every sphere, from housing to education to health care, central government took control over black people's lives with a view to reinforcing their allotted role as 'temporary sojourners', welcome in 'white' South Africa solely to serve the needs of the employers of labor.