



The white-ruled Republic of South Africa, facing economic recession and black unrest, is still the area's strongest power. With the independence of Angola and Mozambique, its neighbors are now ruled by black African regimes, except for hardpressed Rhodesia.



# Southern Africa

In the wake of the Angolan civil war, the independence of Mozambique, and the pressures for black majority rule in Rhodesia, Southern Africa is back in the news. Involved directly or indirectly in all these changes has been the Republic of South Africa, whose own tranquillity was shaken last summer by the rioting black youths of Soweto outside Johannesburg. The Republic's future as a locus of Western investment, a friendly military power, and prosperous citadel of white supremacy is again a matter of scholarly speculation and much debate. Our Background Books cover the entire area of Southern Africa. Our essayists focus on South Africa. Historian Lewis H. Gann examines the peculiar white experience which has so strongly shaped Pretoria's politics. Political scientist Gwendolen Carter reviews the blacks' long history of protest. Journalist Colin Legum examines possible outcomes, and anthropologist Absalom Vilakazi supplies additional commentary.



## THE WHITE EXPERIENCE IN SOUTH AFRICA

*by Lewis H. Gann*

It was a rough day at sea in April 1652, when the first mate of the Dutch vessel *Drommedaris* sighted land at the Cape of Good Hope. The crew, under the command of Captain Jan van Riebeeck, a thick-set, weather-beaten surgeon with much sea-going experience, dropped anchor, and the Dutch built their first crude fort of earth and timber on a site close to Cape Town's present main railroad station. Unwittingly, the Dutch had taken the first step toward permanent white settlement in

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Southern Africa. They had merely been seeking a harbor where their ships might refit and obtain food and fresh water on the long trip to the Indies, but the fort and its market garden evolved into a colony as more settlers arrived. They came from Holland, Germany, and France. In 1679 a number of families moved beyond the isthmus into the Cape proper.

### Life on the Frontier

The temperate climate enabled white women to settle in the country and raise healthy children. Their presence discouraged male colonists from marrying women of the indigenous Khoikhoi, a primitive, dark-skinned, pastoral people known to the settlers as Hottentots. Irregular interracial unions were not uncommon, but their offspring bore the badge of illegitimacy and were treated with contempt by both races. The Dutch introduced slaves from the East Indies into the country, which accustomed most colonists to look down on persons of color by associating menial labor with a dark complexion. More significant perhaps was the impact of the inland frontier, where European colonists confronted Khoikhoi herdsmen and the San (whom they called Bushmen), a Stone Age people dependent on hunting.

Life on the frontier did not always beget hostility. White hunters and traders often established amicable relations with the aboriginal communities, but white farmers clashed with their black neighbors over water sources, and pasture land. The native herdsmen were unable to defend their grazing grounds against the advancing whites, and many perished. Others were reduced to dependence or servile status; still others mingled with whites, acquired horses, guns, and wagons, adopted the language of their conquerors, and turned to farming on the European model.

As the tide of European conquest rolled on into the 18th

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*Lewis Henry Gann, 53, is a Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace, Stanford, California. Born in Germany, he grew up in England and served with the Royal Fusiliers in World War II, took his B.A. at Balliol College, Oxford (1950), and went to Northern Rhodesia as a research historian. He taught colonial history at Manchester University in England before becoming head of the National Archives of Rhodesia and Nyasaland (1954-63). Awarded a Ph.D. from Oxford, he joined the Hoover Institution in 1964. His many books include The Birth of a Plural Society (1958), Burden of Empire: An Appraisal of Western Colonialism in Africa South of the Sahara (with Peter Duignan, 1967, 1971), and Africa and the World at Large (also with Peter Duignan, 1972).*

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century, the whites became increasingly color-conscious. Whereas it was possible for halfcaste Christian converts to acquire full civic status in the early days, the sacrament of baptism no longer sufficed to make a half-breed the equal of a white man in the civic sense. A Cape burgher now had to be born of free white parents to be accepted as a fully qualified citizen.

At the same time, white society split into two distinct segments: the society of the coastal Cape settlements, linked to Holland by ties of culture, ancestry, and religion (the Dutch Reformed Church) and the pastoral society of the interior. Cape Town had grown into a substantial port that looked toward both the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean. The adjoining settlements drew their grain supplies from farms of the European type in the Western Cape. These were substantial estates, worked by colored (that is to say, halfcaste Eurafrikan) labor. The wealthier European farmers built substantial but simply furnished homes, embellished with whitewashed walls, great verandas, and fine portals.

The sedentary society of the Western Cape contrasted sharply with the rude society of the interior. As the colonists pushed deeper inland, they raised livestock rather than market crops. Subdivision of land, accompanied by more intensive cultivation, was not a feasible proposition as long as labor and capital were scarce, markets inadequate, and only land was plentiful. The *trekboer*, or Boer herdsmen, kept moving in order to avoid competing with their neighbors for pastures and wells. Trekking provided opportunities for the poor who could not afford to buy the required farmland. Frontiersmen who could afford the land were apt to exhaust the soil by their methods of cultivation. "The veld got tired," the saying went, and the trekkers moved on.

### The Taming of the Wilderness

The *trekboer* first supplied the Cape markets. Later the economic center of gravity shifted more toward the new ports—Port Elizabeth, East London, Durban—that were being opened on the east coast. By the middle of the last century, the trekkers belonged to a new nation, no longer Dutch, although they spoke Afrikaans, a new language derived from Dutch. The *trekboer* became one of the world's great wilderness specialists. He knew how to handle a span of oxen in rough country. As a soil prospector, he knew how to find the best farming land in the wilderness. He was a crack shot and expert hunter. The interior had no terrors for him. The Boer's wagon, or *laager*, served both as a

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means of transport and a means of mobile defense in battle. His weaponry and military skill defeated the Khoikhoi and the San. Later, the Afrikaners met far more warlike opponents, the Bantu-speaking Kaffirs, first encountered on the Great Fish River in 1778. The Bantu were familiar with the use of iron and had developed their own systems of farming and grazing. These were as extensive as those of the Boers, requiring ever new expanses of woodland and pasture for sustenance. Not surprisingly, Boer and Bantu met in battle. The Bantu fought hard, but by and large, the fortunes of battle favored the Afrikaners—less numerous but better armed and organized than their opponents, who depended on rudimentary tools like the hoe, simple weapons like spears, and sheer muscle power.

By the beginning of the 19th century, the white population at the Cape was estimated to be 27,000 men, women, and children. Of these, about 6,000 lived in Cape Town, the principal city; by contemporary standards, white South Africans were already a highly urbanized people. The Dutch, French, and German population was further reinforced by immigrants from Great Britain. During the long wars against the forces of the French Revolution and Napoleon, the British seized the strategically vital Cape of Good Hope. By 1806, they held it permanently, and British settlers found homes for themselves on the Eastern Cape and in Natal. Some became farmers; others turned frontiersmen, like the Afrikaners. The majority, however, became townsmen, so that British influence became dominant in trade and finance. The British, of course, also held political power, and tried to reshape Cape society in the British image.

### **The Great Trek**

In 1833 slavery was outlawed as part of a wider movement to extirpate slavery throughout the British Empire. Guided by missionary and humanitarian influences, the British made some attempts to improve the civic condition of the Khoikhoi. Forced labor was abandoned, and the former slaves were gradually absorbed into a wage-earning proletariat. At the same time, the British attempted to “anglify” the Cape Dutch population, but the Dutch clung to their accustomed ways. The more uncompromising elements escaped British rule by trekking into the interior.

“We complain,” wrote Piet Retief, one of the most prominent trek leaders, in words that were to echo later from Cape Town to Salisbury, “of the unjustified odium that has been cast upon us by interested and dishonest persons under the name of re-

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ligion, whose testimony is believed in England to the exclusion of all evidence in our favour, and we can foresee as the result of their prejudice nothing but the total ruin of our country.”\*

The Great Trek was the Afrikaans-speaking frontiersmen's declaration of independence. By the end of 1837, some 5,000 men, women, and children had crossed the northern boundary of the Cape Colony. As the wagons rolled further and further inland, the trekkers fought bitter wars against the Bantu-speaking peoples of the interior and suffered unbelievable hardships. In the end they founded two independent states, the Orange Free State and the Transvaal, with complete domination of the indigenous peoples.

### **Diamonds, Gold, Englishmen**

The new farmer republics were not left alone for long. In 1867, diamonds were discovered in the interior near the Orange River. Prospectors of many nationalities, most of them English-speaking, invaded the Cape and set off for Kimberley, the tough frontier town that was attracting both white and black newcomers from many parts of the world. For the first time, substantial amounts of capital flowed into a region hitherto dependent economically on a few agricultural exports. The precious stones were first extracted by small entrepreneurs in open quarries, but this method soon became inadequate; control of the industry passed into the hands of a few large modern companies headed by mining magnates like the British empire-builder Cecil John Rhodes. The diamond industry was sufficiently profitable to generate more investment within South Africa. Additional expansion occurred in 1886 when gold was discovered at the Witwatersrand in the Transvaal. South Africa in time became the world's greatest producer of gold.

The exploitation of mineral resources had far-reaching consequences in South Africa. It encouraged the construction of railways and created a need for a broad range of secondary industries. The miners' compound provided markets for farm products. Johannesburg, as time went on, developed from a backwoods community into the center of Africa's greatest industrial complex. The unskilled laborers were migrants from the tribal areas in the countryside, but the businessmen, managers, and skilled workers were mainly of British origin, and they imposed the English language on the Witwatersrand.

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\*Cited in L. H. Gann and Peter Duignan, *White Settlers in Tropical Africa* (Penguin, 1962) p. 31.

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**POPULATION OF SOUTH AFRICA, BY RACE**

	Total	Whites	Blacks	Asiatics	Colored (Eurafricans)
<b>1904</b>	5,174,827	1,117,234	3,490,291	122,311	444,991
<b>1921</b>	6,927,403	1,521,343	4,697,285	163,594	545,181
<b>1936</b>	9,587,863	2,003,334	6,595,597	219,691	769,241
<b>1946</b>	11,415,925	2,372,044	7,830,559	285,260	928,062
<b>1951</b>	12,671,452	2,641,689	8,560,083	366,664	1,103,016
<b>1960</b>	15,982,664	3,008,492	10,907,789	477,125	1,509,258
<b>1970</b>	21,447,230	3,750,716	15,057,559	620,422	2,018,533

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Source: *Economic, Financial and Statistical Yearbooks for South Africa* (Johannesburg: Da Gama, various years).

By the end of the 19th century the population of South Africa had undergone tremendous growth. The exact figure for 1800 is not known, but it was probably between 1 and 2 million. In a single century, the number had increased to about 5 million—roughly 1 million whites, 3.5 million native Africans speaking a variety of languages, less than half a million coloreds, and just over 100,000 newcomers from India. From 1900 on, there has been a demographic revolution due to a substantial number of new immigrants, white, Asian, and African (see table). Declining death rates, improved medical and transport facilities, and increased supplies of food all helped to shift the demographic balance. More importantly, the well-being of all races increased, albeit at vastly different rates, by reason of such mundane innovations as brick houses (which replaced primitive huts), sewage facilities, piped water, and the growing availability of soap.

Demographically, the black and colored peoples of South Africa more than held their own with the white immigrants, who remained a minority within the country. Politically, the dark-skinned races were unable to exert much power. Mission-trained Africans acquired a certain measure of education, but the military and technological balance of power remained with the whites, who were sharply divided into opposing groups—townsmen and countrymen; employers and employees; immigrants and old-timers; above all, English-speaking whites and whites who spoke Afrikaans and were primarily of rural origin.

Anglo-Afrikaner rivalry came to a head in the South African

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War (1899–1902). For President Oom Paul Kruger of the Transvaal Republic, the struggle was one of national survival for the Lord's Chosen People. "The Lord transplanted this people and led it here among miracles," he declaimed. The time had come to defend the Afrikaner heritage against the new Babylon. The British view of the war was that it was being fought not only for local South African interests but for the British Empire and civilization in general. Sir Garnet Wolseley, commander-in-chief of the British Army, said in all sincerity, "I firmly believe that . . . I work in the cause of Christianity, of peace, of civilization, and the happiness of the human race. . . ."\*

To put it more realistically, Great Britain, supported locally by Natal and the Cape, went to war against the Boers of the Orange Free State and the Transvaal over the issue of who was to rule in South Africa. The struggle began as a colonial campaign against a foe whom many British officers considered barely superior to Afghan mountaineers. It ended as the greatest overseas military venture undertaken by a European power prior to World War I. Nearly 450,000 men (including English-speaking South Africans and volunteers from countries as far afield as Australia and Canada) served under the Union Jack, as against a total of about 87,000 on the Afrikaner side. To many Americans it was a replay of the American Revolution. To the Boers it was a war of national defense, known in Afrikaans history books as the Second Freedom War. To British South Africans in the Transvaal, it was a war for equal rights with the Afrikaans-speaking burghers. Socialists mistakenly regarded the war as a struggle for South Africa's gold. (The so-called Rand Lords were in fact divided.)

### Defeat into Victory

Fundamentally, it was a white civil war, a war of territorial unification, comparable in a certain sense to the U.S. Civil War, with Afrikaners, Jews, Irishmen, and even Englishmen fighting on both sides. After a long and bitter struggle, the British won, but only in a military sense. In 1906, the conquerors restored self-government to the defeated Orange Free State and Transvaal, and in 1910 the four South African colonies joined in the Union of South Africa, a self-governing dominion as independent of British political control as Canada. The franchise remained largely confined to whites, of whom the Afrikaners were a majority, and Afrikaans remained the nation's most widely spoken language.

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\*Cited in Eversley Belfield, *The Boer War* (Hamden, Conn.: Shoe String, 1975), p. 5.



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Politically, control began to pass into Afrikaner hands. (Since 1910, all South African Prime Ministers have come from the Afrikaans-speaking community.) The balance of economic power, on the other hand, continued to rest with English-speaking whites, and in a military sense, South Africa remained allied to Great Britain.

After the Boer War, South Africa seemed destined to simply supply overseas industries with raw materials, mainly metals. During the 1930s and 1940s, the most distinguished academicians predicted that South Africa's industrial progress was bound to be slow. Color-bar legislation, favoring white men in skilled jobs over black, said the experts, would prevent the country from embarking on a rapid course of industrialization, not to mention other obstacles, such as lack of capital. The country was seen as locked in a vicious cycle of rural poverty from which it could not speedily emerge.

But as happened so often in South African history, the academicians turned out to be wrong. Speaking broadly, the industrial revolution on the African continent began in South Africa. World War I saw a rapid growth of manufacturing. During the 1930s (at a time when nearly half of South Africa's European-descended population—mostly Afrikaners—were still classed as "poor whites"), South Africa began to manufacture its own steel, thereby laying the foundations of a major industrial system. During World War II, industrialization increased at a phenomenal pace, and manufactures became increasingly diversified and complex.

### **Africa's Most Urban Society**

In the 1950s, South Africa was the first African country to reach industrial parity with the developed nations of the world. By the late sixties, the country was not only exporting specialized mining equipment but was turning out sophisticated electronic and nuclear engineering products and demonstrating managerial and entrepreneurial skills that were to influence the economic fortunes of neighboring Rhodesia and Zambia. South Africa ceased to be totally dependent on foreign capital and, for a time, even began to export its surpluses.

The social effects of industrialization were far-reaching. The Afrikaners were drawn into the cities, like their English-speaking countrymen before them. (By 1970, 86.7 percent of all whites, as against 35 percent of Africans, had become urban dwellers.) The class of poor whites largely disappeared as unskilled whites

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moved into semiskilled and skilled jobs, and skilled whites moved into the managerial class. This progression was accompanied by a form of "ethnic succession" as black Africans began to move into the cities to fill industrial jobs previously held by less well-paid whites, commonly Afrikaners. Afrikaners, once the butt of ethnic jokes by English-speaking South Africans, began to make their fortunes in industry, banking, commerce, and publishing, fields where English-speakers had once been supreme. Afrikaners' political predominance solidified in 1948 when the National Party, largely an Afrikaans-speaking organization, gained victory at the polls.\*

This Afrikaner victory brought about a decisive change in South Africa's international reputation. During the Boer War, liberal opinion overseas had regarded the Afrikaners as virtuous underdogs, struggling for freedom from British rule. During World War II, Jan Christiaan Smuts, ex-Boer guerrilla leader and then South African Prime Minister, had given inestimable, much-lauded service to the allied cause. The British military effort in the Near East depended on control of the Cape route; South African gold helped to sustain the Allied cause. Liberals at home and abroad were loud in their praise of Smuts, and his fall in 1948 was interpreted by the British South African press and by academia as a disaster, indeed almost as an offense against the natural order. In time, South Africa came to be the prime target of international humanitarian criticism, the "unspeakable Turk" of the mid-20th century, its tyrannies seen as worse than those of Stalin, Ho Chi Minh, or the grubby despots of ex-colonies like Equatorial Guinea.

In South Africa after 1948, the ruling National Party made no verbal concessions to the real or supposed spirit of the age. The Nationalists remained committed to minority rule by European-descended South Africans. African opposition was to be assuaged by social reform (ironically enough, the record of the Nationalists in urban renewal and the provision of medical and educational services for Africans turned out to be much superior to that of the Smuts regime). In addition, the South African blacks would enjoy local independence.

The critics, however, totally rejected what they regarded as a form of social tinkering. The South African system, as they

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\*Since September 1966, the Republic of South Africa's National Party Government has been headed by Prime Minister Balthazar J. Vorster. The largely Afrikaans-speaking Nationalists, as of May 1976, held 122 seats in the House of Assembly; the divided, largely "English" United Party, which advocates a federation of racially based local governments with a multiracial central parliament under white guidance, held 35 seats; the Progressive Reform Party, formed in 1975 from a liberal faction of the United Party, held 12 seats.

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saw it, depended on a ruling "pigmentocracy," comprising no more than one fifth of South Africa's total population. The Bantu homelands were but a sham. The gap between whites on the one hand and browns and blacks on the other, remained unbridgeable. At a time when the peoples of the Third World were throwing off the shackles of colonialism, South Africa (its critics insisted) remained a global anachronism, a neo-Fascist state, a peril to peace and to human liberty, the problem child of the guilty West. The system must be mended or ended—mended by reform or ended by revolution. Fundamental change, they argued, was both healthy and inevitable, even if accompanied by violence and temporary breakdown.

### Myths and Realities

Those sympathetic to the cause of South Africa (like the present writer) took a very different line. The belief that South Africa was governed by a rigid, unchanging dictatorship, they held, rested on an optical illusion. White South Africans, during the last three decades, had in fact evolved in a fashion that would have appeared strikingly "negrophilist" to supposedly liberal statesmen of an earlier generation such as Prime Minister Smuts.

During the 1930's, the National Party had resembled in certain respects a Middle-European anti-Semitic peasant party composed of intellectuals, poverty-stricken farmers, and white workmen threatened by unemployment because of black competition. A generation later, the Nationalists had dropped their erstwhile hostility to the Jews. Their numbers included many solid businessmen and bankers willing to give employment to qualified workmen, no matter what the color of their skin.\* South Africa, moreover, was anything but decadent. It was economically the most progressive country on the African continent. Blacks as well as whites benefited from economic development. Black wages had gone up steadily, despite wage discrimination. By late 1976, less than 3 percent of all jobs in South Africa were officially restricted to whites only.

Given South Africa's economic vigor, the chances for revolution were small. The opposition was divided. The Republic's army and the administration were neither inefficient nor corrupt,

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\*In his forthcoming *The Politics of South Africa* (Oxford, 1977), Howard Brotz writes that the National Party has long been unduly dominated by its apartheid extremists. Brotz argues that a new "center" coalition could attract a sufficient majority of relatively moderate white voters, both from the National Party and the United Party, to a policy of "reality, sense, and decency" with respect to the homelands, urban blacks, and "law and order." But Mr. Vorster's Nationalists, he maintains, must take the lead.—Ed.

nor were they subject to infiltration like, say, the former government of South Vietnam. The country's military expenditures, though impressive by African standards, did not constitute an insupportable burden.\* Despite predictions of a racial bloodbath, the whites had managed the country with infinitely less bloodshed than had occurred in independent African countries like Nigeria, the Sudan, Uganda, Zaire, and Angola. The Indian minority had grievances but were quite conscious of the fact that their existence in white-governed South Africa compared favorably with the plight of Indian minorities in black African states like Kenya or Uganda.

The Bantu-speaking black Africans likewise had grounds for discontent. There was rioting; there was much bitterness; but there was almost no black emigration. Few South African blacks left for Mozambique or Angola. On the contrary, many hundred thousands of foreign Africans had chosen to live and work within South Africa. The Bantu homelands policy suffered from a variety of severe, unresolved contradictions. It was certain, for instance, that the program would require more capital and would have to be much enlarged, and that the whites would have to concede municipal home rule to urban Africans as well. Yet by African standards, the homelands had not done too badly. (The per capita income of the Transkei—a Bantu homeland granted independence in 1976—was larger than that of Togo, Tanzania, Sudan, Somalia, Rwanda, Niger, Mali, or Malagasy; the per capita income of another homeland, Kwazulu, exceeded that of Guinea, Gambia, Ethiopia, Dahomey, Chad, and Burundi.)

### No Revolution in Sight

In terms of civil liberty, South Africa is infinitely freer than most of the countries that condemned South Africa in the United Nations. The English-language press in South Africa, for instance, remains solidly arrayed against a supposedly totalitarian Afrikaans-led regime. The freedom that churchmen or dissident academics enjoy in South Africa would appear extraordinary to their counterparts in China, Russia, Vietnam, Cuba, or in most other African states. South Africa did not expel dissident ethnic minorities by the millions, as the Poles and Czechs, the Indians and Pakistanis, the Burmese, and the Ugandans had done after World War II, all without incurring global censure. Relations between the races in South Africa in the mid-1970s, though

\*South Africa's military budget in 1976 totaled \$1.5 billion (17 percent of the total national budget) for a 51,000-man army, air force, and navy.—Ed.

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strained, were vastly more peaceful than relations between rival ethnic groups in Lebanon, Cyprus, Nigeria, and many other strife-torn countries of the world.

South African blacks were—and are—divided along linguistic, ethnic, and social lines. No disciplined cohesive cadres capable of leading a revolution exist. Armed intervention on the part of other African states is not presently feasible, given the strength of the South African military, and the logistic, organizational, and political weaknesses of Pretoria's foes.

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The old-style trekker looked for fresh pastures whenever he saw smoke rising from some newly built homestead on the distant horizon. But future treks will not avail against the new challenges of the megalopolis, as economic expansion makes Johannesburg and Pretoria coalesce into great, multiethnic, urban complexes. It is, of course, conceivable that the South African economy, already faced with recession, inflation, and fluctuating gold prices, might be shaken to its foundations by a bloody civil war. To this writer, such a contingency seems unlikely, given the balance of power. Regardless of who wields political power in the future, the nation's major task will be twofold: to feed an expanding population and to solve the problems of an industrial society. In this great task, the whites will continue to play a major, perhaps a decisive, role. But first they will have to overcome obstacles that would have taxed alike the courage of a Jan van Riebeeck and the resolution of a Cecil Rhodes.