

**Chris Walton**

Chris Walton is Professor at the  
University of Pretoria.  
E-mail: chrwalton@gmail.com

Review article

## Can new histories be written objectively by old historians?

### **New History of South Africa.**

Hermann Giliomee & Bernard Mbenga. 2007. Cape Town: Tafelberg. 454 pp.  
ISBN: 978-0-624-04358-4.

What is a 'new' history? When is a history 'new', and who decides what is no longer 'old'? With a volume intended for general readership, splitting hairs like this is perhaps a little unfair, for the adjective is probably just what that general reader will assume it is: a signifier that this is a history of the beloved country for the 'new', democratic, South Africa as opposed to a history for (rather than 'of') the 'old', pre-democratic, now not-so-beloved apartheid state. A history, then (as the Introduction states clearly) that eschews the earlier tendency to begin in 1652 with some form of *terra nulla*. But as the Introduction also points out, the excellent *Oxford History of South Africa* of 1969–71 (still a good read today) had already extended South African history into – well, South African pre-history. Since the *Oxford History* was an 'Oxford' history, however, not a 'South African' history, I suppose it would count as (at best) 'pre-new', rather than 'new'. Nor is the Giliomee-Mbenga the first 'new history' of South Africa, as there was one over twenty years ago, by Trewhella Cameron and Stephanus Spies (which I suppose we'd then have to classify as 'post-pre-new'; but let's not get too carried away by all this).

So what makes this *New History* new? Well, the fact that it has one black and one white editor, for a start; and one suspects that it would not have been published (at least not as 'New'), were this not the case. As the Introduction states, the *New History* draws on the 'revisionist' historical work of the past three decades and the reinterpretations of such events as the Mfecane, the Anglo-Boer Wars and the role played in the Second of the latter by blacks, coloureds, Indians and the San; it rightly aims to "redress past distortions and biases". To sum it up: "Our goal has been to present our history in all its complexity in a fair and balanced manner" (x).

How successful have the editors been in that goal? On the whole, remarkably so, for the first two-thirds of the book at least. It is elegantly produced, with many illus-



trations (black and white plus colour), and as a historian hitherto better versed in the modern than in the old, the present writer has learnt a lot from it. To be sure, there is much that will be familiar to readers from other sources, not least Giliomee's own *Afrikaners*, and as the Introduction also admits, the book as a whole "rests to a large extent on previous published work by the different contributors" (x). While anyone can quibble about this or that being left out (there was some displeasure in the Afrikaans press a few months ago at the treatment of the early years from 1652 on, for example), any concise telling worth its salt is going to displease everyone in some small way. What really counts in a book such as this is whether or not the resultant narrative comes across as fair and representative. And for much of the time, this book succeeds. The complex history of early South Africa, of its many immigrants from different places, the importance of slavery, the conflict between Boer and Brit after the arrival of the latter, the impact of the missionaries, the emergence of the various nationalisms – all this makes for a darned good read. Perhaps surprisingly, certain key Afrikaner figures do not get the prominence one might expect (such as President Steyn of the Orange Free State). But again, a history of less than 500 pages can't satisfy everyone. And one is simply reminded that it's high time that we get decent biographies of men such as Steyn and Kruger (Giliomee is not alone in having in recent times argued, rightly, for a re-evaluation of Kruger; yet one must not forget that there are in fact hardly any reliable biographies of *any* leading South African political figures). The book barely touches on cultural issues, however, restricting itself (intentionally) to the political and, to a degree, the economic fields. But it is a real shame. This was a missed opportunity to bring a spotlight to bear on general issues of art, literature and music in a manner that would have been of benefit to the layman.

There are, however, a few more specific questions that this *New History* raises. One is: just how much was written by whom? While the dust jacket proudly announces that the book is the work of "31 of South Africa's foremost historians", the list on page [v] makes it clear that some of them wrote very little indeed, and it also mentions more than once that "Hermann Giliomee wrote the rest" of certain chapters. (In fact, there seem to have been 32 authors; Annette Giliomee wrote a section in Chapter Two, but is omitted from the tally of contributors at the end of the book).

It would be interesting to know precisely how much of the book was written and or edited by Giliomee alone. Not least because the latter part of it – for which Giliomee was apparently the prime author (e.g. "... of the rest of the material in the three chapters of Part Four") – seems to reflect certain revisionist tendencies apparent in Giliomee's own writings of the past few years. Elsewhere, for example, he has argued that apartheid should be regarded as "a modernised form of both paternalism and trusteeship, on the one hand and, on the other, elements of liberal ideology not used by segregationists", whose "most sophisticated version [was] espoused first by N. P. van Wyk Louw and G. B. Gerdener" (Giliomee 2003: 373). In the *New History* too, as in



the article just quoted, there is an endeavour to portray apartheid as part of a historical continuum of segregation.

This brings about an interesting interpretation of Verwoerd. His “most significant contribution [...] [in the development of apartheid as a form of decolonization] was to help whites think about race in terms other than biological superiority/inferiority and to present the problem as a political problem where different ethnic groups had to find a way to co-exist” (345). We are also told that Verwoerd’s policies “fell far short of his earlier promise” (345), though precisely what that promise was remains nebulous. And it is implied that his later promise, too, remained unfulfilled: thus his discussions with Dag Hammarskjöld in 1961 offered him “a unique opportunity [...] to develop a plan that could gather sufficient international support for the ‘decolonisation’ of South Africa. But tragically Hammarskjöld was killed a few months later in a plane accident” (340; since it is now a matter of debate that the ‘accident’ might in fact have been planned by the South African authorities themselves, this naturally puts that ‘unique opportunity’ in a different light). When Verwoerd was assassinated, we are further told, “he was to make a speech that was said to have contained important policy announcements” (345). Yet another Verwoerdian opportunity of which South Africa, it is implied, was robbed by fate.

Verwoerd’s assassin, the *New History* tells us, was a “white parliamentary messenger Dimitrio Tsafendas”, who “was later found by a court to be deranged” (345). But he was not white (which we all should know, at least since Henk van Woerden’s *Mouthful of Glass*); he was of mixed race. And while the poor fellow by all accounts did have his problems upstairs, it is noteworthy that Verwoerd’s unsuccessful assassin of 1960, David Pratt, was according to the *New History* also “a mentally deranged white man” (336). As Oscar Wilde might have said, to be the victim of one deranged white man is unfortunate, but to be the victim of two smacks of carelessness. It’s almost as if a wish to rid the world of Verwoerd were by definition the prerogative of deranged whites. But in this context, regardless of the mental state of the perpetrator (and without wishing to justify any act of killing), would not ‘tyrannicide’ be a more accurate term than ‘assassination’?

Apartheid’s possible origins in Nazi ideology are also disputed here. Thus, “There is no evidence that [Verwoerd] was influenced by Nazi racial ideology” (314). Situating the birth of apartheid as much in the thinking of a man such as N. P. van Wyk Louw, as Giliomee does elsewhere (see above) also inevitably serves to disassociate it from crass ideologists. We are told in the *New History* that the National Party in the 1930s and ‘40s “was not in any significant way influenced by the far right” (300). While the Nazi affiliations of Nico Diederichs, Piet Meyer and others is not hidden here, their names receive barely a mention in the book (Meyer only once), while Geoffrey Cronjé, perhaps best known today thanks to J. M. Coetzee’s decade-old essay on him, receives not a mention at all. This effort to move apartheid into the historical



mainstream, which involves a shift in blame towards respected men such as van Wyk Louw, could in theory lead to a broadening of culpability (Daniel Goldhagen here we come?). But instead, it seems coupled with an endeavour to portray the loony right as peripheral, which they were not. Then there is the attempt to paint Verwoerd as a mistaken intellectual who should perhaps be compared to the likes of de Gaulle rather than, say, a Saddam Hussein. Giliomee (in Brand) has discussed both these comparisons before, but finds the latter an 'absurdity', pointing out that, under Verwoerd, "in die selle het presies drie mense in aanhouding gesterf". But by mentioning the comparison merely to dismiss it, Giliomee to my mind reinforces its validity. To take recorded deaths in police cells as one's prime criterion for proof of evil intent is surely itself an absurdity. So is the table given in the *New History* on page 398 listing "deaths in ethnic conflicts" worldwide, with Cambodia with the most at the top and South Africa with the fewest at the bottom, below Northern Ireland (I must remember to tell my Northern Irish friends how much better their lives would have been, had they been born black in South Africa instead). Consider South Africa's millions of blighted lives, the hundreds of thousands uprooted, the disregard for life and limb of millions of citizens, all to promote the well-being of a racial élite – and then the comparisons of Verwoerd with the nastiest leaders of the 20<sup>th</sup> century no longer seem so invalid. Similarly, to claim that there is 'no evidence' of the influence of Nazi thought on Verwoerd is too glib: this is a topic that really needs further investigation. To be sure, while the German universities he studied at in the mid-1920s were hardly dominated by left-wing intellectuals, and while his sometime colleagues, at least in Leipzig, included men who became prominent supporters of the post-1933 university order, this does not prove anything conclusive about Verwoerd himself. However, the fact that his first editorial in the *Transvaler* in 1937 was rabidly anti-Jewish suggests that German fascism had not left him cold. The lack of Nazi phraseology in National Party statements after the Second World War is proof only that they, too, had realized that racial supremacy had acquired a bad press worldwide. The simple fact is that Nazi-influenced men such as Piet Meyer (who did not even shave off his Hitler moustache after 1945), Geoff Cronjé, B. J. Vorster and Nico Diederichs were not an idiotic fringe of minor importance, but mainstream players, both in the establishment of the apartheid state, and in the running of it for some three decades (a glance at Cronjé's obituary [see Pieterse 1993], for example, with its lists of the committees on which he served and the honorary doctorates he was awarded, allays any suspicion that he had somehow been sidelined after the 1940s). To read the writings of Diederichs, Meyer, Cronjé and others is not just uncomfortable (as Coetzee has noted, for example, Cronjé had an obsession with black men's sperm). It also pushes one to an interpretation of apartheid as something more than a 'mere' continuation of segregation. It is all very well, for example, to tell us that Bantu Education was "an attempt to provide mass education for an industrialising economy" and that it "made for a



definite improvement in mass literacy" (319), implying that apartheid in fact brought some good with it; but the notion of mother-tongue large-scale basic education for blacks was in fact just another means of subjugation. Its aim was not to uplift, but to ensure that the black population was on the one hand deprived of the English missionary schools that had produced the black intellectual élite of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, and on the other hand removed from the possibility of any political/cultural assimilation into the English-speaking population.

In his article for the *Sunday Times* of 21 November 2004 condemning the suggestion that Bram Fischer should be awarded an honorary doctorate by Stellenbosch, Giliomee wrote that the reasons given by the university "violate the most basic rules of historical understanding – always judge people within their own historical context and never project today's political values on to the past". I would agree with his premise up to a point – for a historian's task (as I'm sure Giliomee would admit) is also to make informed decisions with the benefit, however dubious it may be, of hindsight. But in fact, in its treatment of apartheid the *New History* itself violates those 'most basic rules'. For the historical context in which apartheid was created was shaped by the post-1945 knowledge of what happens when a state raises racist supremacist thinking to its key ideology, makes marriage and sex between the races punishable by law, deprives those who are supposedly of inferior race of their citizenship and of their basic rights, separates the men from their womenfolk, and puts them to work for the economic benefit of a racial élite, with little concern as to whether they perish in the process. To claim then that apartheid was merely another form of segregation just does not figure – such an assertion is at best intellectual sleight of hand, at worst sophistry.

The revisionism of the *New History*, however, does not stop here. It mentions the UN's declaration that apartheid was a 'crime against humanity', but adds that South Africa "was unable to get any country to intercede on its behalf as the United States did on behalf of Israel when it successfully pushed for the removal of the reference to Zionism as a crime against humanity" (359). Whatever one's views on the current parlous state of the Palestinians, a statement such as this cannot but leave a nasty taste in one's mouth. And when it comes to Mandela, we are told that in the 1950s he "deliberately assumed a messianic role" (332), and that the ANC helped "to develop the messianic status of its leaders, especially Chief Albert Luthuli [...] [and] Nelson Mandela" (328), while as President, "Mandela may have helped to foster the venality that has become so conspicuous in South African public life. He included in his administration individuals with an established record of venality" (417). Apart from the strange, implicit assertion that venality is a post-1994 invention in South Africa, how many times do we have to read the words 'messianic' and 'venal' to get the message? And why use them specifically for Mandela? A time will surely come when his halo will not shine as brightly as today; that is the fate of all significant leaders. But



while the *New History* also lists Mandela's obvious achievements, just as it also openly states the "gross harm and humiliation" caused by Verwoerd's policies, by describing the latter as a "brilliant" intellectual, but Mandela as a "messianic" individual "fostering venality", it goes a revisionist bridge too far.

Then there is the matter of the TRC. Its "composition was hardly balanced [...] almost all members were considered to be tacit or overt ANC supporters [...] the level of corroboration of the victims' evidence was not high [...] hearsay evidence was [allowed] [...] the result was decidedly mixed" (413–4). But this is to confuse victims and perpetrators. Since Giliomee and the *New History* seem to like comparisons (if only, at times, to stress how they don't like them), let's offer one ourselves, if an extreme one: By the same token, the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal must have been biased, because it did not have any Nazis amongst the judges. Would any sane historian today argue such a thing?

I do not wish to suggest that the *New History* is a work beholden to some pseudo-NP agenda. It incorporates much worthwhile scholarship, there is much fairness in it (in the first two-thirds of the book), and there is certainly no attempt in it to claim that apartheid was a good thing. However, we have here concentrated on the apartheid chapters because, under the guise of a coffee-table 'general history' intended for a broad (presumably also international) readership, the editors are engaged in a process of relativising what should not be relativised, and on revising what is not worthy of revision. This leaves the book as a whole a very mixed bag. In the 1980s in Germany, the so-called *Historikerstreit* debated the extent to which the Holocaust should be regarded as a unique event in history. To outsiders, it seemed at the time (and still can) an oddly Germanic insistence on splitting historical hairs about a crime too enormous for the rest of us to contemplate. But it was also about something very fundamental: about resisting the temptation to relativise Evil. Perhaps it's time for South Africa to have its own *Historikerstreit* about apartheid. Perhaps, in twenty years or so, we might even reach a point where those Daniel Goldhagen-like questions of general complicity in apartheid can be asked (as they probably should), even if they might never be answered satisfactorily. But for the moment, we can suffice ourselves with a simple question: to what extent can new histories be written objectively by old historians?

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