

History of South Africa: From 1902 to the Present, by T. Simpson

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Chapter 5, *Revolt*, begins with a reference to the Moffat Commission report of 1918, which states:

Whatever public opinion may be, there can be no question that the coloured and native races are not going to be content to be hewers of wood and drawers of water for ever (p.63), even in the post-apartheid period.

This may be taken as the sub-text of this extremely significant history of South Africa, the first truly substantial and comprehensive history of our nation. Simpson begins with a brief historical overview before launching into his engaging narrative.

With consummate skill, he leads us through the turbulent and convoluted chronological history, although also dealing with issues thematically, which gives a sense of continuity and depth. I would define this as crisis history. South Africa's foreign policy in Africa (arising out of the situation in South West Africa [SWA] Namibia) is disentangled to show the complex attempts at propaganda warfare and the global involvement of Cuba, the USSR and the USA, leading to South Africa's ignominious retreat from SWA, which resulted in an accrual of confidence throughout Africa. Simpson links this to the internal struggle against the imposition of the provision for teaching in Afrikaans (p.235), which led to the massacre of protesting students on 16 June 1976. This led to a renewed wave of protests, including an increase in *Umkhonto we Sizwe* activity, culminating in Steve Biko's tragic death in 1977, which caused extensive international protest. This was followed by an early general election and the beginnings of constitutional reform, including a tri-partite government to further balkanise the Union of South Africa. This "reform" was facilitated by the disintegration of the United Party. International protest manifested in the powerful call for an arms embargo and economic



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sanctions. This became a major theme of the 1980s, involving primarily the UK, the USA and the United Nations, with the UK and USA employing prevaricating tactics such as “constructive engagement” and Margaret Thatcher’s “psychological signals.” All of this was happening in the context of increasing protests and “states of emergency,” culminating in P. W. Botha’s “Rubicon” speech, which disappointed the majority while giving impetus to external role players.

The situation moved on apace, leading to South Africa’s ignominious withdrawal from Namibia and acceptance of “Principles for a Peaceful Settlement in Southwestern Africa.” Concurrently, she was facing political violence involving the Inkatha Freedom Party and the United Democratic Front. These pressures, aided by local boycotts, led to discussions with Nelson Mandela regarding talks that might have led to negotiations on universal suffrage. F. W. de Klerk followed Botha as President at a time when the Mass Democratic Movement was gaining ground.

Domestic breaking of barriers throughout 1989 had its international counterpart in the destruction of the Berlin Wall. The clamour for negotiations to replace military power was gaining momentum. The role of CODESA (Convention for a Democratic South Africa) is discussed as is that of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), highlighting their failures as well as their successes. As history progressed in South Africa, it gathered momentum as one crisis followed another and some ran concurrently; HIV/AIDS, the power crisis, service delivery failures, the constitutional crisis during and following Zuma’s term of office, labour unrest and the Marikana massacre, radical economic transformation reforms and the land issue, recession, state capture, corruption, Covid-19 and the July 2021 riots in KwaZulu-Natal, with the only glimpse of light coming from hosting the soccer World Cup in 2010 and the rugby World Cup in 2019. All of this makes this book the most up-to-date South African history I have ever come across, and the existing history suggests that the theme of crisis will continue to dominate South Africa’s future.

This is a comprehensive, integrated history of South Africa, which takes account of the development of all racial groups in the country. It is also comprehensive in its scope. It places South Africa in its African and global context, relating its progress to international events including the First World War, the Great Crash, the rise of totalitarian Nazi Germany, and the situation with regard to South West Africa. Further, during the Second World War, South Africans were particularly active in north Africa, at Tobruk and El Alamein, and in Europe in Italy and Poland. Following the war, Jan Smuts made a significant contribution to the production of the United Nations’ Charter.

Simpson is skilled at highlighting the anomalies of apartheid. For instance, he demonstrates clearly how malleable Verwoerd’s hard-line apartheid policies could be in relation to the treatment of, for example, the Chinese and Japanese, where “white” became the equivalent of “fifty shades of grey” (p.197-8), not to mention Anton

Rupert's assertion that Koos Potgieter heard Verwoerd himself admit that apartheid was unworkable (p.198).

In this book, Simpson corrects a long-held false assumption regarding the involvement of South Africans during the First World War, particularly with regard to the battle at Delville Wood, the sinking of the SS Mendi, engagements in the Middle East, at Marrières Wood (p.50-53), and the Second World War (chapter 8), where leading South African Defence members and many enlisted combatants played a significant role.

Although this is not a work detailing the African History of Christianity or Missiology, it contains strong elements that contribute to a better understanding of these disciplines. For instance, many Christians form a part of this history as emerging national leaders in a variety of contexts, e.g., Michael Scott, Ambrose Reeves, Sam Buti, Allan Boesak, and Desmond Tutu. More specifically, the churches and other faiths played an active role, especially through the South African Council of Churches, in social justice issues such as opposition to the "tot" or "dop" system (p.87-90). This is nowhere more true than in the challenge to apartheid. Hence, this book provides a helpful broad context against which to study particular aspects of South African life

This book is an excellent example of how Simpson deploys his considerable analytical skills to produce a lucid and readable account of South Africa's fascinating, combative and crisis history, including the contemporary context. It is set to become a major text for the study of South African history in the foreseeable future and will be an asset for scholars, students and members of the general public alike.