

An African Volk: The Apartheid Regime and Its Search for Survival

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The Cold War, understandably, was for a long time viewed through a prism of the confrontation between the Soviet Union, its allies and the United States-led West. Conflicts, even in what used to be termed the Third World, were often described as proxy wars. Of course, the roots of these conflicts in for example Vietnam, the Middle East and southern Africa was more often down to particular regional factors and botched colonial legacies. That being said their ramifications went beyond their regions and had global effects due to the direct and indirect interventions of the superpowers. There has in recent years been a welcome re-orienting of the Cold War away from the United States and the Soviet Union to the periphery. Piero Gleijeses' work on Cuban involvement in southern Africa, based on extensive research, in Havana demonstrated the ability of a small country to influence geopolitical developments thousands of miles from home.⁽¹⁾ While Odd Arne Westad's seminal combination of primary research and synthesis *The Global Cold War*, integrated comprehensively the interests and concerns of the regional players in the wider story of the post 1945 worldwide struggle between the superpowers.⁽²⁾ Of course difficulties remain, and archival sources in Africa, the Arab world and parts of Asia often remain frustratingly difficult to access.

One of the key archival breakthroughs of the last few years in Southern Africa, at least, has been the growing availability of South African and Rhodesian documentation. Sue Onslow's pioneering work in the files of the South African Department of Foreign Affairs and the papers of Ian Smith, the former Rhodesian prime minister, opened up new vistas and avenues of investigation.⁽³⁾ Similarly Ryan Irwin integrated South African archival research in his impressive study of the attempts of African nations to use international bodies to fight apartheid in the 1960s and the struggle within the United States government of how to

respond.⁽⁴⁾ More recently, my own collaboration with Filipe de Meneses examined the close links forged between the white-ruled states (South Africa, Rhodesia and the Portuguese empire) taking cognizance of southern African material as well the extensive documentation made available relatively recently in Lisbon.

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Jamie Miller's important new book is perhaps the most successful monograph-length attempt to integrate a wide-ranging use of particularly South African, US and Rhodesian sources into a study of Pretoria's foreign policy during John Vorster's tenure as prime minister (1966–78). Based on a Cambridge PhD, its utilization of archival research, hard to find memoirs, newspapers and interviews makes it worthy of serious consideration. Any substantive study of Vorster-era foreign policy will need to take account of this work. His publisher has also done a fine production job. The author has impressively tracked down and secured the rights to many relevant contemporary black and white photographs and newspaper cartoons. These are deployed extensively throughout. There is a slight caveat regarding sources. As Dr Miller outlines in an excellent essay on the available archives (pp. 339–346), there is a widespread sense that many key South African documents were destroyed during the 1990–4 transition from apartheid to democracy. Moreover, as he and other scholars have discovered, while the Department of Defence appears to have been exceptionally good at generating and keeping its paper records (though one has to follow a rather cumbersome declassification process), the traces left behind by the various prime ministers and the Cabinet apparatus provide slim pickings. The Department of Foreign Affairs is a more mixed bag with lots of material but also many apparent gaps. Some of this can be explained by the relative paucity of staff to generate paper in that department but one suspects much went up in smoke as well. Hermann Gillomee, the doyen of historians of the Afrikaners, is also skeptical about how much of the South African archival record has survived and is keen believer in talking to the surviving protagonists – advice that Dr Miller has taken on board.⁽⁶⁾ Indeed, he demonstrates fine historical detective work in interviews with former politicians, most notably former foreign minister, 'Pik' Botha, civil servants, generals and even Bureau for State Security officials.

It should be stated at the outset that the book is very ambitious. Unlike my work with Filipe de Meneses, which focuses primarily on the alliances that Pretoria sought with the other white settler polities, Miller emphasizes, at least in the first half of the book, the attempts to engage with Black Africa. At its most basic level, it is the story of how Vorster's regime attempted 'to break out of isolation and secure long term acceptance by the outside world' (p. 1). It also attempts to explore how the Afrikaners sought 'to adapt to the coming of the postcolonial world ...' (p. 2). Three levels of analysis are deployed. First, international diplomacy including the outward policy towards Africa in the late 1960s, the 1974–76 Southern African détente, intervention in Angola, the Kissinger initiatives and their disillusioning aftermath. The second level is regional strategy. Finally, the importance, if not the primacy of domestic politics is also dealt with. It is asserted here that 'South Africa's turn away from diplomacy [from 1977, in particular] and toward a more confrontational approach [occurred] against the backdrop of both genuine conceptual differences over how to preserve apartheid in the new era and political, personal, and bureaucratic rivalries' (p. 12).

As is widely known, the April 1974 revolution in Lisbon destabilized white power in Southern Africa. Miller decries that that event is often seen as 'little more than the moment when the stalled teleology of decolonization restarted, leading to the fall of the regime twenty years later. This is to read history backward'. He rejects the idea that Southern Africa [and South Africa] was on a predetermined course after April 1974 (p. 6). Vorster, he argues, was determined to influence what would happen afterwards to the benefit of South Africa – hence his pursuit of détente, his pressure on Ian Smith to settle Rhodesia and his refusal to intervene in Mozambique. Indeed, he suggests that the origins of the détente between South Africa and the frontline states over Rhodesia, after 1974, lay back in the late 1960s when South Africa attempted a rebranding exercise in foreign policy, at least, and implies there was continuity in the policy before and after 1974.

According to the bold reading presented here, Vorster, more or less from coming to power in 1966, resolved to appropriate the very same principles that South Africa's enemies used to attack the regime, adapt them to the Verwoerdian gospel of separate development, and use them to justify white independence and viability in Africa (p. 8–9). It was all in an effort to legitimize their state in Africa. He, from the outset, subtly

changed the language of the National Party (NP) with his declaration that Afrikaners were 'in every respect a part of Africa'. This was something Verwoerd would never have said (p. 42).

Of course, this went hand in hand with the continued repression of the black majority, which obviously undermined the concept from the beginning. It is to Dr Miller's credit, that while he acknowledges the dysfunction, contradiction, even farcical nature of Vorster's foreign policy, he takes it seriously. One of the strange aspects of examining apartheid South Africa is that most outside observers found the policy, not just morally indefensible, but also found it incoherent, illogical and stupid. There was, however, a different, though delusional, narrative amongst the Afrikaner elites. Apartheid, or at least the Verwoerd version of it, which Vorster never disavowed, was a sincere, virtuous project to solve the racial problems of South Africa. In that sense, it needs to be taken seriously. Even those within the elite who wanted reform only desired to remove some of the more embarrassing aspects of the policy, not surrender white power. By the middle of the 1960s, the NP was a much broader-based coalition of voters. White differences began to dissolve: Verwoerd (and Vorster) after 1958 was able to attract increasing numbers of English-speaking whites to vote for the NP (pp. 8–9). Moreover, Miller argues this was taking place while 'a crisis of control and identity' emerged as the old tenets of Afrikaner identity began to change in the 1960s. The old bindings of anti-English resentment, shared poverty and the Dutch reform church began to break down as Afrikaners became richer. This meant there were some, even within the Afrikaner community, who were willing to countenance new approaches. The ultimate aim, however, remained the retention of white power. This meant there was widespread support across both sections of the white electorate for the harshest security measures at home but growing support for a more outward policy abroad and the abolition of some petty aspects of apartheid. The problem was that the unhappy mix of peaceful coexistence abroad and the iron fist at home, which Vorster followed, was unlikely to ever end well. Occasionally Dr Miller takes his analysis a bit too far. One does not have to be of the left to raise eyebrows at the assertion that 'decolonisation looks more like a contest to delineate and coalesce a dominant ethno-nationalist identity, all the while investing resources in the successful group. South Africa was no exception here, but very much part of the mainstream' (pp. 22–3). That seems a bit too fair to apartheid. Yes, there were and are dreadful post-colonial regimes in Africa and there is certainly an argument to say that you were better off being a South African township resident than a villager in the Congo, Rwanda or Amin's Uganda, but those governments rarely made serious claims to be on a higher plain of civilization.

It was in this context that two different approaches to foreign policy emerged in the NP cabinet. The first, advocated by doves centred around Vorster, his foreign policy team and others such as the intelligence service, BOSS, believed that 'if South Africa offered to help African states achieve their goals, then their self-interest would mandate embracing mutually advantageous cooperation rather than assuming a posture of futile confrontation'. This so-called Vorster doctrine 'was the golden thread running through all incarnations of Vorster's foreign policy until the end of 1976' (p. 10). The basic strategy was to use trade and aid to drive a wedge between radical African states and moderate African states. On the other hand, 'hawks', particularly the Minister of Defence, P. W. Botha, advocated rearmament, an assertive military posture and a strategy to counter the communist-led campaign which African nationalism was believed to be merely a tool of. This story of how the apartheid regime sought viability and survival in the post-1974 era was therefore, according to the thesis presented here, one of competing policy programs. Moreover, 'foreign policy, so cursorily discussed in the vast literatures on apartheid, was never just foreign policy. It was the arena of a fierce battle over the direction of the regime and the future trajectory of the Afrikaner National project' (p. 12). Now, this is somewhat problematical. One of the issues is that Vorster or the Department of Foreign Affairs never set down a coherent strategy on paper. Foreign policy, in my view at least, seemed to be developed on a much more ad hoc and opportunistic basis. To take one example used in support of his thesis, Dr. Miller suggests that the fact that South Africa's defence spending declined from 21 to 12 per cent of the national budget between 1964–5 and 1972–3 was a sign that the regime was not militaristic. GNP, however, grew 140 per cent and the amount South Africa was spending was still growing. Major rearmament was still happening but South Africa could afford it more easily. It was the need to avoid distortions in the domestic economy that tended to forestall higher spending, not that a peace-loving John Vorster had taken over the reins of power. I would also question whether Vorster 'was eager to find ways to differentiate and distance South

African whites from those in Rhodesia and the Portuguese colonies as a symbol of a new "Africanized" identity – in spite of considerable resistance from substantial sections of both the nationalist establishment and the white electorate' (p. 15). There is not sufficiently strong evidence in my reading of the archive to say that this meant much in practice. The thesis advanced here is that Vorster's plans were undermined, however, by his allowing ministers and key officials, notably P. W. Botha at Defence and Hendrik Van Den Bergh to carve out independent powerbases with little oversight or control due to his lackadaisical attitude to daily grind of government and paperwork. Indeed, unlike his predecessor, Hendrik Verwoerd, it is very hard to find material in the South African governmental archives that Vorster wrote or commented upon. This makes it very hard to identify who the real John Vorster was. Yes, he was ideologically less rigid than Verwoerd. Indeed, the willingness to make tiny gestures to amend petty apartheid (admitting non-white sporting participants) and the willingness to countenance better relations with Black Africa were a key factor in the split between Vorster and the hard-line *Verkramptes* (the unenlightened) who believed any mitigation in the Verwoerdian idea of total separation would open 'the door to the eradication of Afrikaner self-determination, culture and control' (p. 53). *Verligtes* (the enlightened) in the media, the universities and the growing Afrikaner business community, who enjoyed more space under Vorster, continued to view separate development – the Bantustan or homeland policy as central. They, however, wanted it implemented more justly. Aspects of petty apartheid also increasingly appalled them. Even though Vorster electorally crushed the *Verkramptes* led by Albert Hertzog in 1970 and drove them out of the dominant social and cultural organisation, the *Broederbond*, their ideas continued to exert a powerful hold on many Afrikaners, limiting room for substantial domestic reform and mitigation of apartheid (p. 60). Miller asserts that the 'regime's unwillingness to fully commit to dismantling petty apartheid only reinforced the political appeal of continuing to push the ideological envelope through foreign policy' (p. 87).

Dr. Miller makes much play of the outward policy including South African investment. I would argue that this investment was very little in comparison to the money and aid supplied to Portugal and Rhodesia at the same time. Moreover, apart from Hastings Banda of Malawi, South African links were forged with conservative leaning states in Francophone Africa. Now, why was this? I would suggest that these links were down to the influence of the French government, who wished to protect their large arms supplies contracts to South Africa. Rhodesian records suggest the link man in this was Jacques Foccart, de Gaulle and Pompidou's notorious African 'bagman'. It would have been useful to see more investigation of the Franco-South African relationship. The Francophone states were also generally, like South Africa and Portugal, supporters of Biafra in the Nigerian civil war (1967-70).. To an extent the outward policy worked in the short term. In 1971, Gabon, Cote d'Ivoire, Lesotho, Malawi, the Malagasy republic and Mauritius rejected an OAU call not to engage with Pretoria. The 1969 Lusaka declaration, which decried the white-ruled states, also suggested that peaceful ways were preferable to war if that was possible and moreover, suggested such methods were desirable even if they took longer to succeed. South Africa's engagement, particularly its aid to Malawi, drew much criticism from the *Verkramptes*, particularly in their press outlets.

While this outward policy was taking place, however, South Africa, was if anything, doubling down on its aid to Portugal and Rhodesia, with increasingly close military, police and intelligence links. This, I would suggest, in contrast to Dr Miller, was because Vorster was essentially Janus faced. A low cost outward policy was merely one track of his policy. The maintenance of the fellow white regimes was arguably a much more important track. The Botha doctrine and the Vorster doctrine, if either ever truly existed, were not incompatible and much of the literature may actually overplay its importance. (By the way, I tended to take much the same view in earlier writings as Dr. Miller and others such as Dan O'Meara about the importance of personal, bureaucratic, ideological and provincial rivalries, but now I am now beginning to change my mind).

The fact that there were, at best, only tentative attempts to mitigate petty apartheid during the Vorster era, surely the *sine qua non* of any serious attempt to gain wider international acceptance of South Africa also makes me question the importance of the outward policy. In any case, by 1973, the outward policy was in ruins. Therefore, while the nature of South African bureaucracy and Vorster's own working methods mean that his signature does not appear to be extant endorsing the increasingly close links that P. W. Botha forged

between the South African, Rhodesian and Portuguese militaries, the sheer scale and ambition of Exercise ALCORA, the name given to this cooperation, surely suggests that he most have been in the loop. It should be noted that when the illegal activities of the Department of Information (Muldergate) came to light, Vorster initially denied all knowledge but he was forced to resign, as state president, in 1979 when it turned out he knew all along.

Where the author is on much stronger ground is in the post-April 1974 policy that lasted until at least the intervention in Angola in late 1975. Vorster, the Department of Foreign Affairs and BOSS all rejected intervention in Mozambique and pursued a policy of *détente* with Kenneth Kaunda's Zambia to achieve a peaceful settlement in Rhodesia, at the expense of the Smith regime. Miller certainly provides a persuasive account of the marginalization of P. W. Botha from this process. His suggestions for a more aggressive policy – i.e. intervention to support white settlers in Mozambique was rejected and plenty of strong evidence is provided that Botha was a strong opponent of *détente*, viewing it as appeasement.

Vorster and Kaunda spent from the end of 1974 until the August 1975 Victoria Falls in an extensive dialogue to try to end the Rhodesian crisis. It ultimately broke down due to mistrust between Smith and the liberation groups. Indeed the Victoria Falls conference was little short of a disaster and demonstrated the limitations of the persuasive powers of Vorster or Zambian leader, Kenneth Kaunda. Trying to control their allies was harder than herding cats. Dr. Miller's forensic investigation of the South African and Ian Smith archives provides fresh perspective on what is a well-known tale. He also demonstrates that Vorster took considerable domestic political risks in the teeth of domestic opposition for this policy and his attempt to resolve the South West Africa problem. However, these domestic constraints meant that Vorster was not able to apply enough pressure on Smith to 'quell his own doubts about the political dangers of being Salisbury's executioner' (p. 161). It was as Miller notes, a missed opportunity that would have possibly avoided the bloody civil war in Rhodesia.

P. W. Botha, according to this account, had a revenge of sorts when he foisted a South African intervention in Angola on his more dovish colleagues and the prime minister in the autumn of 1975. From his reconstruction of Botha's actions between August and November 1975, Miller concludes that the head of the army, Magnus Malan, the SADF, the official history of the campaign and 'probably the Cabinet itself all thought that there was more prime ministerial authorization for Botha's action than there really was' (p. 182). Now the debate on South Africa's intervention in Angola has generated a number of interpretations.⁽⁷⁾ There have always been suggestions that Botha and the SADF more or less presented Vorster and the South African cabinet (which had marginal involvement) with a *fait accompli*. Others though have suggested that even the doves, Hendrik Van den Bergh of BOSS and Vorster, believed that the intervention was useful because Kenneth Kaunda disliked the Soviet-backed faction, the MPLA, and it would enhance *détente*. Moreover, there have been persistent rumours that Henry Kissinger, in spite of his denials, told the South Africans they would have American backing. In this reading, the South African intervention was not a break with *détente*, with a new emphasis on military action, but an attempt to strengthen it.

Dr. Miller, however, using interviews, recently declassified US material and South African records discounts the idea that the United States encouraged the South Africans prior to the massive Cuban deployment of troops. (p. 188). According to this account, it was November 1975, two months after the South African intervention began in earnest that Vorster 'likely entertained a dream scenario whereby South Africa's intervention in Angola not only promoted Pretoria's geopolitical aims as conceptualized by hawk and dove alike, but also provided a basis to prove South Africa's value to the "free world" in a concrete way' (p. 188). My conclusion is that Dr Miller's explanation is perfectly plausible, but it does not preclude beyond all reasonable doubt, that Vorster and BOSS supported the Botha strategy from the outset because they saw it as being compatible with southern African *détente*. A definitive answer is probably impossible due to the patchy nature of the archival record, despite the author's use of interviews. Back-channels and verbal nods and winks appear to have been the key means of communications for the key protagonists. Moreover, while the author has talked to many of the survivors, the chief players, P. W. Botha and Vorster, are dead.

Miller's survey finishes with three lengthy chapters that describe the failure of the 1976 Kissinger initiative,

the disillusionment that set in with the United States after Jimmy Carter was elected, and the turn of South Africa into a garrison state as Botha emerged as Vorster's successor. Carter, with his focus on human rights, led to Vorster concluding that détente has run its course. This had the consequence of allowing the praetorians ranged around P. W. Botha to become increasingly influential and to turn South Africa to a much more militarist Total Strategy to defeat its enemies' supposed total onslaught. This culminated in a bloody raid into Angola against SWAPO at Cassinga in early 1978, which ruined any prospect of further progress on the South West Africa issue. By now Vorster was beset by illness and the growing Muldergate scandal regarding misuse of government funds by the Department of Information and resigned in 1978. His successor was P. W. Botha as Connie Mulder, the heir apparent, was fatally wounded by his involvement in the Information scandal. P. W. Botha further entrenched the garrison state.

As Miller notes: 'Cassinga thus introduced the model and confrontation between the regime and the world that would dominate the next decade; diplomatic stand-offs and unadulterated hostility on the international stage, set against a backdrop of savage violence on the ground across Southern Africa' (p. 319). I would subscribe to this to a point. Certainly, South Africa was far more willing to deploy South African military power in spectacular cross-border raids in the P. W. Botha era, but the new prime minister also backed away from confrontation over Zimbabwe-Rhodesia in 1980. Tellingly, Botha, in 1979, envisaged the assembly of a 'constellation' of southern African countries. The constellation concept called for the institutionalisation of South Africa's relationships with its black neighbours rather than with other white minority regimes. These proposed partners consisted of Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland, SWA, the black homelands and the new-look Zimbabwe-Rhodesia. Of course, Mugabe's triumph in the 1980 Rhodesian elections sunk this plan but it had echoes of both ALCORA and Vorster's old outward policy. This suggests that Vorster and Botha were not so different as Dr Miller makes out. It was South Africa's utter isolation after 1980 that arguably drew out Botha's teeth.

While I have a number of caveats about the author's interpretations, which by the way are never implausible or indefensible, this is perhaps the most important book written about South African foreign policy in the mid-Cold War era. The archival research, the interviews, and the wide reading in obscure publications will ensure that anyone who has an interest in apartheid and South African foreign policy will need to read this book and engage with its ideas.

Notes

1. Piero Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959–1976* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2002). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge, 2005). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Most notably Sue Onslow, 'Noises Off': South Africa and the Lancaster House settlement 1979–1980', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 35, 2 (2009); "'We Must Gain Time": South Africa, Rhodesia and the Kissinger Initiative of 1976', *South African Historical Journal*, 56 (2006) 123–53; 'South Africa and the Owen/Vance Plan of 1977', *South African Historical Journal*, 51 (2004), 130–58; 'A question of timing: South Africa and Rhodesia's Unilateral Declaration of Independence, 1964–65', *Cold War History*, 5, 2 (2005), 129–160; Chris Saunders and Sue Onslow, 'Southern Africa in the Cold War 1976–1990' in *Cambridge History of the Cold War*, ed. O. A. Westad and M. Leffler, vol. III (Cambridge, 2009). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Ryan M. Irwin, *Gordian Knot: Apartheid and the Unmaking of the Liberal World Order* (Oxford, 2012). [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. See in particular Filipe Ribeiro De Menezes, and Robert McNamara, 'Exercise ALCORA: Expansion and demise, 1971–4', *International History Review*, 36, 1 (2014), 89–111; 'The origins of Exercise ALCORA', *International History Review*, 35, 5 (2014), 1113–34; and the forthcoming *The White Redoubt, the Great Powers and the Struggle for Southern Africa, 1960–1980*. (London, 2017). [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Hermann Giliomee, *The Last Afrikaner Leaders: A Supreme Test of Power*. (Charlottesville, VA,

2013) p. 15.[Back to \(6\)](#)

7. On South Africa, see R. Hallett 'The South African intervention in Angola, 1976', *African Affairs*, 77, 308 (1978), 347–86; D. Geldenhuys, *The Diplomacy of Isolation: South African Foreign Policy Making* (New York, NY, 1984), pp. 75–84; D. O'Meara, *Forty Lost Years*, (Ohio, 1996), pp. 209–29; J. P. Barber and J. Barratt, *South Africa's Foreign Policy: The Search for Status and Security, 1945–1988* (Cambridge, 1990), pp.186–96. See also J. A. Marcum, 'Lessons of Angola', *Foreign Affairs*, 54 (1976), 407–25. More recent accounts of value include E. George, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola, 1965–1991: From Che Guevara to Cuito Cuanavale* (London, 2005), pp. 49–115 and P. Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959-1976* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2002), pp. 230–347. On the role of the United States, T. J. Noer, 'International credibility and political survival: the Ford Administration's intervention in Angola', *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 23 (1993), 771–85 provides a useful summation of the literature. Important memoirs include H. Kissinger, *Years of Renewal* (New York, NY, 1999); J. Stockwell, *In Search of Enemies: A CIA Story* (New York, NY, 1978); and M. Malan, *My Life with the SADF* (Pretoria, 2006).[Back to \(7\)](#)
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