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International Studies Essays

Why did the struggle to end apartheid in South Africa take so long?

The struggle to end apartheid in South Africa appears, at the dawn of the twenty first century, to be an aberration of social and world history. Viewed within the context of the pervasive civil rights movement in North America and the abolition of slavery (first in Britain at the beginning of the nineteenth century and followed by America after the Civil War in 1865), apartheid seems like a medieval notion that was imprinted upon modern history; an anachronistic nightmare imposed on civilised society. In a world that had banished National Socialism and seen the back of Stalin, the Immorality Amendment Act (1961) remained a legal statute in South Africa until 1985, making sexual relations between whites and non-whites an unlawful act under apartheid. Yet the very singularity of apartheid remained a key reason for its longevity: for as long as South Africa could be isolated and swept under the international diplomatic rug the rest of the free world could comfort itself in its liberal attitude to race relations while leaving the citizens of South Africa to play the role of international pariahs. However, as Barber ascertains, "although western governments continued to criticise apartheid, their criticism was often drowned out by accusations of their hypocrisy."

For the purposes of this study, analysis will take a chronological form, tracking the genesis of apartheid as a political creed to understand how it became a part of the South African way of life. In this way it will be shown how apartheid took so long to be rooted out of the national culture.

The greatest mistake for historians today is to view South Africa from a solely British colonial perspective. It is important to understand that the country had a long and rich social history before the arrival of the British. It was a legacy tainted with taut race relations between the indigenous African tribes and the first settlers, the Boers. Indeed, before the arguments pertaining to apartheid were ever voiced, the British and Boers fought a long war of attrition (1899-1902) to determine which nation should govern the land that was rich in minerals and therefore important in an economic and strategic sense. Conflict is thus at the heart of the history of South Africa. Like Northern Ireland one should not dismiss the effects of repetitive differences of opinion whereby war and aggravation can become deep rooted within the culture.

The eventual British victory in the Boer War sewed the seeds of the resentment that would ultimately harvest apartheid (apartness). Boers, or Afrikaners as they were known within their own ranks, felt like aliens in their home land, made to speak a foreign language and pay allegiance to a detested foreign power. During the first three decades of the twentieth century Afrikaners felt more alienated than ever with a large wage and lifestyle discrepancy between the English-speaking South Africans and the Afrikaners. By the end of the Second World War, the Afrikaners were an ethnic group on the verge of revolting. Therefore, when the alliance between the National Party and the Afrikaner Party bore fruit in the way of a unified South African national election victory in May 1948 the result was a reversal back to political ideals that were envisaged in the pre-British days of the nineteenth century – apartheid being one of several popular ultra-conservative slogans used during the preceding electoral campaign. The day after the victory, party leader, Malan declared: "Today South Africa belongs to us once more. South Africa is our own for the first time since Union, and may God grant that it will always remain our own."

With such a resentful and dislocated background, apartheid was introduced as a means to perpetuate white rule. As

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a social and political philosophy, it was a backlash against modernity – specifically against the civil rights movement. Traditionally, prejudice thrives on routine and wilts in the face of modernity and the speed with which the North American people vented their disgust at segregation in the Deep South shocked the white leaders of South Africa, not only for the ferocity of the rage against the state but also for the composition of the dissenters, many white, middle-class and well-educated. Yet there were distinct and fundamental differences between the South African national experience and that of the USA. Although both America and South Africa were initially colonial countries, the influx of immigrants to the USA was markedly different to the migration of people to South Africa. As New York took over from London as the financial capital of the West after 1918, South Africa remained a predominantly agricultural country. The relevance of this in terms of the perpetuation of apartheid is that while one nation became a melting pot of differing ideologies, religions, races and creeds, the other became entrenched in a formulaic white-black divide with a history of Afrikaner and British land-holders dictating policy to a black populace.

Apartheid should be viewed as part of a broader policy of deconstruction taking place in post-war South Africa, all facets tied to the dual desire to keep power from black people as well as moving away from the disapproving gaze of the West. The removal of both the British National Anthem and the Union Jack as cultural symbol (1957), the replacement of UK currency (1961) as well as the referendum (1960) and subsequent formulation of the republic (1961) highlighted the uniquely South African experience, which was designed as a means to create white unity and loyalty to South Africa alone. In this sense, apartheid was strongly tied to Afrikaner nationalism, making it a movement beyond the comprehension and control of the former British colonial masters.

“While there was very little difference between Afrikaners and English-speakers in their support for white supremacy, residential segregation and migrant labour, English opinion-formers constantly tried to distance themselves as much as possible from the racial politics of Afrikaner parties. They found the crude expression of racism distasteful and resented being shut out from power.”

Political apartheid in South Africa was so durable because it was built upon a well-founded ideological structure that curbed black influence in all corners of society. Apartheid can be viewed as a pyramid. The first building block was the political obstacles put in the way of black participation in administrative affairs leaving politics to be a whites' only domain. The National Party next used enforced separation of existing physical communities to perpetuate their rule, followed by the segregation of education and the labour market (black workers were not officially permitted to form trade unions). Not only did the National Party separate black and white communities but they also restricted movement within the country in the same way that Jews were not permitted to travel within Nazi Germany. The formation of the Bantustans (black 'homelands') meant that blacks were put out of sight of the white minority rulers giving rise to two completely separate socio-economic groups within one sovereign nation. The sum of these measures was to make a law of a loose body of segregation and prejudice methods of divide and rule that were already in place before 1945, making apartheid the most extreme version of institutionalised racism anywhere the industrialised world.

“Segregation doctrine was supplanted by the more dangerous notion ‘separate development.’ This involved the idea that Africans and others should reside, and enjoy citizenship rights, in distinct ethnic homelands. Whereas White supremacy and segregation had involved an explicit racial hierarchy in legislative and political practice, the NP from 1961 was committed to formal equality between groups understood in ethnic terms.”

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It is a key point to make in terms of comprehending the durability of apartheid. While segregation alone would have ensured white supremacy for a generation, the complete stagnation of educational or vocational opportunity for blacks meant that they were, over successive generations, unable to wrest power from Afrikaner hands. Moreover, the notion of two ideals of citizenship in one country gave the blacks the illusion of self rule even though, in reality, their human rights were worth next to nothing under apartheid.

Of all the installations of prejudice utilised by the National Party to ensure the penetration of apartheid, the restriction of physical movement proved to be the greatest obstacle to long term change. Throughout history, all of the momentous instigators of social change heralded from industrial cities where like-minded individuals could disseminate information to one another and could meet in secret underground. Paris, Boston and St. Petersburg are all examples of the role of the modern city as conduit through which progressive ideas might puncture throughout society so as to induce cultural change. In 1948 there were two million blacks located in South African cities compared to six million in the countryside and the great majority of these lived in slums. With the arrival of the Bantustans, the blacks were further constrained in terms of being able to form a coherent opposition to apartheid along the lines of the Black Panther Party in the USA or the NICRA in Northern Ireland. Clearly, the lack of intellectual, philosophical and political discourse within South African urban centres meant that apartheid was more difficult to dislodge from within than was the case in, for example, French Algeria, South Africa's closest continental equivalent.

If the period 1945-1961 is seen as the foundation of apartheid in South Africa, then the years 1961-1980 should be viewed as the era of 'high apartheid', where the NP regime fought against modernity and international opinion to maintain a political system that was at odds with the rest of western civilisation. Acts of state-sponsored atrocity such as the Soweto Massacre (1976) shocked the world and divided international opinion. In 1966, at the heyday of apartheid during the final year of Verwoerd's term in office, 1.5 million blacks were kept in reserve who would otherwise have become urbanised and, potentially, radicalised.

Yet it should be understood that the international community was compliant in the continuation of apartheid during this time. It has been shown that the blacks within South Africa were powerless to form opposition to apartheid from within. Hope therefore rested with the outside world.

"Enforcing apartheid required not only a range of oppressive methods domestically: intimidation, abandonment of the rule of law, torture, outright terror including assassination – all these were commonplace in South Africa. But the tentacles of the police state also spread abroad, often assisted by Western intelligence services in ways which infected and compromised the democratic politics of these countries. From the late 1960's onwards, South African agents were responsible for a series of attacks on anti-apartheid organisations across the world."

Thus, as the horrors of the Holocaust faded into history and the world became united by satellite communication, the National Party treatment of blacks could only have been perpetuated via external assistance. Although sanctions were imposed and diplomats constantly sent to Pretoria, the police state apparatus was aided by international impotence in the face of extreme racial oppression. Indeed, the nerve centre of apartheid during the era of high apartheid was the South African equivalent of the Gestapo – the Afrikaner Broederband, established by three Afrikaner nationals in 1918.

"The Afrikaner Broederband made the nature of the apartheid administration unique. Most of the country's leading

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government members, generals, judges and senior police officers, along with many Church and education officials, operated on the deeply secret level of the AB.”

Economic and cultural ties also ensured that key European countries such as Britain and West Germany continued to trade with South Africa, and the illegal arms trade made certain that the AB and hit-squads of apartheid were always supplied with the tools to guarantee black suppression. In addition, the spectre of the Cold War loomed large over the issue of apartheid. Not only did the USSR divert attention away from the atrocities taking place in South Africa, but the nation was seen, in much the same way as Vietnam, as a key battleground in the spreading of communist theory across the post-war globe, exacerbated by the rich economic opportunities prevalent in the country. Perversely, the Soviet states supported the liberal racial ideologies of the suppressed black South Africans, fuelled by the extreme anti-communist stance of all of the NP leaders, who each played a major role in apartheid.

“Apartheid’s phases have been stamped by Afrikanerdom’s great men: Malan preached Afrikaner unity, Strydom the republican ideal; Vorster’s rule was marked by pragmatism and tough security laws; and PW Botha’s era was distinguished by the total onslaught and militarism tinged with reformism.”

That the compliance of the international community was a major factor in the continuation of apartheid can be seen through the means via which it was eventually dismantled. The beginning of the end of apartheid was the revised 1984 national constitution, which aimed to highlight existing divides within the nation to split the burgeoning black political parties. The new constitution differentiated between Indians, ‘coloureds’ and whites leaving blacks as the sole focus of racism in South Africa; however, in attempting to woo other ethnic groups the National Party gave explicit encouragement to, among others, the UDF (United Democratic Front). “The view from below was of a galling piece of political expediency. The new constitution amounted to an admission that apartheid was a failure.”

De Tocqueville in the nineteenth century noted that people may endure grievance and abuse only for as long as they feel as if they are powerless to do anything about it. This had certainly been the case in the history of South Africa until the second half of the 1980’s. Yet with the dilution of the ethnic pool over a period of four decades, and the subtle shift in symbolic power from the NP to the ANC, apartheid was ultimately doomed to failure.

Conclusion

The widespread feeling of isolation was at the root of the perpetuation of apartheid in South Africa. Isolation was first experienced by the Boers and Afrikaners who then transmitted this sense of alienation to the blacks under the guise of apartheid. Isolation was likewise the tactic employed by the international community after the National Party victory in 1948, which further assisted the policy of apartheid. History reports that expulsion from international groups and treaties benefits no-one but the dictators in charge of the nation that has so offended the free world. The recent examples of Iraq and Zimbabwe highlight the futility of isolation as an international relations panacea to the social ills of the modern world.

It is therefore prudent to see apartheid in South Africa as the vision of Afrikaner racists fuelled by international compliance via ineptitude. Apartheid’s longevity was also aided by the presence of communism and the enticing economic climate of South Africa, which ensured that a tougher stance was not taken against the NP. In this way the struggle to end

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apartheid took the best part of half a century; the greatest surprise was that by 1990 it ended so quickly without recourse to civil war or mass bloodshed.

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