

**Lindie Koorts, *D.F. Malan and the Rise of Afrikaner Nationalism***

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Gordon S. Wood in his book, *The Purpose of the Past: Reflections on the Uses of History* (2008), argues that the problems and issues of the present should be the stimulus for historical forays into the past, but they should not be the criterion for what the historian finds in the past. The historian has to break loose from the immediate demands of the present and portray the past in its own context with all its complexity. In South Africa, struggling to come to terms with the destructive legacy of apartheid, this is a daunting challenge for the biographer of D.F. Malan, the stern and grim faced prime minister of the apartheid state between 1948 and 1954.

To resist the demands of the present, Lindie Koorts has written *DF Malan and the Rise of Afrikaner Nationalism* with the stated intention to understand and explain “without any attempt at apology or justification” her subject's role in the rise of Afrikaner nationalism, and the creation of the apartheid state. Her stance is that by understanding Malan, one not only grasps his world, but also comprehends how his actions and personality shaped the Afrikaner and South Africa. Koorts succeeds admirably in fulfilling the biographer's most challenging task: to understand what her subject thought at the time whether or not she happens to agree with him. She furthermore masters Malan's long and varied career as theologian, newspaper editor and politician while never becoming obscured by the vastness of his historical circumstances. In doing so she reflects the ambiguity, uncertainty and “differentness” of the past, as well as the complexity of Malan's personality.

Koorts convincingly argues that Malan's political success was based on his intense religious belief. As a young man he was painfully shy with a sense of inferiority and crippling self doubt, but his fervent belief that he had a special

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1. “Singing to Death”, *Manchester Evening News*, 16 January 1900, p 5.
  2. F. Pretorius (ed.), *A History of South Africa: From the Distant Past to the Present Day* (Protea Book House, Pretoria, 2014), p 244.

calling to serve God and the Afrikaner led to him becoming a clergyman in the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC). His status as a clergyman DRC ministers were treated like demi gods by their congregations turned him into a formidable and respected public figure. His stern demeanour, combined with his clerical garments made him a terrifying figure for children. In his Graaff Reinet congregation the children would hide when they encountered him in the street. In reality Malan was more tolerant and open minded than most of his fellow DRC ministers. For example, he practised Higher Criticism and agreed that some Biblical events, such as the story of Jonah and the whale, were symbolic. He was furthermore sympathetic to the theory of evolution. This did not place Malan at odds with the DRC because he did not focus on theological disputes, but on his desire to serve the interests of his fellow Afrikaners eradicating poverty, improving education, advancing Afrikaans as a language, and protecting their political rights. He fiercely resented British cultural hegemony, especially the dominance of the English language and concluded that political power had to be obtained without compromise, or the Afrikaner faced extinction. For this reason he rejected the conciliation policy of Louis Botha and Jan Smuts. This explains why as a rural DRC clergyman he was headhunted to become the first editor of *Die Burger*; why he became the undisputed leader of the Cape National Party (NP), a prominent member of the Hertzog cabinet, and ultimately leader of the "Purified" NP in 1934, leading the party to victory in the election of 1948.

In his private life Malan could be a humorous and warm person. He was a doting father to his adopted daughter, but his public persona was the opposite. Believing that he had a holy mission to secure the future of the Afrikaner he was grim, aloof and stern; a good hater who could deal ruthlessly with those he differed from. This was evident in his dealings with the adherents of national socialism in the 1940s. While the rise of Nazi Germany made many Afrikaners receptive to fascism and the use of violence to secure an Afrikaner republic, Malan rejected national socialism as alien to the Afrikaner character and traditions. As a result he set out to destroy the influence of totalitarian pro Nazi movements such as the Ossewa Brandwag, led by the charismatic Hans van Rensburg, and the Nuwe Orde of Oswald Pirow, a fervent admirer of Adolf Hitler. By 1943, after an emotional and bitter struggle, Malan had achieved his goal and the NP was the sole political platform of Afrikaner nationalism. Purged of fascist sympathies the NP attracted enough Afrikaner support from Smuts's United Party to win the 1948 election.

The most striking section of the book deals with Malan's role in the founding of the apartheid state. Koorts paints a portrait of an old and increasingly frail and exhausted Malan, out of step with a changing world after the Second World War. For him politics remained the struggle between the forces of Afrikaner nationalism and British imperialism. He wanted to remove Coloureds from the common voters roll in the Cape Province because he believed that the British had enfranchised them with the sole aim to counterbalance the Afrikaners.

Malan's final years in politics were furthermore consumed by the succession battle that raged within the NP. Here Koorts casts new light on the inner dynamics of the party after 1948, especially the feud between J.G.H. Strijdom, the leader of the Transvaal NP, and Malan. Strijdom was a volatile personality and a severe critic of Malan and his policies. He regarded Malan as too moderate on apartheid and the desire for an Afrikaner republic, and felt that he was too Cape orientated in his cabinet appointments. Cabinet meetings were

stormy and Strijdom took his discontent into parliament and the NP caucus. Malan, on the other hand, had a low opinion of Strijdom's judgement, confrontational nature and views on race, and saw him as a divisive figure who would fracture the NP. Hating Strijdom with a passion, he was determined to deny him the right to become the NP leader and premier. Strijdom was, however, too powerful to be denied the premiership in 1954 when Malan eventually retired. Ultimately Malan's leadership between 1948 and 1954 was not busy with blueprints for the apartheid state, but with personal and petty score settling.

There is much to admire in *DF Malan and the Rise of Afrikaner Nationalism*, but Koorts's interpretation of the effect on Malan's political career of his feelings of guilt and self disgust at being safe and in comfort as a student in the Netherlands during the South African War could be viewed as too simplistic. Malan was to be haunted by accusations that he was a coward and that he had fled to the Netherlands to avoid the war. Hertzog, for example, in the parliamentary election of 1938 accused him of being a traitor because he had never fought in the South African War. Koorts convincingly rejects the accusation of cowardice by pointing out that as a Cape Afrikaner in Stellenbosch it was impossible for him to join the republican commandos with the outbreak of the war. She is, however, less convincing in arguing that the only legacy of his Dutch stay was that his nationalism was shaped by his experience of late nineteenth century European nationalism. Is it not possible that Malan's uncompromising Afrikaner nationalism, his rejection of the conciliation policy of the South African War heroes Botha and Smuts, and his eventual break with Hertzog, another war hero, was an attempt to compensate for his stay in the Netherlands and to eradicate his feelings of shame and guilt? There is no documentary proof for this assertion, but the historian's view of the past is not merely reduced to that of the recorded.

It is furthermore a pity that the book does not have a conclusion to evaluate the legacy of Malan's heroic image as the stern and unbending saviour of the *volk* on Afrikaner nationalism. In the 1980s and 1990s Dr A.P. Treurnicht, leader of the Conservative Party and a fervent admirer of Malan, emulated his hero's rejection of conciliation politics by vehemently resisting the political reforms of P.W. Botha and F.W. de Klerk. This contributed to an atmosphere that encouraged right wing violence which in turn came close to derailing the political compromise of April 1994.

The few points of criticism are, however, minor ones. In terms of Woods's criteria for a historian, "[t]o be able to see the participants of the past ... in the context of their own time ... and to be able to relate it without anachronistic distortion to our present is what is meant by having a historical sense", Lindie Koorts has historical sense in abundance, making *DF Malan and the Rise of Afrikaner Nationalism* a truly remarkable biography.<sup>3</sup>

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3. G.S. Wood, *The Purpose of the Past: Reflections on the Uses of History* (Penguin Press, London, 2008), p 11.