

An overlooked, repressive tactic of apartheid revealed

Saleem Badat, *The Forgotten People: Political Banishment under Apartheid*

Jacana Media, Johannesburg, 2012

384pp

ISBN 978-1-4314-0479-7

R250.00

African and more specifically South African history is riddled with a heinous past; there are many struggle stories and notable figures that have been pushed into the shadows of silence. Lending voice to these injustices ensures a sense of reconciliation with the past and present, allowing future generations to move forward. Saleem Badat's *The Forgotten People: Political Banishment under Apartheid*, does just that by contributing to the historiography of repressive methods employed during the apartheid era, adding the neglected dimension of banishment as a repressive tactic to the list of atrocities. His book not only focuses on a largely overlooked form of repression, but also brings to light those who until now have been missing from our recorded history, by affixing "peasants and migrants as actors and shapers alongside the black proletariat [and] the heroes of the African nationalist struggle" (p xxiii).

The apartheid state employed a variety of tactics against its opponents, including imprisonment, banning, detention, assassination and banishment. Banishments occurred between 1949 and 1982 (the period studied in this book) under the Native Administration Act of 1927 and its 1956 amendments. With a few exceptions banishment principally affected men in rural areas. The minister of Native Affairs could charge a person suspected or accused of threatening the “peace and good order” to vacate their residence and be forcibly moved to an isolated part of the country (p 14). This method was favoured in the removal of rural political leaders, believing that disruption in the networks of political mobilisation would encourage rural communities to collaborate with the state.

Those who were banished rarely received an opportunity to face their accused or to receive information on their charge. They were merely relocated to faraway areas and plunged into isolation away from their friends, family, culture, language and source of income for an indeterminate period of time. Badat succeeds in relaying that the notion of banishment was not a fate to be thought lightly of, as he illuminates the experiences of those who suffered this form of “social death”. The term refers to someone “who could not belong because he was a product of a hostile, alien culture ... an intruder ... a stranger in a strange land”. On the other hand, social death signified “an insider who had fallen, one who ceased to belong and had been expelled from normal participation in community ...” (p 219).

Inspired by an encounter with Helen Joseph during the early 1970s, Badat’s work looks at the reasons why people were banished, their lives in banishment and the efforts of the Human Rights Welfare Committee, established 1959 by Joseph, Lilian Ngoyi, Amina Cachalia and others who advocated for the basic rights of the banished. In the first chapter of the book, Badat demonstrates the long history of banishment by tracing historical events from the banishment of African leaders by colonial authorities; the exile of Lenin and Trotsky in the late 19th century; to more recent uses of banishment in Israel, Greece and Russia. In his conclusion to this chapter Badat makes the insightful statement that “... the weapon of banishment was not created by the Afrikaner nationalist who came to power on an apartheid platform in 1948. The law that permitted banishment had its roots in the colonial period in Natal, presided over by the British, and was consolidated and enshrined in 1927 during the period of Union” (p 279).

Outlining banishment in a comparative analysis, Badat is able to distance banishment as a repressive product constructed solely through apartheid’s rule. His argument is that throughout the ages banishment has been defined on a theoretical basis associating it with “power and authority”, “authoritarian regimes” and as “a means of political and social control” (p 8). An in-depth historical analysis on the relation between power, authority and repression could provide better understanding of the policies implemented by the apartheid state. However, this chapter merely sets the stage, serving as contextualisation to prepare the reader for that which will follow.

The main focus of this absorbing book comes to the foreground in various case studies, based on empirical data and secondary literature, of the people who were banished and the struggles they endured. Between 1948 and 1982 as many as 160 people were banished, and Badat chooses particular cases as the focal point throughout the book. This makes the study feel somewhat monochromatic and narrow in focus in some instances. However, this statement might perhaps be unfair because the book has a specific scope, namely the neglect of the banished and the use of banishment as a repressive tool in South Africa's apartheid history.

The book sets out to relate the experiences and life stories of a forgotten people and any attempt to add material would have diminished the impact the book strives to make. The more detailed individual stories are presented in such a way that they convey a vivid illustration of the daily lives of the banished through sound research and the addition of a number of emotional photographs taken by Ernest Cole. The individual stories speak of hardships, poverty, illness, loneliness and people living aimlessly. The full import of "social death" becomes all too evident, as Badat effortlessly describes the various tales of the banished. He tells of physical, emotional and psychological strain as the individuals were forced to live isolated lives for many years. The book also sketches moments of courage and resilience, displaying the defiant spirit of those involved in resistance: "to view those banished to alien, often remote and desolate locations not only as victims, which they were, but also as indomitable, courageous, tenacious and resilient people capable of enduring considerable hardship and overcoming adversity" (p 219).

With the individual stories of the banished, the author indicates the impact of government policies and the response from rural communities. For the most part, rural uprisings and reprisals have been marginalised in the historiography, whereas urban uprisings, large organisations and mostly male characters have received the most attention. Badat not only brings the forgotten repressive tactic of banishment to light, but irradiates perspective on rural uprisings and identifies the involvement of women by placing them in their respective roles within struggle activities. Attention is also drawn to the compassion and influence of the Human Rights Welfare Committee and especially Helen Joseph. Badat pays homage to those who advocated for basic rights and fought for the recognition of the banished.

The Forgotten People epitomises the role history can play in restoring worth and dignity to those who were marginalised and oppressed, many of whom have not received due recognition. The author succeeds in his aims; he provides focus on the rural struggles in South Africa and provides context to an overlooked, repressive tactic. However, there are flaws in the study and some chapters feel repetitive. This could have been avoided by careful editing.

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