

# A new past for a new nation? Historiography and politics in South Africa – A comparative approach

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Since its inception in the nineteenth century as a separate scientific discipline, historiography in South Africa continues to busy itself with the problems and tensions resulting from a system of both foreign domination and “domestic colonialism”. Inevitably, the abolition of apartheid also has far-reaching consequences for the historical culture of this country. The enlarged image of history fits into a political strategy aiming to bring about a new national consensus. The so-called *Rainbow Nation* is looking for an image of history which can be linked to the new profile of a multicultural democracy. One is struck by a number of similarities to developments in European countries which, as in South Africa, underwent drastic national transformations. This contribution deals with developments in historiography as a scientific discipline as well as with political debates on dealing with the past.<sup>1</sup>

## 1 Historiography as present past

### 1.1 A “School version of History”

The “national issue” has always been prominent in the writings of South African historians.<sup>2</sup> The nineteenth century founders of modern South African historiogra-

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  - 1. This article based on information contained in my previously published contribution: G. VERBEECK, ‘Een nieuw verleden voor een nieuwe natie. Een Duits model voor Zuid-Afrika’ in J. TOLLEBEEK, G. VERBEECK and T. VERSCHAFFEL (Eds.), *De lectuur van het verleden. Opstellen over de geschiedenis van de geschiedschrijving aangeboden aan Reginald de Schryver* (Leuven 1998) pp. 535-563. Certain aspects of recent developments in German historiography are more elaborately discussed in: G. VERBEECK, ‘De tegenwoordigheid van het verleden. Duitse *Zeitgeschichte* in de jaren negentig’ in *Bijdragen tot de Eigentijdse Geschiedenis*, 4 (1998) pp. 283-303. Special thanks go to P.H. Kapp and W. Visser (Stellenbosch), and to J. Snyman (RAU) for their critical comments on earlier drafts of this article. The English version of this paper has been made possible by the meticulous translation from Dutch by N. Morgan (UNISA) for which I am particularly grateful.
  - 2. There are several good surveys of the history of South African historiography (until 1994). See eg. K. SMITH, *The changing past: Trends in South African historical writing* (Southern Book Publishers, Johannesburg 1988); B.J. LIEBENBERG (Ed.), *Reader on Trends in the South African Historiography*, (Unisa, Pretoria, 1986); C. SAUNDERS, *The making of the South African past: Major historians on race and class* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1988).

phy, representatives of the so-called *settler* historiography such as George McGall Theal and George E. Corry, chose settlement of the colonial community in Southern Africa as the object of their study.<sup>3</sup> Practising history in such a way was bound to be strongly eurocentric: it hailed the arrival of whites, and especially of British emigrants since the 1820's, as another step in the march of Western civilisation at the southern tip of Africa. For this generation of English historians, themselves descendants of the British newcomers, *white rule* was evident. With arguments borrowed from nineteenth century anthropology, an order of population groups was vindicated according to which, European colonists occupied the highest echelon. Until the late twentieth century, the image - later exposed as myth - of the "empty interior" and of victorious Western civilisation would continue to surface on a regular basis in school textbooks and would continue filtering through in popular conceptions of history.<sup>4</sup>

The historians who followed in the footsteps of the white settlers, were followed in turn by a new generation whose conceptions were on a grander scale. The representatives of this so-called "imperialistic school", such as Alan Hattersley and E.A. Walker, placed even more emphasis on the blessings that the British empire had bestowed on the African continent.<sup>5</sup> The vision of the *white man's burden* was born here: it was thought that the European nations' opening up of the black continent, with England in the lead, was not only in response to political, economical and cultural necessity, but was also rooted in moral duty. The white man had to perform his task as a coloniser with the conviction that a civilizing mission rested on his shoulders.<sup>6</sup>

The ascendancy of the eurocentric image of history came to an end with the rise of a more liberal school of history in the thirties and forties.<sup>7</sup> Advocates of the *New History*, such as W.M. McMillan and C.W. de Kiewit, brought about a revolution by putting stronger emphasis on the social and economic aspects of history and by orientating their historical investigations on the daily life of the "ordinary man". Despite their interest in socio-economic themes – industrialization and poverty, the impact of British imperialism, the meaning of domestic mission work for government policy – this liberal tendency also laid great emphasis on "race" relations. The distinct undertone of a new South African patriotism of consensus could be heard in the work of these first liberal historians. That patriotism translated the envisaged reconciliation between English and Afrikaners under the governments of premiers Louis Botha and Jan Smuts after the Union was founded in 1910. This Union,

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3. K. SMITH, *The changing past: Trends in South African historical writing*, pp. 31-56.

4. Still to be found, albeit in nuanced form, in [minor] history books in defence of apartheid: W.J. DE KOCK, *Geschiedenis van Zuid-Afrika*, (Department of Information, Pretoria, 1972) pp. 7-11; W. GRÜTER and D.J. VAN ZYL, *The Story of South Africa* (Don Nelson, Cape Town, 1981) pp. 22-25.

5. K. SMITH, *The changing past: Trends in South African historical writing*, pp. 19-30.

6. This notion corresponds with the British historico-philosophical dream of a 'Romance of Empire', described in: B.M. MAGUBANE, *The making of a racist state: British imperialism and the Union of South Africa 1875-1910*. (Trenton - Asmara 1996), pp. 67-96.

7. K. SMITH, *The changing past: Trends in South African historical writing*, pp. 103-138.

which signified virtual independence within the British Commonwealth, had to end the aftermath of the Boer War and seal the sharing of power between the two language groups. Even more so than their predecessors, these historians were diligent advocates of a truly national image of history. Despite the obvious racial oppositions they considered the history of South Africa to be the result of the joint efforts of all its inhabitants. The work of this first generation of liberal historians indubitably displays “enlightened” traits, in as far as it contests the old dogmas of a world view focussed on Europe. However, they persisted in considering the arrival of Western colonialism and the spread of capitalism as a great step forward.<sup>8</sup>

Nationalistic Afrikaner historiography developed parallel to the (predominantly English) liberal historiography.<sup>9</sup> Its inspiration was especially to be found in the frustrated national conscience of the Afrikaans-speaking white community. It was rooted in an aversion for English domination and was backed by the glorification of great moments in their own *volksgeskiedenis* (nation’s history): the Great Trek, the founding of the Boer republics and certain traumatic experiences during the “Anglo-Boer Wars” (especially that of 1899-1902). As chosen *Volk* (People) carrying the light of Western civilization into the darkness of the black continent, taking up a David versus Goliath struggle against British imperialism, the Boer nation took on Old Testament airs. This type of historiography, which went against the liberal trend of integrating different population groups into one national image of history, consciously created a separate Afrikaner history and culture, with its own national heroes as shining examples. This nationalistic image of history became a central part of Afrikaner *civil religion*, the political mythology supporting the ideology of apartheid.<sup>10</sup> Its first expressions were closely linked to the political culture of the old Boer Republics and later on with the political aims of the National Party. When the latter came to power in 1948, it took the lead as far as research and education was concerned. In its academic form this image of history found its expression in the work of prominent historians such as C.F.J. Muller and F.A. van Jaarsveld. The lat-

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8. The first products of ‘Black historiography’ originated from within the liberal historiographical tradition - especially under the impetus of Protestant Missionary Schools. One talks about a ‘mission-inspired liberal tradition’ amongst Black historiographers. One is also struck by the moderate political disposition, the absence of any controversy and the permeation of a strong, Christian-inspired humanistic tradition which exercised great influence on the first generations of Black intellectuals in South Africa. See: K. SMITH, *The changing past: Trends in South African historical writing*, pp. 131-134.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 57-102.

10. L. THOMPSON, ‘Afrikaner nationalist historiography and the policy of Apartheid’ in *Journal of African History*, 3 (1962) pp. 125-141; L. THOMPSON, *The political mythology of apartheid*, (Yale University Press, New Haven 1985); T. DUNBAR MOODIE, *The rise of Afrikanerdom: Power, apartheid, and the Afrikaner civil religion* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1975).

ter is also known for his not unimportant contribution to the theory of history and the history of historiography.<sup>11</sup>

Although Afrikaner historiography was also cautiously modernized over the years, historiographers held on to a number of fixed points of departure. A characteristic feature was the continued interest in the principle of “ethnic pluralism”, which divided members of the community according to ethnic and cultural criteria. It was not until the seventies and eighties that a generation of reformist historians building bridges to the anglophone and international world was to come to the fore.<sup>12</sup> For example, a prominent figure such as Cape Town University’s Hermann Giliomee, raised critical objections against the use of history in the Afrikaner political culture.<sup>13</sup> This was concomitant with the cultural turnabout taking place within the ranks of “enlightened” Afrikaans-speaking intellectuals from various academic institutions. As historiographical surveys have shown, the Afrikaner nationalistic themes gradually lost their dominant position in the academic writing of history paving the way for a more pluralistic approach.<sup>14</sup> For decades the influence of *settler*, imperialistic and nationalistic Afrikaner historiography remained visible in the official as well as the popularised image of South African history. A so-called *School Version of History* came into existence, which, in broad terms, provided the ideological substructure for the apartheid ideology and legitimised white domination.<sup>15</sup> There was no room for the *black experience*, the historical experience of the non-white (African, Asian and Coloured) population group, not in the pre-colonial period nor thereafter. In the past, cultural stereotypes had led to history being brought back to a genealogy of white ancestors, in which non-whites were not considered important enough to be accorded a history of their own.<sup>16</sup> Non-whites were driven to the outskirts of the national memory as a useful work-force, street hawkers, poor agricultural labourers, secondary citizens from the homelands.<sup>17</sup> Black activists still remember all too well that they were banished from the image

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11. F.A. VAN JAARSVELD, *The Afrikaner’s interpretation of South African history* (Simondium, Cape Town, 1964); F.A. VAN JAARSVELD, *Moderne geskiedskrywing: Opstelle oor ‘n nuwe benadering tot geskiedenis* (Butterworth, Durban, 1982); F.A. VAN JAARSVELD, *Omstrede Suid-Afrikaanse verlede: Geskiedenisideologie en die historiese skuldvraagstuk* (Lex Patria, Johannesburg, 1984). Van Jaarsveld’s orientation is markedly towards developments in German historiography.
  12. H. GILIOMEЕ and R. ELPHICK (Eds.), *The shaping of South African Society 1652-1920* (Maskew Miller Longman, Cape Town, 1979); A. DU TOIT and H. GILIOMEЕ, *Afrikaner political thought: Analysis and documents, I: 1780-1850* (David Philip, Cape Town 1983).
  13. H. GILIOMEЕ, *The history in our politics* (Inaugural lecture, University of Cape Town, 11 June 1986, no. 126).
  14. See P.H. Kapp’s contribution in this review.
  15. For criticism of this version of history, see the UNESCO publication: E. DEAN, P. HARTMAN and M. KATZEN, *History in black and white: An analysis of South African school textbooks* (Unesco, New York, 1983).
  16. B.A. LE CORDEUR, ‘The reconstruction of South African History’, in *South African Historical Journal*, 17 (1985) p. 3.
  17. L. MAREE, ‘The hearts and minds of the people’ in P. KALLAWAY (Ed.) *Apartheid and Education: The education of black South Africans*, (Ravan Press, Johannesburg 1984) p.2.

tivists still remember all too well that they were banished from the image of history of their own country.<sup>18</sup>

## 1.2 Liberal renewal

Apartheid thought dominated the “school book version” of history. Change would only come with the rising of a new trend in the seventies which, along with the publication of the *Oxford History of South Africa*<sup>19</sup> would thus be given a sounding-board and be responsible for a veritable landslide.<sup>20</sup> Historians such as Leonard Thompson, John Omer-Cooper, Leo Kuper and others profited themselves as representatives of a new, liberal, but this time also of an “Africanistic” school.<sup>21</sup> In the spirit of a world-wide decolonisation process, the new trend rang in a revolution in the study of South African history.<sup>22</sup> These historians were “Africanistic” in so far as they opposed the principle of ethnic separatism in the old textbooks. The *Oxford History* broke with four old clichés: 1. the arrival of the Dutch in 1652 meant the beginning of a national history; 2. pre-colonial society was essentially static, without any noteworthy influence on later developments; 3. the frontiers (according to socio-Darwinist principles) between the different population groups were fixed for eternity; 4. the division of labour should be maintained between historians occupying themselves with the dynamic development of the white presence in South Africa and anthropologists studying the static (pre- and post- colonial) history of black South Africans.

The *Oxford History* became the figure-head of the renewers, but would (as was to be expected) draw the new dominating line which, in turn, would run into adversity from an even more radical historiography. South African science of history would land itself in a protracted controversy between the “liberals” and the “radicals”, with the “conservatives” a grinning third.<sup>23</sup> Critics of the liberal trend acknowledged the merit of the new national synthesis, but pointed out that the living spheres of whites

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18. Z.K. MATTHEWS, *Freedom for my people: The autobiography of Z.K. Matthews. Southern Africa 1901-1968* (David Philip, Cape Town 1981) pp. 58-59.
  19. M. WILSON and L. THOMPSON (Eds.), *The Oxford history of South Africa*, part I: *South Africa to 1870*; part II: *South Africa 1870-1966* (Oxford University Press, Oxford 1969-1971).
  20. I. SMITH, ‘The revolution in South African historiography’ in *History Today*, 38 (1988) pp. 8-10.
  21. J. BUTLER and D. SCHREUDER, ‘Liberal historiography since 1945’ in J. BUTLER, R. EMPHICH and D. WELSH (Eds.), *Democratic liberalism in South Africa: Its history and prospect*, (Wesleyan University Press, Middletown - Cape Town – Johannesburg, 1987).
  22. T.O. RANGER, ‘Towards a usable African past’ in C. FYFE (Ed.), *African studies since 1945: A tribute to Basil Davidson* (Longman, London, 1976).
  23. H.M. WRIGHT, *The burden of the present: Liberal-radical controversy over Southern History African history*, (David Philip, Cape Town 1977); S. MARKS, ‘The historiography of South Africa. Recent Developments’ in B. JEWSIEWICKI and D. NEWBURY (Eds.), *African historiographies: What history for which Africa?* (Sage Publications, Beverly Hills, 1986), pp. 165-176; C. BUNDY, *Re-making the South African past: New perspectives in South African history* (Department of Adult Education and extra-mural Studies, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, 1986); F. JOHNSTONE, ‘‘Most painful to our hearts.’ South Africa through the eyes of the new school’ in *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 16 (1982) p. 5.

and non-whites were still studied too much as “separate” worlds. Also, in the new image of history there was little talk of social and economic interaction. Wars and conflicts were the almost exclusive meeting places of black and white. The responsibility for the origin of racial separation was laid entirely at the door of the Afrikaner nationalists, descendants of the narrow-minded Boers. The white English community, on the other hand, the bearer of progressive and liberal ideas, was usually represented as a population group having precious little to do with racial prejudices and repressive segregationist laws. This “liberal africanism”, which, meanwhile, had become tainted with hypocrisy, was reproached with having no eye for the social and economic integration of the different population groups. According to the critics, that was deceptive, because thus the impact of industrialization and the growing mobility of labour forces (two aspects in which especially British capitalism played an essential role) had been overlooked. The destiny of the apartheid system was linked to an almost impossible dilemma, which would eventually cause its downfall: political segregation and economic exploitation (thus “integration”). Doesn’t the *Oxford History* strengthen the myth of English innocence during the National Party regime? Doesn’t its emphasis on racial oppositions and the denial of social and economic interaction come much closer to the starting points of apartheid ideology than what the authors would like to concede? “Liberal africanism” shed light on the *race* factor as a central category in South African history, but, according to their adversaries, by obfuscating the *class* factor, it was not that far removed from the old paradigms which they themselves had contested.<sup>24</sup>

### 1.3 Radical criticism

During the seventies and eighties new forms of the study of history appeared which, as described above, no longer considered the leading, enlightened liberalism as renewal and which all more or less share the denominator of “radical” or “revisionist” historiography.<sup>25</sup> This type of historiography was “radical” in its starting points as well as in its political orientation. Influences from marxist inspired historiography in Europe were clearly noticeable.<sup>26</sup> Examples worthy of imitation which were referred to, were especially British and French authors such as E.P. Thompson, Eric J. Hobsbawm, Gareth Stedman Jones, Louis Althusser, George Rudé, but also leftist theorists such as Antonio Gramsci and Nicos Poulantzas. Apolitical academic research had become out of the question; most of the historians belonging to this group, left no doubt that their work had to contribute to the struggle against apartheid. Different leading institutions inside the country and abroad closely following

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24. D. POSEL, ‘Rethinking the ‘race-class debate’ in South African historiography’, in: *Social Dynamics*, 9, (1983), p. 60.

25. K. SMITH, *The changing past: Trends in South African historical writing*, pp. 155-212.

26. P. NEL, ‘Recent Marxist analyses of South Africa. The question concerning explanatory superiority’ in *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 2 (1983) pp. 146-147; G. VERHOEF, ‘Die Neo-Marxistiese historiografie oor Suid-Afrika’ in *Historia*, 30 (1985) pp. 13-25.

political developments in South Africa supported this radical current.<sup>27</sup> The impetus of the growing internationalisation of the anti-apartheid movement undoubtedly contributed to the latter. Under the influence of this new radicalism, historiography of the traditional *history from above*, with its emphasis on questions of a political nature and on the importance of individual leadership shifted to a *history from below*. Now, a form of social historiography was practised, no longer exclusively concentrating on great social changes, but on ordinary people and on networks of social and cultural relations within the community. The search continued for “forgotten” and “unrecognised” subjects in history. Social historiography, conceived as a *popular history* or *people’s history*, aims to penetrate all aspects of people’s ordinary lives.<sup>28</sup> The breakthrough of this type of historical practice, with its emphasis on the history of mentalities and of popular culture, came at the beginning of the eighties with Luli Callinicos’ *People’s History of South Africa* project. Its success was not limited to scientific historiography, but also permeated the media. It is no coincidence that especially subjects from the social history of vanished indigenous kingdoms now caught the attention and led to a number of noteworthy publications.<sup>29</sup>

In complete accordance with the latest trends in the cultural sciences, *South African Studies* also found itself in the post modernist maelstrom – it had long since ceased to be a question of merely practising historiography. As in the rest of the Anglo-Saxon world, it became the latest fashion to try to link up with the shaping of theories on *colonial* and *postcolonial discourses*.<sup>30</sup> Epistemological naivety – the search for a past “wie est eigentlich gewesen ist” – was no longer the ambition; historians became interested in the origin, construction and distribution of historical *narratives*, stories *about* the past. The past was no longer studied on its own, but as a network of “stories” through which people gave meaning to their existence. More than in the past, attention was paid to written and oral testimonies as a source of historical research, where the search was not so much aimed at the quality of the truth, as much as it was at giving it meaning.

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27. Thus a ‘History Workshop’ was set up at the University of the Witwatersrand (Johannesburg) and different institutions saw the light of day inside the country and abroad. The most important of these were the African Studies Institute in Johannesburg, the Institute for Commonwealth Studies in London and the Southern African Research Programme at Yale University in the United States. Raven Press in South Africa proved to be a powerful distribution channel for introducing new historical publications.
  28. S. MARKS, ‘Towards a people’s history of South Africa? Recent developments in the historiography of South Africa’ in R. SAMUEL (Ed.), *People’s history and socialist theory* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1981), pp. 297-308.
  29. Some examples are: J.B. PEIRES, *The House of Phalo. A history of the Xhosa people in the days of their independence* (Johannesburg 1981); J. GUY, *The destruction of the Zulu kingdom: The civil war in Zululand 1874-1884* (Longman, London, 1979); P. DELIUS, *The land belongs to us: The Pedi polity, the Boers and the British in the nineteenth century Transvaal* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1983) e.a.
  30. An example of discourse analysis: A. ASHFORD, *The politics of official discourse in twentieth century South Africa* (Oxfordshire Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1990).

The changes in South African historiography do not quite coincide with the political caesura of 1994. The search for an image of history better suited to the reality of a multi-racial democracy brought about by the change of regime, could be linked without much effort to the process of renewal set in motion during the seventies and eighties. The historical myths on which the apartheid regime was founded may survive in vulgarised surveys, but the latter were shown up for what they were by new insights into the science of history long before 1994. Gradually a “national image of history” came into being which included different social and cultural population groups (blacks, coloureds, women, farm labourers, minorities, *ordinary people*), an image at variance with apartheid thought. Since the dismantling of the apartheid regime, recommendations on how to develop an image of history better suited to the new social and political relations have been pouring in from all sides. The blueprints for a new curriculum contain two components: *critical* and *alternative*, in other words a demand to settle accounts with the old image of history and a call to formulate a new vision of history. What then are the ingredients for this ‘*New History for a New South Africa*’? A manual written by two (female) history pedagogues, June Bam and Pippa Visser, may throw some light on the subject.<sup>31</sup>

## 2. A new past for a new nation

### 2.1 Settling accounts

Firstly, when settling accounts with an obsolete image of history, there is no getting away from the representations and interpretations which legitimised the colonial community and the white oligarchy.<sup>32</sup> Another crucial aspect is the strongly mythologized representation of the arrival of whites on the African continent and the conflict with the different population groups in the interior. It is no longer tenable to have die-hard stereotypes up to the present which in some cases are maintained and propagated by mass tourism, such as: 1. the view that Europeans and Bantu peoples arrived “simultaneously” in southern Africa, in order to the viewpoint acceptable that both are involved in a more or less equal battle for survival; 2. Rousseauist representations of an “uncivilized”, but at the same time also a “pastoral, idyllic”, “authentic” and “unspoilt” Africa, where indigenous peoples live happily and in harmony with nature; 3. and especially the application of a particular type of “psychology of nations” in the laying down of the stereotypical characteristics of “Zulus”, “Xhosas”, “Tswanas”, “Ndebeles”, “Coloureds”, etc. In the new ideology of history, aimed at national reconciliation, there is no more room for similar myths from obsolete textbooks, rather for faith in a brighter future.

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31. J. BAM and P. VISSER, *A new history for a New South Africa*, (Kagiso Publishers, Cape Town, n.d.)

32. This section draws especially from: J. BAM and P. VISSER, *A new history for a New South Africa*, pp. 33-57. Also refer to: M. CORNEVIN, *Apartheid: Power and historical falsification* (Unesco, Paris, 1980); J. NAIDOO, *Tracking down historical myths: Eight South African cases* (AD Donker, Johannesburg, 1989).



It is a known fact that a comprehensive, historical, heroic saga supports Afrikaner nationalism. Especially the heroic tale of the Great Trek from the Cape Province (ca. 1835) as foundation myth of an independent Boer nation occupies a prominent position. In the next political context this event is now seen as *one* of the numerous streams of migration within a whole made up of different transformation processes, from which the foundation date of *one* separate nation can only be deduced with difficulty. The journey to the north, which was itself part of complex migration movements, cannot be placed at the “beginning” of the Afrikaner nation, as was accepted for a long time. The story of the Great Trek and the message of salvation of the Chosen People, which it preached, became fashionable much later.<sup>33</sup> Nationalistic Afrikaners construct their own historical, political *Sonderweg*. Inevitably, blacks disappear from the field of vision of an image of history dominated by whites, unless when portrayed as enemies and opponents on *one* of the countless battlefields. South Africa is also no exception to the rule that the process of *nation-building* is rather a matter of political contexts than of evolutionary development.<sup>34</sup> The nation does not “grow”, but is “made” by ideologists, as has been established by the post-modernists.

The Great Trek as foundation myth of white South Africa links up with the representation of a “depopulated interior” as a result of bloody tribal disputes amongst blacks. Especially the Zulu expansion under king Shaka (*Mfecane* or *Difaqane*) belongs to one of the episodes of South African history, which most captures the imagination. The rising of the Zulu kingdom and its territorial expansion and the following forced removal of other groups is a theme historians have been quarrelling about for a long time.<sup>35</sup> Now it is no longer only the bellicose spirit and the expansionist urge of the martial Zulus which is shown up, but matters of a social and economic nature are also taken into account: drought, conflicts concerning the ownership of farm land, control over commercial routes. The image of a “depopulated interior”, used by white colonists to support their regional claims, is no longer accepted, in the light of the presence of indigenous population groups.

An analogous debate can be held about the adventures of the legendary Trek-leader Piet Retief who, along with his companions, was murdered after negotiations with the Zulu king Dingane about property rights in Natal, later to be avenged in the battle of Blood River (1838). He can no longer be seen as a brave hero, killed in cowardly fashion, but as a representative of the white thirst for expansionism. Does the “treaty” between Retief and Dingane, which would have supported the first territorial claims and white appropriation of Natal, exist, as was maintained for a long

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33. H. GILIOME, ‘Constructing Afrikaner nationalism’, in *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 18 (1983), pp. 83-98.

34. See the different contributions in: S. MARKS and S. TRAPIDO (Eds.), *The politics of race, class and nationalism in twentieth century South Africa* (Longman, London, 1987).

35. See eg.: J. PEIRES (Ed.), *Before and after Shaka: Papers in Nguni history* (Institute of Social and Economic Research, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, 1981).

time by white South Africa? Once again efforts are being made to refute the arguments and the old historical claims of whites on black land.

In South Africa, as is the case almost everywhere else in the world, the remembrance of wars also offered many points of contact for national or group-bound identification. The ‘Anglo-Boer War’ is no different. Through its main characters – British imperialists versus Afrikaner nationalists – this war got the reputation of a *White Man’s War*. Once again black actors, whether active or passive participants, disappeared from the field of vision. The new national consensus cannot bear the memory of that sharp conflict. According to the contemporary uniformity of thought there is no longer talk of victors and vanquished. Black auxiliary troops – on both sides of the front – must now get the deserved attention. Prompted by last year’s centenary, the old ‘Anglo Boer War’ is being noiselessly rebaptized to a new ‘South African war’ – or what is even more neutral: the 1899-1902 war. As though within the new national community there is no longer room for a ‘separate’ commemoration of the dead, but only for a collective remembrance uniting the victims in a posthumous act of reconciliation. The collective commemoration of *all* the victims, irrespective of the racial or ethnic dividing line of old, must therefore serve the new national unity.

## 2.2 New language-use in politics

“Mit Wörter macht man Politik.” Words have a political content. The cultural revolution which the new South Africa has experienced since the end of the apartheid regime, inevitably involves a revolution on the level of language use.<sup>36</sup> Words and ideas on which apartheid had conferred the semblance of something evident, implicitly accepted as such even outside the system, was now exposed as a cover for social and political power relations.<sup>37</sup> Sociolinguistics teaches us that words are never merely descriptive, only a portrayal of factual circumstances, but that they clarify the ideas and interest of the speaker. This is particularly true as far as the central vocabulary supporting the ideology of apartheid (inherited from a centuries-old practice of racial division) is concerned: ‘whites’, ‘coloureds’, ‘blacks’, ‘Bantu’, ‘Africans’, are all concepts which, according to the new norms of political correctness, may only still be used when combined with the expression: ‘so-called’.

For the same reasons, antiquated concepts such as ‘groups’, ‘ethnic groups’ and ‘population groups’ are avoided in the new political context; in other words, exactly that set of terminological instruments, which had supported apartheid legislation. It is no coincidence that the concepts all express a static character. They are now replaced by references to cultural or social ‘traditions’ that are dynamic by definition and also leave open the possibility of personal choices.<sup>38</sup> The intention is to avoid especially those concepts that suggest the ‘natural’ status and therefore the invari-

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36. J. BAM and P. VISSER, *A new history for a New South Africa*, pp. 128-153.

37. See eg.: E. BOONZAAIER and J. SHARP (Eds.), *South African keywords: The uses and abuses of political concepts* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1988).

38. T.R.H. DAVENPORT, *South Africa. A modern history* (Macmillan, London 1994) p. 5.

able group homogeneity. After all, population groups are thus represented as internally homogeneous and one another's rivals. It is type of a word-usage, which, through the use of different words, expresses the striving for ethnic separatism. At the same time, white monopoly of power is legalized: a common identity is ascribed to whites, irrespective of their origin, while blacks remain divided according to different ethnic groups. The old apartheid thought was completely 'essentialist' and 'differentialist' at the same time: it laid down the 'invariable' characteristics of population groups along with their respective differences, resulting in 'natural' rivalry.<sup>39</sup> It goes without saying that a similar discourse can no longer be reconciled with the ideological paradigm upon which the 'new South Africa' rests.

The new political vocabulary seeks to replace terms, which originated in a colonial context with a more neutral description of concrete, linguistic or socio-economic realities. 'Bantu-speaking' peoples (instead of black Africans), 'hunters-gatherers' (instead of 'Bushmen' or 'San') and 'stock farmers' (instead of 'Hottentots' or 'Koi-khoi') may serve as examples. From the same point of view, one no longer speaks about 'tribes' (with its accompanying socio-Darwinist and colonial undertones), but rather, one searches for more adequate wording to convey the socio-political types of organization (*chiefdoms*).<sup>40</sup> Added to that, it has become a rule to avoid especially concepts perceived as insulting by the parties concerned ('Kaffirs', 'Hottentots', 'Bushmen', 'Coolies'). The term *settler* has become just as problematic for the new national ideology. Although, it initially had a neutral meaning for the parties concerned (descendants of Dutch and later British immigrants), extreme 'pan-africanistic' ideology conferred the meaning of 'newcomer' on this concept, thus of someone without any historic 'rights' on South African soil. Radical africanism, which voiced itself in the bloodthirsty cry, 'One settler, one bullet', is a product of the same ethnic homogeneousness thought. This is no solution for a multicultural South Africa either. In this way one prevents the white (Afrikaans- and English-speaking) communities from feeling themselves to be late arrival minorities because of the negative connotation of *settler*, not permitted to participate fully in the national community.<sup>41</sup>

Any purification of language, however well-meant and necessary, may easily lead to a new witch-hunt and to vexatious forms of political correctness. If all language use becomes politically conditioned, the new banner of multiculturalism of course also conceals a politicised 'discourse'. A good example of this is found in the (in itself commendable) effort to avoid terms experienced by specific groups as insulting, and to give preference to descriptions used by the parties themselves. Thus, one could argue, everyone has a better guarantee of the right to (historical) self-identification. But what happens when it turns out that 'San' ('Bushmen') is an ex-

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39. J. DEGENAAR, 'De mythe van de Zuidafrikaanse natie' in R. DETREZ and J. BLOMMAERT (Eds.), *Nationalisme: Kritische opstellen* (Berchem 1994), p. 331.

40. See also: P. MAYLAM, *A history of the African people of South Africa: from the early Iron Age to the 1970s* (Croom Helm, London, 1995), pp. 64-68.

41. J. BAM and P. VISSER, *A new history for a New South Africa*, pp. 146-148.

pression borrowed from the language of the 'Koikhoi' ('Hottentots'), who have nothing but contempt for their neighbours and rivals? The 'Koikhoi' describe themselves in terms of universal humanity. As is the case with so many nations, they consider themselves to be 'human beings' in the first instance; their neighbours could be no less than primitive barbarians. In other words, must the xenophobia and the greatly exaggerated exclusiveness of the 'Koikhoi' become the norm for the new language use? For these reason some prefer to restore the old term 'Bushmen'. This case can serve as an example of badly understood multiculturalism, which effectively led to ethnic pluralism, but not to a new synthesis.<sup>42</sup> The one-sidedness of the old eurocentrism is criticized, but is replaced by a new ethnocentrism, that of the victims of the past in this case.

The problem is more fundamental when the rejection of the language-use that legitimises ethnic differentialism leads to the reflected social reality no longer being recognized as such. Terms and concepts which mirror the power relations within a colonial or racist society may well be morally or politically reprehensible, but in themselves form part of the social reality. Constructions about 'race', 'nation' or 'population groups' may not be a response to the 'natural' condition, but they nevertheless radically influenced the way people think, as well as their mutual relationships, and if only for that reason can therefore not be brushed aside as scientifically irrelevant. It is not because racist prejudices are no longer acceptable that their inner logic and especially their influence on social and cultural conceptions and conduct should no longer be suitable for further study. By merely replacing the old discourse with a new one, there is the danger of the disappearance of a large part of the historical and social world of experience.<sup>43</sup>

The same mechanism can be detected, for example, in the hesitation experienced by many to study national-socialistic ideology within the margin of their own logic. Because the (mostly veiled) nazi jargon as such generates such abhorrence with the present-day observer, one can easily escape into victim 'insider-ism', a group one can at least identify with. One adopts the point of view of what was experienced by the victims, as privileged spectators. But true insight into the mechanisms of power and suppression does not come that easily. The only way is to enter into the logic of power structures and of an ideology which, in the case of National Socialism, reduced the lives of others to *lebensunwertes Leben*. National socialism and apartheid thought had at least one thing in common: both were ideologies with a compelling effect on reality: *points of departure for action*.<sup>44</sup> "The secret of evil is locked up within the dynamics of the political ideas of the twentieth century." (François Furet).<sup>45</sup>

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42. *Ibid*, 131-134.

43. Another example is the blotting out of ethnic differences through an exaggerated aversion to any kind of differentialism: the fusion of Koikhoi and San to 'Koisan' or *hunters-gatherers*.

44. R.A. POIS, *National socialism and the religion of nature* (Croom Helm, London, 1986), p. 22.

45. F. FURET, *Het verleden van een illusie. Essay over het communistische gedachtegoed in de twintigste eeuw* (translated from the French.) (Meulenhof, Amsterdam 1996), p. 47.

### 2.3 Multiculturalism

In the new South Africa, the paradigm of multiculturalism<sup>46</sup> is clearly being projected onto history. Multiculturalism, taken as an alternative for the ethnic separatism of the apartheid system, is looking for a *common* image of history.<sup>47</sup> Despite representing opposite poles, multiculturalism and ethnic pluralism are not always clearly distinguishable in practice and certainly not within the South African context. In its radical form of expression, the acknowledgement of cultural diversity may also lead to the slackening of universal moral values. Born from a desire to make up leeway (as they misunderstand it), minorities will demand a type of preferential treatment for their “own” history. As compensation for past discrimination and injustice, minorities go in search of strong points of contact for a group-bound identity, resulting in an excessively moral relativism. Thus ethnic pluralism becomes the precursor of ethnic separatism<sup>48</sup>. Multiculturalism can only be a true alternative for ethnic separatism in so far as it places universal humane unity above the acknowledgement of cultural diversity.<sup>49</sup> Multiculturalism and ethnic separatism differ when it comes to the question of what belongs to the essential characteristics of being human, and what is accessory.

What the advocates of multiculturalism have in mind in the first place, is to awaken the ‘sense of a shared past’.<sup>50</sup> This means that the emphasis is no longer laid on conflicts and opposition, but on a common world of experience. This is of course no easy assignment, taken the concrete historical experiences in South Africa, the endless series of bloody conflicts and wars in the past. The recent undertaking to shed new light on the ‘South African war of 1899-1902’ is such an example. But efforts are also being made to apply the same model of consensus on the countless clashes between the British and the Xhosas in the Eastern Cape, the so-called *Frontier Wars* of the past century. Emphasizing the fact that both the British immigrants and the indigenous population are locked in the same material and economic battle for survival and are mostly pursuing the same goals, namely ensuring their living conditions, can do this. Even the experiences and environment of population groups who live separately as far as language, culture and ethnicity are concerned, but who meet in a common social, economic work-place, can be placed in a new light: different groups of foreign contract labourers or *indentured labourers* (Irish, Indians, Chinese), ‘coloured’ house servants and black slaves, independent and unfree Boers, and so forth. Instead of conflict and segregation, unavoidable interaction has to be

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46. *Vele kulture. Een nasie: Inhuldiging van die President van Suid-Afrika 10 Mei 1994* (Pretoria 1994) pp. 28-33.

47. J. BAM and P. VISSER, *A new history for a New South Africa*, p. 144.

48. Borrowed from examples within the American context: R. HERZINGER and H. STEIN, *Endzeit-Propheten oder Die Offensive der Antiwestler. Fundamentalismus, Antiamerikanismus und Neue Rechte* (Rowohlt, Hamburg, 1995), pp. 110-116.

49. For this debate, consult C. TAYLOR, *Multikulturalismus und die Politik der Anerkennung: Mit Kommentaren von Amy Gutman, Steven C. Rockefeller, Michael Walzer, Susan. Mit einem Beitrag von Jürgen Habermas* (S. Fischer, Frankfurt a.M., 1993).

50. J. BAM and P. VISSER, *A new history for a New South Africa*, pp. 48-49.

emphasized. Certainly in the case of unfree labour and slavery – as in the American situation – a micro-approach can be the judge of the interwoven nature of relations between ‘master’ and ‘slave’ in a more nuanced way. Mixed relations and marriages break the pattern of official race separation. Is there a better way of showing up the inhuman aspects of racial segregation than the evocation of real lives of people from the past?

‘Restoring Silenced Voices’, bringing to life suppressed or silenced sounds from the past, is the aim of the new historiography in South Africa. Firstly, there are the victims of apartheid, who are as it were removed from their traditional role as the oppressed and who previously almost exercised some influence on important developments in their country. It can thus be expected that a new history of heroes has been reserved for the ANC and for other resistance movements. As for other themes and ‘forgotten groups’, South African historiography finds its inspiration in the developments that have been part and parcel of western historiography for a long time. Thus the history of women - more than the dismal destiny of the Boer women in the British concentration camps - the history of the working classes and of ethnic minorities (Jews, Chinese, East-Europeans, Portuguese) will be given a chance. Operation ‘Restoring Silenced Voices’ is the umpteenth instrument for constructing the experiences of people and groups now forming the network of the new South African identity. “We need a new historical synthesis now which seeks to represent the *entirety* of the South African historical experience”, according to Bam and Visser.<sup>51</sup>

During the last few years, South African historiography has made a shift in emphasis which is also noticeable in other countries. With the rise of *micro-history*, interest for *great men* is being transferred to the anonymous actors of history. A picture of the lives of ordinary people is being created – farm labourers, farmers, domestic servants. One example is Charles van Onselen’s biography of Kas Maine, a poor black *sharecropper* on the South African *highveld* in the twentieth century.<sup>52</sup> The tales of ordinary lives serve as a kaleidoscope through which the impact of social and political changes can be viewed. The full significance of poverty, apartheid and persecution in people’s lives can thus be measured in a more precise way.<sup>53</sup> Another possibility of creating more of an interest in history with the broad public is sought in the writing of family histories or the practising of local and regional history. Of course the danger lurking around the corner in such an enterprise is that of a new type of ethnic provincialism, which may mean that the link with the wider national context gets lost.

The new South African historiography wants to break with traditional eurocentrism and is looking for a new africanistic orientation. This means no longer being satis-

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51. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

52. C. VAN ONSELEN, *The seed is mine: The life of Kas Maine, a South African sharecropper 1894-1985* (David Philip, Cape Town 1996).

53. ‘Whit’s whitey in the woodpile. Charles van Onselen: Wits University historian and senator’ in M. VISSER, *Portraits of power: Profiles in a changing South Africa* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1996), p. 8.

fied with textbooks limited to the history of Western Europe and North America, showing an interest in the rest of the world only in so far as it enters the western sphere of influence. The new, dominating ANC ideology is seeking contact with historical examples of 'national democratic revolutions' elsewhere in the world: decolonisation of countries in Latin America, Africa, Asia and Oceania, the Chinese revolution and upheavals in Eastern Europe. The new anti-eurocentrism expresses itself in the interest in the early histories of non-European peoples who for too long have been eclipsed by the search for European civilization's roots (the Middle East, Greece, Rome). The frame of reference for South African history is no longer European colonisation, but the African continent. A curriculum on such a scale is not without risks, of course: first and foremost, it is not unthinkable that these great expectations may never be realized. In practice, the project of an all-embracing *World History* where all civilizations have equal representation is barely feasible. And furthermore, it is doubtful whether one can escape from a eurocentric perspective. There is simply no way for the specified aims of the new national image of history to ignore the fact that the frame of reference, namely the South African nation, is the product of European intervention and *not* of African traditions. One does of course not change anything in the frame of reference by replacing the 'culprits' with the 'victims'. Can it be coincidence that one of the brochures on the history of the ANC begins with the statement 'that, in 1652, the Dutch set foot on South African soil'?<sup>54</sup>

'The Need to be Fair, Accurate and Inclusive', could be the creed of the new South African historiography. To summarize, it boils down to a global endeavour to create a national image of history, which is as integrated and as 'inclusive' as possible. The new government's drive to 'nationalize' South Africa's past also explains why present-day history pedagogues are averse to any suggestion of introducing separate textbooks in the education departments of the different provinces. In that way all population groups will not always have an equally strong representation. Government is particularly apprehensive that Afrikaner nationalists will keep the old image of history alive in regions where they constitute a numerical majority. In education, the curriculum of history can be nothing other than *national*.

An image of history encompassing the historical experiences of as many groups as possible thus needs to do more than reverse the old school-book version of the past – i.e. the roles of 'whites' and 'blacks'.<sup>55</sup> In the new situation one would be wrong to create the impression that *all* Afrikaans-speaking whites were racist oppressors or that *all* non-whites were heroic heroes of the resistance. One notes the tendency of some to diabolise the past and to identify only with positive aspects from the 'own' history. The result is a moralizing attitude condemning the past or parts thereof. An image of history, which remains dualistic in nature ('good' versus 'bad', 'white' as opposed to 'black', 'heroes' or 'villains') threatens to lead to historical amnesia. In

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54. Mzabalazo: *A pictorial history of the African National Congress* (Mayibuye Books, Bellville 1994) p. 1.

55. J. BAM and P. VISSER, *A new history for a New South Africa*, pp. 34-37, 136-138.

that respect it is noteworthy that the new South African image of history no longer wishes to see itself placed within the tradition of the previous *oppositional history*<sup>56</sup> from the years of anti-apartheid struggle. The latter is now seen as a necessary, one-sided correction of the one-sided image of history of the apartheid regime. What is required for the nineties, is a synthesis including all historical *narratives*, a mirror of the *Rainbow Nation* in the past.

### 3. South Africa in international perspective

The transformation which the South African historiography and the historical culture of the country in general is momentarily undergoing, is typical of a society which has experienced profound political changes. It follows a pattern of development which is not so different from that of other countries. Despite the geographical distance and the political differences, there are obvious parallels to be noted with the development of historiography in different European countries. Moreover, the influence of for example the broader Anglo-Saxon world should be borne in mind. In the work of English-speaking historians the overture to international trends in the historical research of old was still the clearest. This information at once relativised the consequences of the political isolation that the country had to undergo for decades. A more accurate analysis reveals a number of obvious resemblances with historiography in countries, which, like Germany, underwent a national metamorphosis. This is evident on different levels, such as 1. the change of emphasis within historiography as a scientific genre; 2. the striving for a national, historical synthesis, and 3. the public debate about the political processing of the past.

#### 3.1 Shifting paradigms

The shifting paradigms, which the South African science of history went through, display a number of striking resemblances with those in most West-European countries. A relative backlog in the development of historiography - as a result of the peripheral position of the country - reminds one of the development of German historiography. Unlike most European countries (especially France, England and to a certain extent Italy as well), the modernization of historiography started late here, the beginning of the sixties at the earliest.<sup>57</sup> The broadening of the image of history and the abandoning of traditional roads show similar patterns in Germany and South Africa. In Germany the social, scientifically orientated *Gesellschaftsgeschichte* of the so-called *Bielefelder Schule* played a part, which can be compared to the liberal movement around the *Oxford History*.<sup>58</sup> In both cases renewal turned against the methodological and political premises of an outdated image of history: the neo-

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56. A typical ANC interpretation of South African history can be found in: J. PAMPALLIS, *Foundations of the New South Africa* (Zed Books, Maskew Miller Longman, Cape Town 1991).

57. The controversy over Fritz Fischer's position on how the First World War started, with reference to his book, *Griff nach der Weltmacht* (Droste, Düsseldorf, 1961), is inferred.

58. As far as Germany is concerned, see amongst other: G.G. IGGERS, 'Introduction', in: *Idem*, (Ed.), *The Social history of politics: Critical perspectives in West German historical writing since 1945* (Berg, Leamington Spa, 1985) pp. 1-48.



historicism of political historiography in Germany and of Eurocentrism in South Africa. The 'revolution' brought about in South Africa by the *Oxford History*, can perhaps best be compared to the Fischer controversy in Germany at the beginning of the sixties. In both cases, methodological renewals were linked to questions on political guilt concerning the outbreak of the First World War or the origins of apartheid. Both paradigm shifts meant a revolution in the image of history because the transmitted thinking patterns legitimated rather than explained historical developments. In both cases a critical inquiry was directed at the breeding ground and the foundations of a system which deviated from the western pattern of development of history: national socialism in Germany, racial segregation in South Africa.

However, what had started as renewal, would soon come under the pressure of a new revisionism.<sup>59</sup> The *Gesellschaftsgeschichte* and the liberal afrikanerism of the *Oxford History* were blamed for handling points of departure which did not differ that much from the old approaches. The alternative in both cases was a broadening of perspectives, which would involve the broad layer of the population in the historical inquiry, and a strong rapprochement to the different cultural sciences, such as anthropology, linguistics and science of literature. The *Alltagsgeschichte* in Germany and the *People's History* in South Africa joined a broader 'History Workshop'-movement, which was also advancing in other countries. In both cases, the 'micro-perspective' also had political and ideological implications, namely the deconstruction of current values and power relations. In Germany as well as in South Africa, this shift accompanied a movement away from the 'great historical tales'. Not the 'structures' and 'processes' of power and politics, but the worlds in which concrete people lived and had certain experiences, occupied a central place.<sup>60</sup> In both cases, representation preceded reconstruction, and 'imagined' reality preceded 'factual' reality. It was no coincidence that attention then shifted to 'borderline-cases' and 'forgotten stories', people and groups falling outside the dichotomy of 'good' and 'bad', of 'white' and 'black'. Within political historiography, naked oppression from above was no longer central, but rather, daily lives, which could not be accommodated by political caesuras. Van Onselen's epic may perhaps be best compared to a project such as *Bayern in der NS-Zeit* by the *Münchense Institut für Zeitgeschichte* or a television series such as *Heimat*. The extensive biographical witness-literature of regime victims also belongs here.

One is struck by a parallel criticism exercised again and again by the new currents on those that preceded them in Europe as well as in South Africa.<sup>61</sup> Cultural, histori-

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59. 'Revisionism' is of course a misleading term, because today it evokes associations with negationism or denial of the Holocaust, cries heard in extreme-right circles. Originally - and with better reason - the notion was used to indicate all radical criticism and renewal within historiography. In the specifically German context, 'revisionism' is the opposite of 'neo-historicism': W.J. MOMMSEN, 'Revisionism and Neo-Historicism. Recent Trends in West-German Historiography' in *Storia della Storiografia*, 11, (1987) p. 104.

60. A. LÜDTKE Hrsg., *Alltagsgeschichte: Zur Rekonstruktion historischer Erfahrungen und Lebensweisen* (Campus Verlag, Frankfurt a.M. 1989).

61. G. VERBEECK, 'De tegenwoordigheid van het verleden', pp. 293-303.

cally-inspired criticism on social historiography is aimed especially at the continued belief in a ‘teleology of modernity and rationality’, in this case the fruits of world capitalism. Modern social historiography remains essentially limited to a history of the industrial revolution and its consequences for politics and society. It continues to cling to the dogma of the connection between economic progress, more political democracy and cultural emancipation. It does no more than lay down the ‘norm’ of the Western model of civilization.<sup>62</sup> In Europe, socio-democratic historians held up the prospect of class harmony; enlightened English-speaking historians in South Africa envisaged the end of racial segregation without, however, paying attention to class differences. Whoever fell outside the socio-economic field of tension, remained unmentioned. *Alltagsgeschichte* and *People’s History* place the very people who have no place in this scheme in the spotlight: women, marginals, forgotten minorities.

In Germany as well as in South Africa, renewals in historiography get lost in the fashion trends of post-modernism.<sup>63</sup> An analysis of structures has made room for ‘thick description’ (a hermeneutic aimed at the understanding of a culture as a system of symbols). The shining examples here are not the social sciences, but the cultural sciences (anthropology, semiotics and science of literature). And yet there is one important difference not to be noted. Under the influence of anti-apartheid ideology, (neo-)marxism in South Africa, stronger than its European counterpart, maintained a place in intellectual life. Next to academic historiography, measuring itself according to Western standards, one notices a radical tradition of opposition filtering through. As in the rest of Europe, this is much less the case in Germany. Marxism’s bankruptcy gave radical historiography a very limited power of attraction. Since the collapse of the Berlin wall, the Marxist heritage (although of German origin) can survive only in strongly diluted form in methodologically driven pluralism. As in the rest of Europe, the great ideological debates in Germany are over.<sup>64</sup> In South Africa, developments in historiography bear the stamp of pressing political and social problems way over the country’s head.

### 3.2 A broadened image of history

The broadening of the image of history still implies political ambition, in the sense of creating national unity. In most European countries this aim has been reached, because the nation has attained an assured right of existence. In the Federal Republic of Germany, the attachment to national unity was also evident. There could be no doubt about historiography’s national frame of reference, even before 1989. In

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62. W. HARDTWIG and H.-U. WEHLER Hrsg., *Kulturgeschichte heute* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1996), pp. 7-13.

63. W. SCHULZE Hrsg., *Sozialgeschichte, Alltagsgeschichte, Mikro-Historie* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1994); C. CONRAD and M. KESSEL Hrsg., *Geschichte schreiben in der Postmoderne. Beiträge zur aktuellen Diskussion* (Reclam, Stuttgart, 1994).

64. J. RÜSEN, “Historische Aufklärung im Angesicht der Post-Moderne: Geschichte im Zeitalter der ‘neuen Unübersichtlichkeit’”, in *Streifzug Deutsche Geschichte. Geschichts- und Gegenwartsbewusstsein in den 80er Jahren* (Reimar Hobbing, Essen, 1988), p. 22.

the early days of the DRG, the building of a national image of history played a crucial role in the regime's ideological legitimation, and therefore in the right of existence of a separate state. The class struggle model from the fifties and sixties, which had given rise to a 'partial' and, especially, to a very one-sided image of history, was replaced by a harmony model in the seventies and eighties. Historiography explicitly sets itself the task of securing the claims to as broad an historical heritage as possible. Thus the DRG is supported by a noteworthy paradox. By claiming to be the lawful heir of the entire German history, they wanted to perpetuate a continued existence as a *separate* state.<sup>65</sup> This construction was a boast, as became evident when the two German states rapidly reunited. The Restoration of national unity is preceded by the restoration of a common past.

Similar dynamics are also at work in South Africa. The 'new South Africa' is trying to project the political model of consensus on the past. The harmony being pursued must be reflected in a common past. Common memory becomes the matrix for a new South African national culture. Rehabilitation for the injustice done still remains *historical* rehabilitation. For the damages they suffered, people are also demanding a rightful place in history. Thus, history is more than contemplation without engagement, but always has something to do with a 'right' that may be asserted. Historiography that pursues similarly external aims, must of course guard against the danger of anachronisms and the temptations of a world without conflict. After all, it is not the right of national consensus planners, pressure groups or national minorities to complete the image of history. That is the exclusive right of the science of history.<sup>66</sup>

The German example shows that unity-thought and the projection of national consensus on the past are *undesirable* as far as at least one point is concerned. If that should be the case, it would (amongst other things) lead to those responsible for and the victims of National Socialism being grouped together. In the past, great difficulties arose every time efforts were made to 'normalize' German history and calls were made for reconciliation with the national past, for example at a common commemoration of 'all victims of the Second World War'.<sup>67</sup> Since the Historikerstreit, efforts have repeatedly been made to remove the partitions separating the

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65. Some conclude (to my mind, unjustifiably so) that the building of a 'national image of history' in the GDR made the factual reunification in 1989/90 possible. See: J.H. BRINKS, *Die DDR-Geschichtswissenschaft auf dem Weg zur deutschen Einheit. Luther, Friedrich II und Bismarck als Paradigmen politischen Wandels* (Campus Verlag, Frankfurt a.M., 1992) pp. 309-313.

66. The pursued broadening of the image of history is an ever recurring theme in all historiography-in-development. The historian will have difficulty shirking from the legitimation responsibility of his scientific activity. Each new phase in the development of historiography is legitimized as a necessary 'supplement' of the 'shortcomings' and 'gaps' of older historiography. It testifies to a finalistic approach to the practice of science, starting from the point that new insights always mean improvement when compared to what preceded. The popularization of the micro-perspective has strengthened the trend even more: now at last, 'forgotten' and 'neglected' groups get the attention they 'deserve'.

67. C.S. MAIER, *The unmasterable past: History, holocaust and German national identity* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988) pp. 9-16.

‘culprits’ and the ‘victims’; an operation stemmed every time by violent resistance. In Germany as well as in South Africa or any other country, it is recommended to remain wary of the temptations of a certain kind of consensus thought. It is desirable to keep into account the fact that the danger of such an institution is that of a new dogmatism and a new intolerance.<sup>68</sup> As far as the South African situation is concerned, Kader Asmal, Louise Asmal and Ronald Suresh Roberts rightly affirm:

This talk of shared memory must not be understood or mystified. It is not the creation of a post-apartheid Volk or a stifling homogeneous nationhood; nor a new Fatherland. Nor is it merely a nationwide equivalent of every individual’s mental ability to retain facts and arguments at the front of her consciousness. Such analogies between individual and collective memory are unhelpful. Rather, shared memory, in the intended sense, is a process of historical accountability.<sup>69</sup>

### 3.3 Assimilation of the past

The past thus also has to be accounted for. The comparison between historiographical developments in Germany and South Africa can finally also be found on the level of the public debate about ‘going about with the past’. In Germany as well as in South Africa, changes in the image of history accompanied (and accompany) a political, juridical discussion about ‘accounting’ for the past. Every time it was about mechanisms making the transition from a repressive (totalitarian or oligarchic) regime to a democratic (liberal or non-racial) state of law possible. In addition, Germany fulfilled an example-function in the light of experiences with the denazification after 1945.<sup>70</sup> After the reunification of East- and West Germany in 1989/90, the debate about the GDR-past was opened, by analogy with ‘denazification’ also called ‘deStasification’.<sup>71</sup> Here, assimilation of the past stems principally from the fusion of two countries. In South Africa political transformation coincides with a radical change in the social system, namely the dismantling of a system founded on racial separation. In both cases the aim is to account for the ‘criminality of government’ in the past. In Germany it is about political dictatorship in the GDR symbolized by the hated state security services (*Stasi*). In South Africa the central issue is injustice under the apartheid regime.

Both countries developed a juridical framework to ‘rehabilitate historical truth’. Under the political motto that ‘reconciliation is possible only through memory’, re-

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68. H. ADAM, F. VAN ZYL SLABBERT and K. MOODLEY, *Comrades in business: Post-liberation politics in South Africa* (Tafelberg, Cape Town, 1997) pp. 102-103.

69. K. ASMAL, L. ASMAL and R.S. ROBERTS, *Reconciliation through truth: A reckoning of Apartheid’s criminal governance* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1997), pp. 9-10.

70. See eg.: K.-D. HENKE and H. WOLLER (Eds.), *Politische Säuberung in Europa. Die Abrechnung mit Faschismus und Kollaboration nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, München 1991).

71. The terminological confusion becomes even greater when the problem of ‘destalinization’ is brought into the discussion: R. ECKERT, A. VON PLATO and J. SCHÜTRUMPF (Eds.), *Wendezeiten - Zeitenwände. Zur ‘Entnazifizierung’ und ‘Entstalinisierung’* (Ergebnisse Verlag, Cologne, 1991).

pression and violations of human rights from the past were brought to light. In Germany, on 20 December 1991, the *Gesetz Über die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen DDR* (in short, the 'Stasi-actions act') was founded. This gave rise to the creation of the so-called 'Gauck-Behörde', an institution administering the files of the former Stasi and opening them to whichever party concerned asks to examine them.<sup>72</sup> In similar spirit, to confront the past, the Bundestag created the *Enquete-Kommission 'Aufarbeitung von Geschichte und Folgen der SED-Diktatur in Deutschland'* in March 1992.<sup>73</sup> In South Africa, the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (in short, TRC or Truth Commission) was called into existence by the *Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act* of 26 July 1995. Proceedings were to start in 1995. The commission put forth its recommendations towards the end of 1998.<sup>74</sup> In the light of these resemblances, it is obvious that the way the two countries have assimilated the past is mutually comparable.<sup>75</sup> In the meantime, agencies from the German political and academic world gladly gave advice during the transition to the post-apartheid period in South Africa. Conversely, eager South Africans left for Germany, but also for Eastern Europe and Latin America, looking for solutions to the problems in their own country.<sup>76</sup> The question of dealing with history in both these countries is now also being treated in a number of joint publications.<sup>77</sup>

Accounting for the past after a change of regime sometimes leads to the wrong conclusion that the regimes being accounted for are also mutually comparable. The public consensus to put an end to a hated and repressive system gave rise to superficial comparisons. In Germany, the debate about the GDR-past was conducted with the experiences of the post-1945 denazification process in the back of people's

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72. Sources for examining the activities of the 'Gauck-Behörde' include the different reports published since 1993, e.g. *Tätigkeitsbericht des Bundesbeauftragten für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen Deutschen Demokratischen Republik* (Edited by the Abteilung Bildung und Forschung of the German Parliament, Berlin s.a.)
73. Sources for studying this commission of enquiry include: *Materialien der Enquete-Kommission 'Aufarbeitung von Geschichte und Folgen der SED-Diktatur in Deutschland'* (12. Wahlperiode des Deutschen Bundestages), Ed. Deutscher Bundestag, 18 Bände (Baden-Baden - Frankfurt a.M. 1995).
74. K. ASMAL, L. ASMAL and R.S. ROBERTS, *Reconciliation through Truth. A reckoning of Apartheid's criminal governance*, pp. 6-7.
75. Another - very partial - similarity concerns the problematics of land reforms and indemnification for land expropriation; in South Africa, as a result of forced population displacements within the framework of homeland politics; in the former GDR, as a result of the collectivization of the economy after 1945. Reference can also be made to the military support both countries lent to friendly regimes and resistance movements in foreign countries.
76. A. BORAINÉ, J. LEVY and R. SCHEFFER (Eds.), *Dealing with the past: Truth and reconciliation in South Africa* (IDASA, Cape Town, 1997), pp. IX-XVII.
77. M.R. RWELAMIRA and G. WERLE (Eds.), *Confronting past injustices: Approaches to amnesty, punishment, reparation and restitution in South Africa and Germany* (Butterworth, Durban, 1996). This publication was created with support from the Humboldt University of Berlin, the University of the Western Cape (Cape Town) and the South African Office of the pro-SPD Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

minds.<sup>78</sup> For some, the comparison between the Third Reich and the DGR is obvious. Both regimes are in fact (historically) comparable, but the way in which the debate is conducted, is not.<sup>79</sup> Similar mechanisms thus seem to be noticeable in the manner in which historical perception functions. One must guard against confusion between the process of dealing with the past, and the past itself. Historical analogies give the false impression of getting a grip on a new situation. It is all too easy to believe that ‘lessons can be learnt’ from the *past* to solve *today’s* problems.<sup>80</sup>

Hitler’s Third Reich, ‘truly existing socialism’ in the GDR and the apartheid regime have in fact little in common. Any comparison is a perilous enterprise, if only the celestial latitude of difference in totalitarian perfection or loss of human life. What in fact linked the latter two, was a common international context. The GDR’s right of existence and that of the South Africa was based on that; not exclusively, but to a large extent. Both could hold their own thanks to the Cold War; the end of East-West opposition hastened their disappearance.<sup>81</sup> What is better known, however, is the comparison – especially within the anti-fascist discourse – between the nazi-regime and the apartheid system.<sup>82</sup> Despite a few superficial similarities (and even strong mutual influence during the thirties and forties<sup>83</sup>) the comparison is, however, faulty. National socialism was an extreme variant of European fascism with deep roots in European history. It was unique when it came to putting into practice the radicality and efficiency of an ideology aimed at extermination.<sup>84</sup> The development

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78. See eg. F. WIELENGA, *Schaduwten van de Duitse geschiedenis. De omgang met het nazi- en DDR-verleden in die Bondsrepubliek Duitsland* (Boom, Meppel - Amsterdam 1993); C. HOFFMANN, *Stunden Null? Vergangenheitsbewältigung in Deutschland 1945 und 1989* (Bouvier, Bonn 1992); K. SÜHL (Ed.), *Vergangenheitsbewältigung 1945-1989. Ein unmöglicher Vergleich?* (Volk & Welt, Berlin, 1994).
79. It is linked to the renaissance of the totalitarianism-model. See, amongst others: G. VERBEECK, ‘Afrekening en reconstructie. Zeitgeschichte in het herenigde Duitsland’, in: *Bijdragen tot de Eigentijdse Geschiedenis*, 1 (1997), 78-84. There are numerous publications on the subject of the comparison between the NS-regime and the GDR. Some examples are: L. KÜHNHARDT e.a. eds., *Die doppelte Diktaturerfahrung. Drittes Reich und DDR. Ein historisch-wissenschaftlicher Vergleich* (Verlag Lang, Frankfurt a.M., 1994).
80. See my contribution to the debate on the fight against the extreme right: G. VERBEECK, ‘Lessen uit het verleden’. Historical analogy as an anti-fascist weapon?’, in H. DE WITTE (Ed.), *Bestrijding van racisme en rechts-extremisme. Wetenschappelijke bijdragen aan het maatschappelijk debat* (Acco, Leuven - Amersfoort 1997), pp. 133-154.
81. Regarding the position of South Africa during the Cold War: M. MULLER, ‘South Africa’s changing external relations’ in M. FAURE and J.-E. LANE eds., *South Africa. Designing new political institutions* (Sage Publishers, London, 1996), pp. 121-150.
82. H. ADAM, F. VAN ZYL SLABBERT and K. MOODLEY, *Comrades in business. Post-liberation politics in South Africa*, pp. 28-50.
83. Regarding mutual influence of national-socialism and apartheid ideology, see amongst others: P.J. FURLONG, *Between crown and Swastika: The impact of the radical right on the Afrikaner nationalist movement in the Fascist era* (Wesleyan University Press, Hanover, 1991) pp. 70-96.
84. One example from the unlimited sources A.S. ROSEBAUM (Ed.), *Is the Holocaust unique? Perspectives on comparative genocide* (Westview Press, Boulder - Oxford 1996). Traditionally, the national-socialist Holocaust is compared to the Turkish genocide on the Armenians, the destiny of the North American Indians, the victims of the African slave-trade, Stalinist terror, the regime of the Red Kmer, etc.

of the apartheid regime in South Africa stands completely apart from the European twentieth century cycle of revolution and counter-revolution, but must be included in a worldwide framework of colonization and decolonisation. At the crossing of African and European influences, the apartheid regime created a unique system of domestic colonialism.<sup>85</sup> The NS regime did not collapse because of its own contradictions – it was too strongly rooted in the spirit of the times for that (Ernst Nolte) – but through the superior power of the Allied armies. The GDR had linked its destiny to certain international power relations and was doomed to disappear with the end of the Cold War. The right of existence created by the regime itself hastened its own downfall. A national state, which links its right of existence to one particular ideology only, undermines itself as soon as the ideology supporting the regime is longer being viable.<sup>86</sup> The policy that was followed in South Africa during the period of government of the National Party (1948-1994)<sup>87</sup>, was doomed to succumb to its own contradictions. After all, it rested on racial segregation (racism) and economic integration (exploitation). The combination of the two proved to be untenable in the long run and turned out to be the Achilles' heel of apartheid.<sup>88</sup>

Despite factual historical differences there is, however, one noteworthy point of similarity between dealing with the past in Germany and in South Africa. In both cases, historical thought fits into a framework of 'assimilation of the past'. This means that dealing with the past is not an isolated matter, but is linked to the establishment of a democratic political culture. This leads to poetic exaggeration, as exemplified by the South African poet and Nobel prize-winner Derel Walcott: "History is fiction, subject to a fitful muse, memory."<sup>89</sup> But one can agree that nations imagine being able to *choose* their past and therefore giving shape to their memories.<sup>90</sup> Despite factual differences, the situation in Germany and in South Africa shows a striking resemblance here. In both countries people have an idealistic view of history, according to which knowledge of history has a purifying function. It is most entrenched in the old GDR-slogan: "Aus der Geschichte lernen, heisst siegen lernen!" But a more or less comparable historical and philosophical optimism is

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85. Taken from: J.A.A. VAN DOORN, *Een kwestie van overleven. Notities over Zuid-Afrika* (Meulenhoff, Amsterdam 1991) pp. 104-121.
86. G. VERBEECK, *Geschiedschrijving en politieke cultuur. DDR-historici over 'de weg naar het fascisme'* (Acco, Leuven - Amersfoort 1992), pp. 158-160.
87. An historical as well as politological and encyclopedic overview (from a neo-marxist perspective) of the NP-era is offered by: D. O. MEARA, *Forty lost years: The apartheid state and the politics of the National Party, 1948-1994* (Ravan Press, Randburg, 1996).
88. The end of apartheid is described in masterly fashion in a number of works of a political and journalistic nature, especially: A. SPARKS, *Tomorrow is another country: The inside story of South Africa's negotiated revolution* (Hill and Wang, New York, 1995). See also: S. MALLABY, *After Apartheid. The future of South Africa* (Faber & Faber, London, 1992); P. WALDMEIR, *Anatomy of a miracle: The end of Apartheid and the birth of the New South Africa* (Norton, London, 1997).
89. Quoted with consent in K. ASMAL, L. ASMAL and R.S. ROBERTS, *Reconciliation through truth. A reckoning of Apartheid's criminal governance*, p. 9.
90. A. GRÜNENBERG (Ed.), *Welche Geschichte wählen wir?* (Rowohlt, Hamburg 1992), especially pp. 7-22.

characteristic of historical culture in the Federal Republic. Here a dominating elite still swears by a permanent commemoration of 'Auschwitz' as a condition for democratic stability (Jürgen Habermas). National ideology in the new South Africa starts from the same axiom: "Reconciliation through Truth". The possibility of building a better future derives from dealing with the past. History is thus seen as a lever to greater justice. One can applaud this for political reasons, but at the same time one cannot but conclude that the expectations of history are particularly great.

### **Opsomming**

#### **'n Nuwe verlede vir 'n nuwe nasie? Historiografie en politiek in Suid-Afrika – 'n Vergelykende benadering**

Die skryf van geskiedenis en die proses om met die verlede te handel is nog altyd deur sosiale omstandighede en politieke transformasie beïnvloed. Politieke veranderinge het verreikende gevolge vir die kultuur van die 'Nuwe Suid-Afrika'. 'n Vergrootte voorstelling van geskiedenis pas in 'n politieke strategie van die 'Reënboognasie' wat ten doel het om 'n nuwe nasionale konsensus en nuwe politieke identiteite daar te stel. Soortgelyke prosesse het plaasgevind in Europa waar sommige state drastiese politieke transformasies deurgemaak het. In die artikel word in die besonder 'n vergelyking tussen die historiografie en politiek van geskiedenis in Suid-Afrika en Duitsland getref. Ondanks omvangryke verskille is daar betekenisvolle ooreenkomste. 'n Soortgelyke dinamiek is in beide state aanwesig sedert die ineenstorting van outoritêre oorheersing en die daarstelling van 'n demokratiese samelewing. In beide gevalle word 'n idealistiese voorstelling van geskiedenis voorgehou en geskiedenis word voorgestel op 'n manier dat dit ondergeskik is aan die bevordering van 'n nuwe nasionale kultuur. Die artikel beskryf tendense in die ontwikkeling van historiografie en sekere meganismes in politieke diskoerse, maar waarsku teen idealistiese oorvereenvoudiging en steriele verwagtinge.