

Part I: Precolonial and Colonial South Africa

During the apartheid era all residents of South Africa found themselves placed into one of four racial categories: African, Asian, coloured, or white. These broad groupings had more culturally-specific subdivisions: the whites were grouped as Afrikaner or English; the Africans were governed in tribal groups such as Sotho, Swazi, Tswana, Xhosa or Zulu; coloureds consisted of people with mixed-race heritage; and Asians included Indians and Chinese. Asians and coloureds had fewer rights than whites but more than blacks. Prior to apartheid, South Africans did not necessarily see themselves as belonging to one of these groups, but discrimination based on race had a long history in the country. To understand the origins of the system of racial classification that formed the foundation of apartheid, and to understand the nature of apartheid itself, it is necessary to explore how the various peoples of South Africa ended up living on the same land.

Who were the first South Africans?

Contrary to myths that would develop later in South African history, most of South Africa was inhabited long before white farmers settled there. The San and Khoi Khoi, often referred to as Khoisan by historians because the two groups spoke related languages, were the earliest inhabitants of South Africa. They arrived several thousand years before Europeans. The Khoisan were hunter-gatherers and pastoralists who relied on cattle, sheep, and goats and vast grazing lands for survival. They lived in the deserts of the southwest tip of Africa.

Around the third century C.E. different groups of people speaking related languages that fit under the umbrella term “Bantu” entered the region. These Africans migrated from the east coast of Africa into the southern areas and introduced cultivation to much of the continent. By the sixteenth century these farmers had occupied nearly all of the land in the eastern half of South Africa, and had devel-

oped into several fluid tribal groupings, such as the Zulu and the Xhosa. These groupings would play an important role later in South Africa's history. Political organization within all of these Bantu groups was relatively similar. Farming provided most of their food, and the ownership of cattle formed the foundation of political power. Chiefdoms developed out of alliances built through marriages and cattle trading. The precolonial South African region was ethnically diverse and socially complex.

Throughout all of South Africa's early history people of these different groups intermarried and a clan could change alliance from one chieftaincy to another. Sometimes the groups split apart as well, into two or more sub-groups. Despite this history of loose tribal affiliations, the twentieth century architects of apartheid would label every African as a member of a particular tribe, whether or not that individual thought of himself or herself as a member of that group.

The Arrival of Outsiders

In the late fifteenth century, just before Columbus set off for the Americas, Portuguese explorers pushed their way south along the Atlantic coast of Africa, reaching the Cape of Good Hope in 1487. As commerce flowing between Europe and Asia increased, the southern tip of Africa increasingly became of interest to Europeans.

On April 6, 1652, Jan van Riebeeck arrived on behalf of the Dutch East India Company to establish the first permanent European settlement at the Cape of Good Hope. This site became a crucial provisioning stop for trading ships traveling from Europe to India and the Spice Islands beyond. These early Dutch settlers, reinforced by Protestants arriving from France, Germany, and other European countries, are the ancestors of modern Afrikaners. Afrikaner means “African” in Afrikaans, a Dutch-based language that developed in the isolated setting of South Africa. The term “Afrikaner” came into widespread use in

the twentieth century; until then “Dutch” or “Boer” were more commonly used.

How did the Dutch establish a settlement in Khoisan territory?

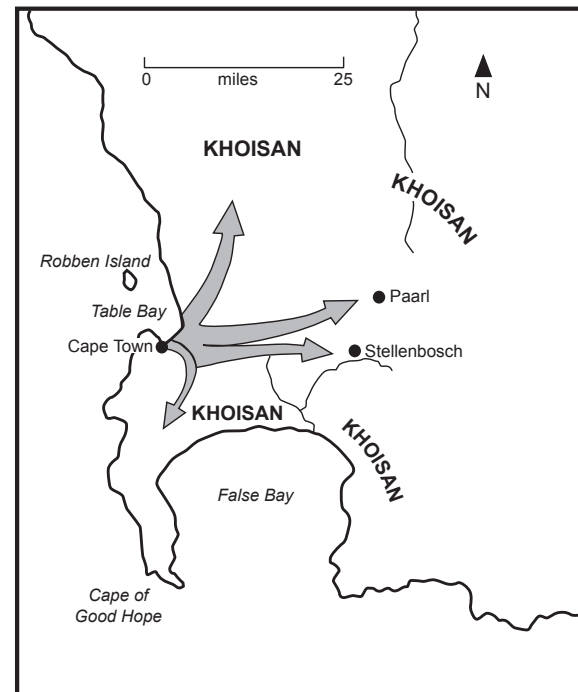
Unlike English settlements at Plymouth and Jamestown in North America, the original Cape settlement was not intended to become a full-fledged colony. Instead, the company ordered Jan van Riebeeck only to barter with local Khoisan for cattle and to grow fruits and vegetables. Fearing the costs of settling disputes or administering a colony, the trading company declared that all nonessential contact with the natives was to be avoided. But the order to avoid conquest, colonization, and employment would soon be forgotten.

Four years after the establishment of the supply station at the Cape of Good Hope, the company ordered Jan van Riebeeck to cut costs by laying off many of the men he had brought with him. Since these men needed to make a living, he granted each one a twenty-eight-acre farm on grazing land used by the Khoisan. The Khoisan resisted these settlements but were defeated in sporadic battles. The Dutch stole much of their cattle. As a result, some Khoisan entered into agreements as free laborers working for the Dutch. Others enjoyed good trade relations with the Dutch, while still others retreated away from European settlements to continue living their traditional lives. The arrival of the Europeans, who brought new diseases and who disrupted the Khoisan economy, eventually caused the Khoisan population to decline significantly.

“You [should] always endeavor to live, and trade, in peace with these tribes at the same time and for the same purpose, to penetrate—by parties of volunteers—further and further into the interior.”

—Jan van Riebeeck’s rule #1 for the next governor of the Cape

Cost-cutting measures and concern for profits encouraged some white settlers to turn to slave labor. Some slaves were Khoisan



The arrows represent movement of Boers inland in the seventeenth century.

children who had been captured after their parents were killed in raids and battles. Most slaves—about sixty thousand of them over one hundred and fifty years—came from Madagascar, eastern Africa, western Africa, India, and southeast Asia. The slaves, white settlers, and Khoisan had children together. Their descendants became the mixed-race coloured population. Over the years as the Cape Colony’s economy grew, whites—like many around the world at the time—began to see slavery as not only economically necessary but natural.

How did whites colonize inland areas?

For the next hundred and fifty years, Boer farmers called trekboers slowly spread out from Cape Town, acquiring land along the way. Beyond the frontiers of the Dutch East India Company’s land, they lacked the institutions and rules of an organized government. As they moved further away from the original settlement at Cape Town, they became increasingly removed from communication with the European world. At the same time they had more and more interactions with Africans. It

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The rugged Swartberg Pass is located in southwestern South Africa.

was this lifestyle—an isolated, rugged farming culture—that formed the basis of the new Boer, and later Afrikaner, identity. “Boer,” in fact, means “farmer.”

“We learned to ride, shoot, and swim almost as soon as we could walk, and there was a string of hardy Basuto ponies in the stables, on which we were often away for weeks at a time, riding over the game-covered plains by day, and sleeping under the stars at night.... We had no railways, and the noise of the outside world reached us but faintly, so that in our quiet way we were a contented community, isolated hundreds of miles from the seaboard.”

—Deneys Reitz, Boer in the Orange Free State, 1902

As the small but growing Afrikaner population spread steadily northward and eastward in the 1760s, they encountered more and more Bantu-speaking peoples. In some cases these

interactions were friendly. In most, violence ensued. On the eastern frontier of Boer settlement, increasing competition with Xhosa people for farmland and grazing pastures resulted in frequent clashes. Unlike the Khoisan, the Xhosa were more unified and were able to defend their territory more effectively against the advancing Europeans. They outnumbered the settlers, and while they did not have horses or guns, their resistance to the trekboers was largely successful. For approximately one hundred years, they fended off the Boers. It was not until after 1811 that the Boer settlers reached eastern South Africa, with the assistance

of British troops. The British burned Xhosa homesteads and grazing lands. The combination of warfare and a deadly cattle disease in the 1850s eventually reduced many Xhosa to poverty.

When did the British take over South Africa?

In 1806, the British took over the Dutch East India Company, which had become bankrupt, and assumed control of the Cape Colony in South Africa. In 1820 the first large group of English, Scottish, Welsh, and Irish settlers arrived. Unlike the earlier white settlers, these new arrivals did not adopt the Afrikaans language or the Afrikaner culture. Their arrival added more complexity to the ethnic mix of the region. The descendants of these settlers, along with later arrivals who identified with them, came to be labeled as “English” regardless of their national origins. Like the Afrikaners, many of them eventually moved inland to establish farms. The boundaries of the Cape Colony expanded to accommodate this movement.

What was the Mfecane?

The trekboers were not moving to empty land. In fact, many African groups living on that land were undergoing a series of complex changes from the 1810s to 1830s. The Zulu and surrounding groups often competed violently for resources, which had become scarcer as a result of larger populations and drought. Various chiefdoms came under the control of larger groups. Sometimes this was voluntary, for protection from slave raiders from the Cape who began raiding Bantu societies in the early nineteenth century. Weaker groups were sometimes driven off or killed entirely. Groups expanded and consolidated rapidly, and several powerful African military leaders emerged during the time period. The result was the creation of several large African kingdoms with complex political systems.

This upheaval, known as the *Mfecane*, or “time of troubles,” has been difficult for historians to interpret. It is still unclear to what extent, exactly, Europeans may have contributed to the disruptions. But it is known that during the turmoil some trekboers took advantage of the temporarily available land and some contributed to the violence.

What was the effect of British rule on the Boers?

The arrival of the English changed the economic system of the Cape. New markets were good for farmers, but when the British abolished slavery in all of its colonies in 1834, the Boers lost their cheap labor supply. Additionally, the land was becoming more regulated and expensive, making it difficult for young farmers to seek their fortunes. The British began to develop a political system based on class, rather than race. This change prevented Boers who did not own property from participating in the government. Many of the Boers came to resent rule by the British Empire, and they increasingly felt discriminated against. They also resented the fact that, in 1836, the British authorities returned much of the land that had been seized from the Xhosa. The trekboers—now sometimes called Afrikaners—had hoped to make use of this land for themselves.

From about 1836 to 1850 thousands of Afrikaners migrated north out of what was now the British Cape Colony. The migration became known as the Great Trek, later described as one of the defining moments of Afrikaner identity. The Afrikaners left in small bands and later formed independent republics, the Transvaal and Orange Free State. Here they could preserve a society with clear color-based distinctions between master and servant and make sure the interests of white farmers would come before those of the African population.

How did Afrikaners use the Battle of Blood River to define their identity?

For some Afrikaners this was more than just an economic and political movement. While most just wanted land, some of the trekboers saw themselves as fulfilling the will of God in a manner they compared to the flight of the Old Testament Israelites from Egypt. The trip was a long, difficult, and often dangerous attempt to seize land from the Africans who lived there.

“On the 10th of August we were again attacked.... It was a terrible sight to witness. I cannot describe their number, for one would have thought that entire heathendom had gathered together to destroy us. But thanks and praise are due to the Lord...who granted us the victory.”

—Anna Elizabeth Steenkamp, trekboer

One battle between the Zulu and Afrikaners, on December 16, 1838, later came to symbolize the Afrikaner movement. The Battle of Blood River was of minor importance to South African history, but generations later, Afrikaners mythologized it. They claimed that the group of trekboers had gathered together in prayer asking God to grant them victory over their enemies. In exchange, said later interpreters, these fighters vowed they would build a church to worship God as soon as possible, and commemorate the day as a great anniversary from that day forward. Afrikaners celebrated the supposed covenant and vic-

tory until late in the twentieth century. They often used this myth to claim that God favored them, as a way of supporting their claims of superiority over others.

How did Asians come to South Africa?

The last major group of outsiders to arrive in South Africa was the Asians, most of whom were Indians. British landowners experienced a labor shortage as they began developing sugarcane plantations in the Natal colony in eastern South Africa in the mid-nineteenth century. They decided to bring workers from the British colony in India. From 1860 through 1866, six thousand Indians arrived in Natal as indentured servants, marking the beginning of what became a permanent and highly influential Indian community in South Africa.

The Mineral Revolution

In 1867 Afrikaner prospectors discovered the first of several huge diamond deposits. These findings marked the beginning of economic changes that would transform the economy, the politics, and the race relations of South Africa on a scale similar to the Indus-

trial Revolution in the United States. Until that time the British did not want to manage the interior of the country, as such an endeavor required frequent—and expensive—military intervention.

The successful excavation of diamonds in Kimberley in 1871, and of gold in the 1880s, changed that attitude. Shortly thereafter the British expanded the empire through violent conquest of African societies in order to develop this new industry. Many thousands of African men came to work in the mines, initially as migrant, often skilled workers. Additional thousands developed and staffed new trading routes that grew as a result of the large numbers of people now living in the area. For the first several years, African workers had some control over their decisions about working in the mines.

But over time it became more economical to manage the mines so that labor could be controlled by the owners. “Deep mining,” the type required to recover gold, needed thousands of workers and a great deal of money for machinery. The work was difficult and dangerous. In South Africa the ore was of poor

Control of Mine Workers

Deep-level mining required thousands of workers for extended periods. So mine owners instituted a contract system for mine workers that required the African workers to work for a certain period of time, usually several months, but often a full year. Deserters—those who returned home before the contract was up or who sought other jobs—could be jailed. Many workers did break their contracts.

In response, mine owners brought the pass system, which had been in place elsewhere in the country, to the mining area. All African men had to carry booklets that indicated their name, address, and for whom they worked. Any man found without a pass, or with a pass that did not indicate current employment, could be detained or forced to work. If a man traveled to a new area and did not find work within three days, he could be deported from that district. In this way mine owners hoped to force Africans to work in the mines, which always needed new laborers.

The compound system on the mines further increased control over black workers. Mine owners built large barracks to house twenty to thirty men. About three thousand men were confined to each compound for the duration of their contracts. Men slept on concrete bunks over mud floors. Often there were no windows, but usually there was a small wash area in each barrack. A small, unventilated coal fire provided heat. The food provided was often not enough to sustain a worker for the ten-hour shift, and many workers ended up in the hospital as a result of poor conditions. Thousands died each year. The closed compound system succeeded in its purpose: desertion rates declined and costs stayed low.

quality. Approximately two tons of mined ore was required to produce three-quarters of an ounce of gold. Mine owners needed low costs to make their mines profitable, and that depended on the cheap labor of Africans. The British began to impose taxes on Africans in order to force them to work in the mines so that they could earn money to pay those taxes. More and more African land was seized—and people were taxed—as more gold and diamond deposits were found.

A wave of unskilled men, faced with fewer choices as a result of land losses and taxation, arrived to work in the mines. Mine owners housed their workers in closed compounds in order to better control them and prevent theft. Wages for these unskilled workers were insufficient to support a family. A system of migrant labor began, which involved husbands and fathers leaving for eleven months a year while their families stayed in the countryside as farmers.

How did the Mineral Revolution change South Africa?

As a result of the Mineral Revolution, South Africa quickly evolved from a rural, agricultural state to an urban, industrial nation with the richest gold and diamond mining areas in the world. The city of Johannesburg, surrounded by gold deposits, became the largest city in sub-Saharan Africa.

“We do not like our men to go to Johannesburg because they go there to die.”

—Sotho Chief

Mining caused a shift in the way the British governed the area. In the Cape Colony, they had emphasized class differences. Now

Weekly Wages of Diamond Mine Workers at Two Mines

		Kimberley	De Beers	average daily number of workers
1881	white	£5.0-£7.5	no data	1100
	black	£1 15s	no data	5000
1882	white	£5.0-£7.5	£4.6-8.0	1000
	black	£1 10s	£1 5s	6000
1883	white	£5.0-£8.0	£4.5-£8.0	600
	black	£1 10s	£1 10s	3260
1884	white	£4.5-£7.0	£4.5-£6.0	550
	black	£1 5s	£1 5s	3200
1885	white	£4.25-£6.5	£3.75-£6.0	770
	black	£1	£1	3230
1886	white	£5.8-£6.25	£5.6-£6.5	630
	black	£1 5s	£1	4400
1887	white	£4.0-£6.25	£4.75-£6.5	1240
	black	£1 10s	£1 5s	5500
1888	white	£5.0-£6.5	£5.0-£7.0	1040
	black	£1 10s	£1	4500
1889	white	£4.5-£6.25	£5-£6.25	887
	black	£1 10s	£1 10s	4460
1890	white	£4.0-£7.0	£3.5-£7.0	1070
	black	£1 12s	£1 9s	3876

s=shilling. There were 20 shillings in 1 pound.

Data from Cape Statistical Registers.

the structure of British rule was based on racial segregation. As a result, Africans became poor in ways they had not been before mining began. Additionally, in 1896 and 1897 an epidemic spread through the cattle population, killing 90 percent of the cattle and further damaging black African communities. Many Africans became dependent on whites for their survival. The Mineral Revolution and the structure of the mining economy laid the foundation for a completely racially segregated society. The Mineral Revolution also worsened the relationship between the Afrikaner Republics and the British Empire.

What caused the South African War of 1899-1902?

While Afrikaners in the countryside grew wealthy from the gold mining industry in the late 1800s, the mines themselves were primarily owned by the British. The British government was concerned that it would lose the chance to control the largest known gold fields in the world. In 1895, it demanded political reform in the Afrikaner republic of Transvaal to weaken the economic control of Afrikaners and to favor the English people living there. An attempted coup against the Afrikaner leadership further increased tensions. Within four years the Afrikaners launched attacks against the British, and a war began.

During the war the British brought five hundred thousand troops to South Africa (Afrikaner troops numbered around forty thousand). They implemented a scorched-earth campaign—destroying homes and land—in order to prevent guerrilla attacks from Afrikaners. The British also rounded up Afrikaner women and children and placed them in concentration camps where twenty-eight thousand died from disease. As a result of their experiences during the war, Afrikaner nationalism began to grow significantly.

How did the war affect Africans?

Historians used to call this conflict the Anglo-Boer War. The name implied that black Africans were not involved. On the contrary, blacks fought on both sides, and many suffered from the scorched-earth and concentration camp policies. Thousands of blacks who had worked on Afrikaner farms were rounded up. Additional thousands of African refugees died during the war. Many Africans supported the British in the hopes that they would get further political rights after the British defeated the Afrikaners in 1902, but these hopes did not materialize.

The peace treaty at the end of the war guaranteed that the British could continue to employ cheap labor at the mines and that the Afrikaners could maintain internal political control. Africans felt betrayed by this treaty, as many had assisted the British forces in their march toward victory. They had expected more rights as a result.

In 1910 the British colonies and Afrikaner Republics joined together as the Union of South Africa. While South Africa now enjoyed self-governance, it was still part of the British Empire. All white males could vote, but only some Africans had voting rights, and those were limited. Unification allowed whites to continue increasing their wealth while preventing blacks from doing the same.