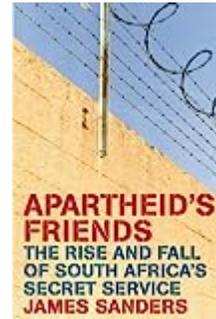




James Sanders. *Apartheid's Friends: The Rise and Fall of the South African Secret Services.* London: John Murray, 2006. 539 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7195-6675-2.



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Uncovering Hidden Histories

It is difficult to write histories of people who do not want their stories to be told. It is even more difficult to write histories of people whose job it was to keep their stories hidden, to misdirect observers to believe that the story is something else, and to keep those stories quiet by any necessary means, including enforcing silence by killing.

These are the barriers inherent in writing the history of intelligence agencies. South Africa's intelligence services after 1948 had more reason than most to keep their stories silent. Apartheid made South Africa a polecat among nations, and by the end of the National Party's reign South Africa was a pariah state even among countries that were hardly squeamish about getting their hands dirty with the more nefarious elements of statecraft. When the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Britain's MI5 and MI6 think that your methods are contemptible, your methods are probably beyond contemptible.

James Sanders faces these challenges admirably in

his ambitious, richly detailed, and sometimes flawed (but always interestingly so) book *Apartheid's Friends*. Sanders takes as his mission a comprehensive treatment of what ends up as a relatively amorphous concept—South Africa's intelligence services, or, as his subtitle indicates, South Africa's Secret Service, a term perhaps more problematic than Sanders recognizes inasmuch as Sanders throughout the book does not define precisely what qualifies, and, indeed, is unclear as to just what fits within his ambit (and thus what does not).

From the outset, South Africa looked to Great Britain and the United States in setting up its own intelligence services. In the early Cold War world, it was clear that discovering the secrets of others and coveting the secrets of one's own would be a crucial factor in international relations. The Western powers had to bring their nascent intelligence services to maturity quickly, and they were happy to welcome South Africa within their penumbral shadow. The National Party's securocrats were more than willing to exploit the Cold War, both its legitimate concerns and its paranoia, in order to garner the support

of Washington and Westminster. But while the United States and the United Kingdom were happy to help, they also saw South Africa as fertile terrain for competition. As the years progressed, both would compete for Pretoria's favor, with each gaining the upper hand for years at a time before the other managed to take the advantage.

South Africa's intelligence services had the myriad responsibilities of any nation's cloak-and-dagger organizations, but one responsibility was first and foremost: protecting Apartheid from the supposed onslaught from within and without that was always supposed to be just around the corner. Naturally this creates a fine atmosphere for storytelling, and Sanders chases just about every anecdote, story, rumor, and legend. And with all of the mysterious figures who are central to the history of South African intelligence and the equally quirky, frightening, enchanting, addled, and messianic figures who flit in and out of the story, Sanders is able to conjure his inner Ian Fleming and John LeCarre. How could he not? The main spying agency for most of the Apartheid era was known by the ominous name of BOSS (though the organization was the Bureau FOR State Security, journalists and others transmogrified it into the Bureau OF State Security, much to the chagrin of the state). Among his cast of characters are legendary names in the South African intelligence world, such as Hendrik van den Bergh and Eschel Roodie, General P. W. van der Westhuizen and Neil Bernard, Gerard Ludi and Craig Williamson, and Mike Louw and Wouter Basson. There are also the members of the police forces, such as Dirk Coetzee and Eugene de Kock (nicknamed "Prime Evil") and Gideon Nieuwoudt ("The Angel of Death"). And as in any great spy story, there are the opposing agents. Sanders's book is largely about the Apartheid spy hierarchy, but he also devotes considerable space to the intelligence apparatus of the African National Congress (ANC) opposition, including such figures as Mo Shaik and Mac Maharaj. Sanders has plenty of anecdotes, though at times it seems that the anecdotes serve no larger purpose except that they are such good stories he could not possibly exclude them. Taken in toto the many tales of intrigue that Sanders tells creates an exhaustive picture of South African intelligence, but there are times when it appears that he is trying to draw a 1:1 scale map of the South African spying universe, and so it can be an exhausting picture as well. But in the end the accumulation of stories reaffirms that the Byzantine intelligence forces existed to bolster white supremacy, and their means of doing so were grim, seedy, and at times murderous.

But even amid the dark and dangerous and forebod-

ing tales, Sanders is adept at revealing that for all of the menace, and for all of the capacity to destroy the lives of black activists and other capriciously labeled enemies of the state, there was also a keystone cops element at work in the intelligence agencies during the Apartheid years. The intelligence services and the organizations that buttressed them could be scary, deadly, and effective. They could also be comically ineffective and corrupt. Buffoonery seemed to characterize the South African intelligence services as much as skullduggery. Furthermore, South Africa's intelligence services were almost always caught up in internecine struggles. The biggest of these conflicts took place between the intelligence services of the government—BOSS and the National Intelligence Service (NIS)—and the Military Intelligence Division (MID). Intelligence thus became contested territory, where prestige and access were often more important than doing the actual work of the state.

In at least one instance, the incompetence and ham-handedness of the intelligence services and their deep connections with the government led to a scandal that nearly brought down the government. In the 1970s, Information Minister Connie Mulder and Secretary for Information Eschel Roodie convinced Prime Minister John Vorster to plant pro-government information in South African publications, and most notably to establish the pro-Apartheid English-language newspaper the *Citizen*. When the news of the propaganda campaign leaked, the main participants tried to cover their tracks. Ultimately the Information Scandal, or Muldergate as it came to be known for its proximity and loose similarity to the Watergate scandal in the United States, directly led to the resignation of Vorster as prime minister and state president and certainly cost Mulder any shot at becoming premier, a position that went to P. W. Botha. Sanders's treatment of the Information Scandal represents one of the strongest contributions of his book.

Botha certainly did not learn from Muldergate the lessons of curbing the use of the intelligence services. If anything, during the 1980s, the interconnections between the security forces and the intelligence services became so blurred as to be indiscernible. Police operations, already dependent on secrecy, increasingly utilized the state intelligence apparatus. At the same time, pressure from within came in the form of a renewed anti-Apartheid struggle that sought to render South Africa ungovernable, and increasing pressure from without took the form of global condemnation and divestment. Both brought greater scrutiny to all of the actions of the Apartheid state.

The transition to multiracial rule in South Africa did not end, and in some ways actually escalated, the sense of urgency in the intelligence services. There were efforts to undermine the negotiations. But there was also a great deal of self-serving behavior as members of the intelligence apparatus sought either to ensure their own positions in a new government or to find space within the public sector.

After the eventual transition, the question became how to create an effective South African intelligence service free of the burdens of the past but capable of learning its lessons, in order to allow the ANC-led government to maintain the sort of intelligence gathering that any prominent state requires in an international diplomatic climate where gentlemen do read each other's mail. This effort included integrating former ANC intelligence and military operatives into the existing intelligence services, a transition that was not always easy and was made considerably more difficult by the fact that former operatives suddenly looked on the past as a golden age that the new dispensation could never equal, a largely ahistorical view that nonetheless allowed critics to maintain their racial and political views. This is not to say that the ANC government's intelligence efforts were always sterling. The growing pains in the intelligence agencies have been every bit as tender as those in other realms of the New South Africa.

An additional factor that the National Party government rarely had to deal with was the rise of private security companies, many of which include intelligence operations within their ambit. The 1990s were an especially fruitful time for such organizations to emerge, which was a sometimes worrisome trend given that these mercenaries were not even nominally under the control of the government, could and would sell out to the highest bidder, and sometimes made overtures about trying to overthrow various governments, South Africa's included. In one well-known case, members of these private security services tried to stage a coup in 2004 against the government of Equatorial Guinea. The two main players in this largely farcical—but no less frightening—effort were

Simon Mann, whose grandfather ran De Beers and who had been associated with the most far-reaching of the private “counterintelligence consultancy firms,” Executive Outcomes, and Mark Thatcher, the son of the former British prime minister. The effort failed, but the threat that such renegade operations could pose became all the more clear.

The greatest source of strength in *Apartheid's Friends* is the incredible level of detail Sanders brings to his work. But that source of strength might also be the book's greatest weakness. There may well be too much detail, and especially too much detail in areas in which the connection with intelligence is dubious or at least unclear. South Africa during the decades after 1948 and until 1994 was a police state, and as a result, intelligence seemed to play a role in every element of daily life. Nonetheless, there are occasions when the level of detail causes Sanders somewhat to lose the plot. All but the most dedicated and knowledgeable readers will occasionally find themselves lost in a morass of names and organizations and events that do not always seem all that germane to the book's central themes. Security forces required intelligence, to be sure, but one wonders whether a tighter and perhaps more disciplined narrative might have improved the book.

Around the turn of the current century, Jacob Zuma, once head of the ANC's intelligence wing, was caught up in a potentially explosive scandal in which he was accused of being part of a cabal within the ANC that was trying to stage a coup against President Thabo Mbeki. A dubious report that tried to bring the alleged conspiracy to light referred to Zuma's “legendary laziness and incompetence” and asserted that ANC intelligence had been compromised as far back as the mid-1980s (p. 393). Zuma, who had legendary clashes with Mbeki that resulted in Zuma wresting the ANC party presidency from Mbeki at the ANC's meeting at Polokwane in December 2007, is now president of South Africa. He is therefore ultimately responsible for intelligence today. He could do worse than to read Sanders's *Apartheid's Friends* to get a sense of just what he is in for.

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