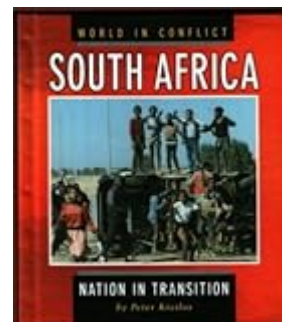


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Peter Kizilos. *South Africa: Nation in Transition*. Minneapolis: Lerner Publications Company, 1998. 96 pp. Grades 7-10, ages 12-16. \$25.26 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8225-3558-4.



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A Kaleidoscope of Issues

This is a good book, recommended for readers aged 12-16 (grades 7-10) researching South Africa's past and current affairs. It presents a straightforward introductory analysis of the history of the conflict and transition in a clear and interesting manner. Visual attention is drawn to every page-spread in a different way—either through photographs worthy of discussion, relevant historical illustrations, extracts from the text, or stories which touch tangentially on the text and bring it to life. It is a concisely written book and is slim in size, but it contains a fair amount of detail in the attempt at a production of an unbiased and objective narrative of the transitional crisis in South Africa. The text is divided into three newspaper-style columns, which make for quick scanning and an easy means to grasp the primary issues being discussed.

The book opens with a glossary of terms. It is understood that the phrases explained here have mainly to do with conflict issues, but it would perhaps have been more significant if indigenous words had also been supplied here, maybe including their phonetic orientation. One who is not familiar with South Africa as such, but

who is studying worldwide conflict in general, may understand the concept of amnesty or guerrilla tactics, but may remain foreign to Umkhonto we Sizwe (also known as MK) or Inkatha as terms as well as concepts.

There is an introduction to the series and the ideas behind it, followed by an introduction to the text, which contains basic background information about South Africa. Thereafter the book is divided into five chapters which in turn are subdivided into different areas of focus, breaking the reading of the text into small more easily digestible sections. The chapters begin with an overview on South African current affairs and then take historical steps back to consider the past and how this situation has evolved over a period of close to five hundred years, up until today.

In the introduction, the reader is presented with the basic dichotomies of the country, briefly touching on the history of the conflict, the geography and people of the land in terms of the discrepancies regarding race, the languages issue, and the ethnic conflicts. It also considers how apartheid has affected mainstream South African existence through the Group Areas Act, the establish-

ment of “homelands” and the economy. The chapter concludes with a brief explanation on the demise of apartheid and how incipient democracy is working, so far.

The first chapter of the book begins at Mandela’s inauguration as President in 1994. It discusses the multi-valent ways in which crime has disrupted the country—looking at problem areas as diverse as education and detention without trial. The second and subsequent chapters follow a chronological exploration of the South African narrative up until 1997. Each chapter represents a mixed approach to the country, balancing its positive with its negative points.

Geographically, South Africa is accurately contextualised. Attention is drawn to the ways in which the land has been divided up over the years into different provinces and earlier, “homelands.” There is however, an inconsistency of naming in the case of Mpumalanga which is referred to as the Eastern Transvaal, its name before the current changes were implemented. The changing of institutions’ purposes as with the changing of their names is significant in the redressing of past imbalances. Robben Island is mentioned—but not the fact that the institution itself, previously a jail for political prisoners, is now recast as a museum.

An error occurs in the citing of twelve official languages and in enumerating them. This is a little misleading as it gives rather a hotchpotch idea of the kind of populace to which the country is directing itself. The eleven official languages are Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, Siswati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu. The subsidiary unofficial languages which play a role in South African media and education are Sign Language, Khoi, Nama and San, German, Greek, Gujarati, Hindi, Portuguese, Tamil, Telegu, Urdu, Arabic, Hebrew and Sanskrit and other languages catering to religious needs. Also under the general theme of language, the term Voortrek as a translation for the Great Trek arises. This is more accurately translated as Die Groot Trek.

There are a couple of discrepancies with regard to cultural or ethnic description. In the second chapter which details the history of the country, Kizilos mentions a people called the “Khoisan.” The Khoi and the San are indeed two completely separate ethnic denominations.

The IFP/ANC conflict is pivotal to much internal and civil warfare in this country. It is touched upon very briefly in the introduction and is not mentioned again in the text. Rather, the results of the conflict and the num-

bers of people killed draws attention in the first chapter. The roots of this problem could perhaps have had more attention.

Together with the complexity of the situation, there is a diversity of approaches articulated within and by the tiny minority groups as well as the very large ones. Kizilos does tend to overlook these subtleties which are fairly significant for an accurate understanding of the complicated workings of the South African socio-political structures.

One example is that the white populace seems to be quite cleanly divided into English and Afrikaans descendants. A lot of people came to South Africa from Europe that are being overlooked here. A number of these people emigrated to South Africa upon the discovery of gold and diamonds, and a fair proportion came as Second World War refugees.

Another area that could be redressed occurs where it becomes understandable that whites took a common biased stance against blacks. This is an oversimplification and the student’s attention should be drawn to the individual local white South African activists that fought against apartheid for many years, people like Joe Slovo, Helen Suzman, Helen Joseph, among others.

Before the body of the text opens, images of the main players in the conflict, and short blurbs regarding their political stances, are given. The flags of the primary political parties of the country are shown, but not the national flag, which only appears in the text in photographic footage. Given that the controversy surrounding the necessary decisions to be taken regarding a new flag were as bitter and interesting as the language debate, this could have perhaps been mentioned, albeit perhaps tangentially.

It is also noteworthy and very interesting to see that some of the photographs presented in this book are not ones that were freely made available through the media or elsewhere to mainstream South Africans. This is remarkable in terms of the censorship of the media in South Africa for a long period during the time when apartheid was most prevalent. Kizilos does, however make mention of the fact that the teaching of South African history to South African scholars was heavily biased during the apartheid years.

The book concludes with an epilogue, foregrounding the fact that the information presented is not a final statement on the status quo of the country. Kizilos backs this

up by supplying a number of useful and relevant website- and newspaper resources which can be consulted for up-to-the-minute updates on the situation in South Africa. A chronology and bibliography also form relevant elements to the closing pages of the text. The former gives a relatively detailed breakdown of important events, and the latter comprises both publications and video-productions on the situation in the country.

Kizilos has realized a competent presentation of a difficult set of problems which will be of value to the begin-

ner researcher into the area. This is also an excellent idea for a series of texts, giving life and meaning to issues that may arise in the media, which one only comes to from a particular angle—or from a particular development in the conflict.

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