

# H-Net Reviews

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**Hermann Giliomee.** *The Last Afrikaner Leaders: A Supreme Test of Power.* Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2012. 447 pp. Illustrations. \$39.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-624-04971-5; ISBN 978-0-624-05837-3.

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The best-laid schemes of mice and men Gang aft agley [often go awry]. These words by the eighteenth-century Scottish poet Robert Burns are quoted by Hermann Giliomee as part of the epigraph to his latest monograph, *The Last Afrikaner Leaders: A Supreme Test of Power*. They are well-chosen words when it comes to understanding much of South Africa's apartheid past, which Giliomee sets out to do afresh in this genuinely gripping book. The book focuses on the Afrikaner leaders Hendrik Verwoerd, John Vorster, P. W. Botha, F. W. de Klerk, and Frederik Van Zyl Slabbert, and their respective roles in the construction and dismantling of apartheid during the second half of the twentieth century. Although scholarly interest has already produced a vast body of literature on apartheid, Giliomee points out that existing works typically focus on the social processes and the abstract forces that first shaped the construction of the system and later worked to bring about its erosion and overthrow (p. 12). What is lacking in the literature, he argues, is a focus on the decisive role played by powerful individuals. Thus Giliomee sets out to investigate the interplay of human agency and the contingency of historical developments as revealed in these five figures. It is at this level that the idea of schemes gone awry has true currency. Rather than analyzing the full scope of National Party (NP) policies, apartheid in all its manifestations, or even political biography, Giliomee focuses on the political schemes the various NP leaders proposed—and Slabbert's criticism of these schemes (p. 12). Giliomee explains that ethnic groups who feel threatened tend to look to their leaders to safeguard the group's interests and survival—and the embattled Afrikaners displayed great loyalty to their

political leadership. Analyzing the outcomes, miscalculations, and missed opportunities of these politicians's plans, he consistently employs the term "scheme" to evoke the idea that NP policies rarely achieved what they set out to do.

Giliomee devotes an average of three chapters to each NP leader's political career, particularly their time in office as prime minister or, after 1983, state president. These are not clear cut chapters—Giliomee masterfully weaves his *dramatis personae* into each other's stories during the time their public service overlapped, demonstrating how they influenced each other and contrasting their leadership styles and priorities. Provocative new insights are provided with regard to Hendrik Verwoerd. Giliomee shows that Verwoerd did not initially intend for African political and economic development to be restricted to the reserves. Meeting with members of the Native Representative Council in 1950, he proposed the possibility that urban Africans would be granted a form of self-rule and be trained to perform white-collar jobs in the townships. Understandably, the NRC rejected the scheme, demanding instead direct representation at all levels of government along with whites. Verwoerd reacted by disbanding the Council and abandoning the proposal. According to Giliomee, Verwoerd's proposition to the NRC was "a fateful turning point" (p. 55), the significance of which has been overlooked by historians. Had the NRC entered into discussion with Verwoerd, it could have meant the development of a new field of black politics and administrative capabilities—something that the country would sorely lack when whites handed over power in 1994 (p. 55).

This forms part of another insight concerning Verwoerd: Giliomee takes issue with the portrayal of the father of apartheid as dogmatic, inflexible, and also obsessed with the principles of his racial policy that he was unable to change course (p. 417). Rather, Giliomee demonstrates, Verwoerd did not hesitate to change his mind if he considered doing so expedient to the situation at hand. In 1951, for instance, he still rejected dividing South Africa into a series of states and advocated self-government for Africans in their own areas. But in 1959, he abruptly changed his mind and made the vision of independent African states NP policy without consulting his party. Giliomee wonders provocatively, might Verwoerd have changed course again in the late 1960s, had he not been assassinated?

Despite its obvious failings, the homelands policy continued to enjoy the commitment of NP leaders long after Verwoerd's death. John Vorster's version of the scheme envisioned a confederation of self-governing black and white units, while P. W. Botha advocated a confederation of Southern African States. Giliomee explains the persistent failure of such plans in terms of these leaders' continued insistence on racially segregated structures as the basis for their alliances with black leaders. While Vorster was responsible for canceling the South African citizenship of Africans whose homelands had accepted nominal independence, Giliomee shows that the statesman was for the most part distracted by disunity within his party or preoccupied by foreign policy issues. Giliomee discusses Vorster's scheme to strengthen white rule by creating an anticommunist bloc on the subcontinent as well as the incursion into Angola at some length, but spends only a few paragraphs on the information scandal. If ever there was a scheme gone awry, it was this covert propaganda war. In 1974, Vorster authorized the Ministry of Information to embark on a series of secret state-funded projects to influence international and local opinion in favor of the apartheid government. The ensuing corruption and sordidness was eventually exposed in the press in 1978, forcing the disgraced Vorster to resign his premiership.

Historians have hitherto underestimated P. W. Botha's contribution to dismantling apartheid, Giliomee argues. Botha was in fact responsible for a number of major policy shifts, including abandoning influx control and the all-white parliament, removing the apartheid miscegenation laws and the dualism of South African labor relations, integrating the armed forces and restoring citizenship to Africans in white areas, as well as—crucially—accepting the necessity of negotiations with the ANC.

But Botha's reform message was plagued by contradictions and his presidency was ultimately overshadowed by the disastrous Rubicon speech of August 1985. Here Giliomee also provides a fresh interpretation. He uncovers evidence that Botha suffered a first stroke, of which cabinet was not informed, in March 1985. Citing correspondence between Botha and a neurologist, as well as an interview with the neurosurgeon who examined Botha, Giliomee explains that stroke victims suffer psychological disturbances which often manifest in outbursts of temper, and it is likely that Botha's physicians would have advised him to avoid unnecessary emotional strain. Possibly, Giliomee argues, Botha's erratic performance in the second half of his term may well have been due to his medical condition (p. 179). Giliomee then takes this informed speculation further, applying it to the crucial meeting of the extended cabinet which precipitated Botha's fateful speech in August that year. What exactly happened at the meeting is still shrouded in mystery, but it is known that Botha kept quiet throughout the discussion on reform initiatives. His silence was wrongly interpreted as agreement—a disastrous assumption which resulted in a communications catastrophe. Giliomee speculates that Botha may have been keeping quiet on doctor's orders, but subsequently became furious at press speculation about his speech. He lashed out, eager to reestablish his authority, and made a speech which fell far short of international expectations.

Only one chapter is dedicated to the leadership of Frederik Van Zyl Slabbert. Although this academic-turned-politician (a path similar to the one taken by Verwoerd) was certainly an important critical voice throughout this period, it is debatable whether he should be placed alongside this line-up of Afrikaner leaders, and Giliomee's inclusion of him at times seems forced. Giliomee argues that Slabbert's role in ending apartheid has been seriously underestimated. He was one of the first Afrikaner intellectuals to unambiguously reject apartheid. A passionate and gifted debater, Slabbert used his time in parliament for the Progressive Party (later the Progressive Federal Party, which he led until 1986) to expose the illegitimacy of the NP's apartheid policies. Later, after leaving politics and founding the Institute for a Democratic Alternative in South Africa (Idasa), he was instrumental in facilitating discussions between Afrikaners and the ANC in exile, and in making the prospect of negotiation acceptable to the South African public. But in his non-racial idealism, Giliomee argues, Slabbert overlooked the ANC's exclusive nature and put too much faith in the organization (p. 239). He was deeply

disappointed when, once it had assumed power, the ANC gave no recognition to the talks he had initiated and did not involve him in building the nonracial liberal democracy for which he believed it stood. In 2002, it censored the recommendations of a commission he headed on reforming the electoral system to improve accountability. Slabbert was left completely disillusioned.

Finally, Giliomee suggests a new interpretation of F. W. de Klerk as the Afrikaner leader who had the courage to begin formal negotiations with the ANC, but who ultimately misunderstood and underestimated the organization. De Klerk's government failed to investigate and formulate its position on key issues such as federalism and minority protection, and as a result, its negotiators often had no clear vision going into talks. Giliomee unpacks the process in which the NP lost the dominant position it held at the beginning of the negotiations process, and plots its retreat from initial power-sharing demands to eventually accepting a constitutional state with simple majority rule. De Klerk also made the fatal mistake of setting a date for elections before an interim constitution was completed and, desperate to reach a settlement, did not pay sufficient attention to crucial issues such as the transformation of the civil service, amnesty for the security forces, or the appointment of constitutional court judges. Ultimately, the settlement fell well short of white voters' expectations and the NP was sidelined in the Government of National Unity.

Giliomee manages to explain this complex and contested past in sober yet engaging prose. A master of

synthesis, he draws together unpublished scholarship, archival sources, and original interview material in addition to insights from definitive works on apartheid and the transition. Building on this meticulous research, Giliomee does not hesitate to challenge established interpretations. He puts forward a much more nuanced picture of this period and its personalities, adding not only detail but explanation by pointing to the role of individuals and the contingency of historical developments. The book in no way reflects the notorious inward-looking tendencies so often displayed by Afrikaners in the course of their troubled history. Rather, Giliomee consistently places these leaders and their schemes in the global context of decolonization and Cold War politics. In addition, we are reminded that Giliomee is not only a historian but also a political scientist of renown—he displays great depth of knowledge regarding political theory, ethnically divided societies, the politics of demography and power sharing, and draws international comparisons with other key political figures and minority-rule or transitional contexts. There is often a measure of hindsight to his evaluations of his subjects' miscalculations in terms of the repercussions for postapartheid South Africa, and he is as critical of the schemes of apartheid politicians as of the shortcomings of the postapartheid government. Rather than simply being a history of great men, *The Last Afrikaner Leaders* thus provides an angle which has been missing from the historiography. Read in combination with his earlier monograph *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People* (2003 and 2011), Giliomee's work provides one of the most comprehensive and insightful analyses of the rise and fall of apartheid available.

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