

HISTORICIDE

By Dave Steward, Chairman of the FW de Klerk Foundation

Our history mirrors the troubled histories of many other countries in North and South America and Australasia that were 'discovered' and settled by Europeans between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. The indigenous populations were conquered, some were enslaved and nearly all lost their ancestral lands. As Chief Red Cloud of the Sioux observed: "They made us many promises, but they kept only one: they promised to take our land - and they did." Some indigenous people died resisting the invaders - but many, many more succumbed to the settlers' diseases - perhaps as many as 90% of the population of South and Central America.

The Dutch settlement of the Cape from 1652 onwards was a catastrophe for the Koi and San. They were dispossessed of their traditional lands as settlers pushed further and further into the hinterland. Some died in skirmishes with settlers - but many more were killed by smallpox and other European diseases. Some were enslaved; others became servants or soldiers of the British Army; and others trekked beyond the reach of European rule.

The nineteenth century was dominated by Britain's conquest of the three strongest peoples of southern Africa - first, the Xhosa in recurrent frontier wars between 1811 and 1879; secondly the Zulus in the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879; and thirdly, the two Boer republics - whose independence enjoyed international recognition - in the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902. For almost three years some 50 000 Boers held the mighty British Army at bay. The war was the biggest and most expensive of the 80 or so wars that the British fought between the Napoleonic Wars and the First World War. It involved the deployment of 430 000 troops - compared with the 100 000 that the British deployed in North America during the War of Independence.

After the war, the British found themselves with a ragbag of expensive and vexatious territories in southern Africa. What to do with them? Why not create a union or federation as they had recently done so successfully with their colonies in Canada and Australia? And so in 1910 the Union of South Africa was established. Of course, there was - shockingly by the standards of our time - no question of giving meaningful political rights to the majority black population of the new country. That would have been a dangerous precedent for Britain's far-flung colonies in the rest of Africa - and, much more seriously, for its vast empire in India.

For the first 40 years of the new union, politics centered on the relationship between the Afrikaners and the descendants of British settlers. White South Africans regarded themselves - and were regarded internationally - in the same light as Australians, New Zealanders and Canadians - as another Commonwealth nation. They fought in the world wars; played cricket and rugby and attended Commonwealth Conferences.

After the National Party victory in 1948 - which coincided ironically with the adoption of the International Declaration of Human Rights - the focus of politics shifted increasingly to the growing conflict between black and white nationalisms. This struggle culminated - not in a long-anticipated race war - but in a negotiated settlement that established our present constitutional democracy.

Now, this is a whole lot of history that we cannot understand unless we read about it in depth from as many perspectives as possible. I would recommend "Frontiers" by Noel Mostert on the Frontier Wars; "The Washing of the Spears" by Donald Morris on the Anglo-Zulu War; "The Anglo-Boer War" by Thomas Pakenham; the wonderful 143-episode podcast of the Anglo-Boer War by Des Latham;

Hermann Giliomee's magisterial book on the Afrikaners; Nelson Mandela's "Long Walk to Freedom" - and (of course!) FW de Klerk's "The Last trek - a New Beginning".

Only if we South Africans understand - and respect - one another's pasts - will we be able to find one another in the present and move forward together into the future. It is thus a great disappointment - but not a surprise - that the ANC wants to dispense with most of this history and replace it with its own NDR-redacted version that can be summed up, more or less, as "blacks good; whites evil (except for Joe Slovo, Braam Fischer and Beyers Naude)".

Last month Nathi Mthethwa, the Minister of Sport, Art and Culture, confirmed that the government plans to make the teaching of "authentic prescribed history" compulsory at schools and that it would move "apartheid and colonial era statues, symbols and monuments" to "cultural nation-building parks". He said that the offensive statues would be moved after consultation with the communities in which they were situated. However - and despite such consultations - "what is important, is that we decide that the statues of supporters of apartheid and colonialism should not stand in our prominent public spaces." "They should rather go to the proposed nation-building parks, because we do not believe, as other people say, that they belong in the dustbin of history."

An audit of offensive statues, symbols and monuments will be carried out throughout the country by 260 unemployed youth at a cost of R10 million. We don't know what they will recommend - but it is pretty clear that the ANC is intent on excising any objective history of white South Africans from our national story. Statues of great men - who for better or worse - had an enormous impact on South Africa - will be consigned to "theme parks" where their roles will, no doubt, be explained by guides who have been properly indoctrinated in the ANC version of history. Will they include Jan van Riebeeck, Oom Paul, Marthinus Pretorius, Louis Botha, Cecil Rhodes, President Steyn and Jan Smuts? This would be in keeping with Angie Motshekga's statement a few years ago that the goal of the ANC's new history will be to depict all former white leaders as "Folk Devils". In a truly Orwellian twist, this frontal assault on two of our national minorities will be carried out in the name of "social cohesion" and "nation-building".

Human history is replete with oppression, wars, conquests and suffering. Virtually all the peoples of the world - including black and white South Africans - have been victims and perpetrators. And yet we make progress and sometimes rise above our fears and passions to make peace - as we did in 1994.

People cannot be separated from their history. The exclusion by the state of their historic symbols from public spaces means that they as peoples are no longer welcome in the concept of the nation and are relegated to a place of moral inferiority beyond the periphery of the acceptable.

History is not a beauty contest. It should tell future generations as impartially as possible, in the words of the great German historian Leopold von Ranke, *wie es eigentlich gewesen* (what actually happened). Without this knowledge we will not know where we came from, who we really are - or how to avoid a repetition of the injustices of the past. More seriously, people who are deprived of their history are also deprived of their right to culture. Without a right to culture there can be neither a right to human dignity nor to equality. If any of our people are deprived of their rights to human dignity and equality our entire constitutional system is in the gravest peril.