



Roger Pfister. *Apartheid South Africa and African States, from Pariah to Middle Power, 1961-1994*. 14. London: Tauris, 2005. xvi + 248 pp. \$89.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-85043-625-6.

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Published on H-SAfrica (October, 2006)

Recent Bygones: The Apartheid Republic and African States

This book is based on a Ph.D. thesis researched in South Africa. The great novelty of the work is the access the author had to archival material of the Department of Foreign Affairs relating to the South African government's relations with sub-Saharan African states from the 1960s to 1990s, to which seemingly few other scholars have hitherto had access. The information gleaned is in part substantiated or developed by interviews conducted with some decision-makers and actors of the time.

The conceptual framework of the book is one that the author wants readers to see as interdisciplinary, encompassing politics, history, and international relations. However, he tells us that overall, the work is to be characterized as falling within the purview of diplomatic history (p. 2).

The author wants to explain what drove South Africa's foreign policy towards Africa. In doing so, he first talks about South Africa's foreign policy system and explains the role of various state and non-state actors who contributed to policymaking. Apart from the foreign policy players at the level of state—the prime minister/state president, the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA), the military, the Department of Information, National Intelligence (NIS)—the South African scenario under apartheid also included players such as the Broederbond, the liberal Progressive Party representing white English business interests, the liberal white press led by the Rand Daily Mail, organized business as well as parastatals, and private business companies as well as individuals engaged in trade or political contacts with other states.

Chapter 3 briefly deals with the period of H. F. Verwoerd. An outline is given of how the DFA and the military tried to come to terms with African independence, covering both the Congo crisis and the regime's near-total isolation by the mid-1960s, despite its initial contacts with and offers of technical assistance to Lesotho and Malawi.

Covering 65 pages out of 150 pages of text, chapter 4, "What Relations with Africa? B.J. Vorster, 1966-78," lies at the heart of the book. It describes the apartheid state's "outward movement" and its policy of so-called dialogue and does this by way of looking at bilateral relations with a number of African states. The author uses original DFA material on detente with Mauritius and Franco-South African cooperation as regards South African forays into Francophone Africa. It is suggested that the military, not the DFA, were the initial architects of dialogue since the DFA had to fear a white backlash (p. 48). Pfister shows how French machinations in and around Biafra helped draw South Africa into the region; Pretoria attempted to forge links with states such as the Ivory Coast, Ghana, and Gabon by using the shared principle of anticommunism as a basis for contact. In a sense, France can here be seen as the midwife to South Africa's detente policy in West Africa. Pfister also goes on to show how the DFA became more independent in making contacts, something the French dissuaded and causing ripples not only in the otherwise close South Africa-France relationship (p. 61) but also within the South African foreign policy-making establishment (the military being worried that such actions might harm relations with the French).

The intricacies of Portuguese, French, Ivorian and South African cooperation regarding support for Biafra are discussed (p. 54), as are links with Mauritius and Uganda. Considerable detail is given on the economic and technical assistance provided to Gabon's President Bongo with the best example, a cattle-breeding project, continuing until the mid-1980s (pp. 65-68).

Interesting excerpts detailing French reasons for supporting Biafra (to undermine British influence in Anglophone West Africa) are gleaned from a letter from Jean Mauriceau-Beaupre (a confidante of France's Jacques Foccart) to P. W. Botha at a time when French-South African relations were very close. These are revealing for

their candor, as in the admission that support for Biafra had to do with French company Elf Aquitaine obtaining a controlling stake of the Biafran oil industry (p. 52).

But the paucity of diplomatic successes by the DFA not only spurred interdepartmental rivalries but also allowed for the use of secret diplomacy—summarized by Pfister as “buying, bluffing or bribing” (p. 68). It led to the greater involvement of the Department of Information and the Bureau of State Security (BOSS) in foreign policy. Pfister believes that the role of BOSS has so far been underestimated (p. 68). The head of BOSS, General van den Bergh, wanted to outmaneuver the military. BOSS therefore assisted the Department of Information to increase its power position vis-a-vis the military.

The Department of Information headed by Eschel Rhoodie now shaped the Africa policy of South Africa. Senegal and the Ivory Coast were considered strategic partners whose policies towards South Africa could help positively shape the rest of the continent’s policies towards Pretoria. The wide use of “second track” diplomacy made engagement possible. Contact in the early 1970s was made via a French journalist and South African immigrant, Bernard Lejeune, who in 1973 made contact with journalists close to Presidents Leopold Senghor of Senegal and Houphouët-Boigny of Ivory Coast. Lejeune and Rhoodie followed up with visits to these countries. This and other visits by individuals in and around not only the Africa Institute, but also the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) and the South African Foundation helped prepare the ground for Prime Minister B. J. Vorster’s visit in September 1974 (p. 74). This now amounted to a wholly South African initiative without French involvement. In the same vein, the visit of Chief Gathsa Buthelezi of KwaZulu to Liberia helped prepare the ground for Vorster’s visit to Liberia in February 1975 (p. 78). Of interest here is Senghor’s disillusionment with contact after Vorster neither responded to his request to cooperate with the United Nations regarding Namibia nor replied to two alleged letters suggesting Senegal send a fact-finding mission to South Africa and asking him to free all political prisoners in early 1975 (p. 76). There is detail on bilateral relations with a number of countries, such as the Central African Empire under Bokassa—prompted by Bokassa’s expedient desire for economic support and credit (p. 81)—and with island states because of geo-strategic considerations in the Western Indian Ocean region. An interesting *bon mot* recounts how South Africa stopped tea imports from Mauritius to leverage an apology of sorts from the Mauritian government in the wake of the Mauritian ambassador’s attack on South Africa at the United Nations (p. 86).

The author claims BOSS instigated detente as a local response to U.S. actions on the world stage (pp. 93-94). In the interests of this policy, Vorster was prepared to sacrifice Rhodesia, though not Namibia. But the latter was of paramount interest to African leaders and, as such, “detente could not succeed. One new partner was Zaire, interested in having South Africa back Mobutu’s protege,” the FLNA in Angola (p. 95). Initial contact, however, revolved around export credit as well as development and investment projects and this involved South Africa’s Anglo-American company, with the United States keen to bolster Mobutu’s standing at a time when it needed his support. Interesting detail emerges of contacts with President Bongo and the latter’s economic interest in a Rhodesian cargo airline making use of landing rights in Gabon (p. 101).

The book also covers the Angolan War and shows how the decision to send South African troops was taken by the military against the opinions of both BOSS and the DFA. Notwithstanding military views that the war could not be won and Washington’s pressuring of South Africa not to attack Luanda, developments here foreshadowed the militaristic bent of South Africa’s foreign policy of destabilization that was to follow during the 1980s (p. 103).

In chapter 5, “The Military in Command,” the author provides some fascinating detail of largely unknown South African contacts during the 1980s with Somalia, Sudan and Chad, revolving around over-flying rights for South African aircraft and proposed arms deliveries. Chapter 6 deals with the “New Diplomacy” of the period 1989 to 1994, where the DFA reasserts itself as a foreign policy player. Light is cast on President F. W. de Klerk’s efforts to have the apartheid state break out of its isolation. Economic leverage was the means by which the attempt was made to normalize relations with Africa, with a view to becoming a member of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and the United Nations in 1992. All this served the purpose of buying time in the negotiations with the African National Congress’ (ANC) Nelson Mandela and the liberation movement (p. 139). The ANC’s counter diplomatic offensive after the Boipatong massacre, however, was successful in blocking the new diplomacy from bearing any fruit (p. 141).

In the conclusion the author summarizes how the DFA was gradually pushed into the background after the 1960s. Its offer of technical assistance was not a successful means by which—as the example of Gabon or the Comores demonstrates—political advantage could be gained. By 1990, when economic incentives were now of greater

interest to a marginalized Africa than in the 1960s or early 1970s, the apartheid regime itself, however, had run out of time and was outflanked by the diplomacy of the ANC. All in all, contrary to the views of other academic commentators, we are told that the outward policy of the 1970s was politically, not economically, driven (p. 148).

Overall, the narrative does not flow easily. This may be due to its self-pronounced interdisciplinary nature. But it also has to do with the presentation of much empirical detail in the body of the text as well as matters of syntax and style. Given the fact that it is based on a Ph.D. thesis, the book could certainly have used greater editing. Rather empirical and concentrating on bilateral relationships over specific time periods, the book—despite attempts made in chapter 2—simply lacks any illuminating argument on how we are to make sense of the institutional rivalries within the apartheid state's foreign policymaking "system." In this context, foreign policy making could also have been more fully described against the

changing sources of the apartheid state's Africa policy after 1960s. As such, there is little to guide the reader about what made this edifice amount to a system, what domestic factors caused the interdepartmental rivalries that led to the progressive displacement of the DFA in favor of the intelligence services such as BOSS or NIS and eventually the military with its militarization of the state's international relations in the 1980s. As such, there are also real gaps—for instance, little is revealed about how the events of June 1976 and their aftermath put paid to any further dialogue by individual African quisling leaders willing to defy a united Pan-African front against apartheid. Nevertheless, inasmuch as some of the original information gleaned from DFA archives and individual interviews in certain instances helps to reconstruct parts of a puzzle, the book is of real use to contemporary historians and those interested in African foreign policy, researching the somewhat disjointed and, with hindsight, what now seems the often perfunctory and ham-fisted foreign policy machinations of the apartheid regime.

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Citation: Paul Bischoff. Review of Pfister, Roger, *Apartheid South Africa and African States, from Pariah to Middle Power, 1961-1994*. H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews. October, 2006.
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