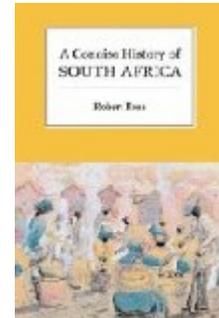


Robert Ross. *A Concise History of South Africa*. Cambridge Concise Histories. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1999. xv + 219 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-57578-2.



Reviewed by Steven Gish

Published on H-SAfrica (February, 2001)

A Concise Survey of South African History

As all history instructors know, finding the right textbook for a course can be a difficult and time consuming task. Those who teach South African history are fortunate to have several recently published works from which to choose. Among the latest works are Robert Ross's *A Concise History of South Africa*, under review here, plus Roger Beck's *The History of South Africa* (Greenwood Press, 2000), T.R.H. Davenport and Christopher Saunders' *South Africa: A Modern History, fifth edition* (Macmillan and St. Martin's, 2000), and Nigel Worden's *The Making of Modern South Africa*, third edition (Blackwell, 2000).

Ross's book is part of the Cambridge Concise History series, which provides short national histories for college and university students and general readers. Ross is well-qualified to have undertaken the South Africa assignment. A lecturer in history at the University of Leiden since 1979, he has written several works on South African history, including books on the Griquas (1976); Cape slavery (1982); and colonial South Africa (1992).

A Concise History of South Africa focuses on the Republic of South Africa, but it mentions surrounding countries just enough to illustrate that their histories have been intertwined with South Africa's. Ross' work focuses on several themes: early patterns of racial interaction and conflict; the development of an industrial economy; the consolidation of white power; African social and economic life; protest politics; and the development and unraveling of apartheid. The first forty percent of the book covers South Africa to 1910; the remaining sixty percent since 1910. Unlike Nigel Worden's survey, Ross's book does not explicitly delve into historiographical debates.

Ross has produced an outstanding work. In just two hundred pages, he has synthesized the latest research on South Africa history in a well-organized, reader-friendly format. His ability to produce such a balanced narrative is especially admirable. While he emphasizes the social and economic history of black and white South Africans, he does not ignore political history. He blends his treatment of important leaders and key historical figures with the social history of ordi-

nary people. He also incorporates material on gender, generational conflict, and the environment. That Ross weaves all of these themes into a smooth, seamless narrative is a testament to his skill as a writer and a historian.

In his introduction, Ross notes that despite South Africa's diversity, its many different cultures have become more interdependent over time --politically and economically. "This book," he writes, "is an attempt to show how South Africa became a single, though not uniform country" (p. 1). Undergraduates and general readers will be drawn into the story immediately when Ross outlines the country's diverse heritage. He notes that South Africa's identity contains African, ex-colonial, capitalist, urban, and Christian elements, as well as many others. His goal is to explore how these strands became interwoven in the past to create the South Africa of today. He succeeds admirably in his task.

After beginning his book with a chapter on South Africa's early population groups, Ross moves on to colonial conquest. Besides outlining the impact of European settlers on indigenous peoples, Ross includes some environmental history. As white settlers moved away from Cape Town and brought their livestock to graze into the interior, wildlife herds in the southwestern Cape decreased sharply and some species became extinct. Ross also reviews the trend toward political consolidation among African groups in eastern South Africa in the late eighteenth, early nineteenth centuries.

In so doing, however, he studiously avoids the term "mfecane." Given the historical importance of this term and the controversies surrounding it, Ross should consider including it in future editions of his work. The chapter on colonial conquest would also benefit from an expanded treatment of miscegenation and the birth of the mixed-race population. Writing a concise history with page limitations no doubt forced Ross to make some difficult editorial decisions. Nevertheless,

the role of the "coloureds" as an intermediate group under white domination deserves more attention.

Chapter three charts how South Africa became economically and politically unified in the late nineteenth, early twentieth centuries. Ross draws upon the work of Charles van Onselen to paint a vivid picture of the Witwatersrand in the years after gold was discovered in 1886. He traces the origins of the South African War without denigrating the Boers or the Britons. The former sought to maintain the autonomy of the South African Republic, while the latter wanted to preserve their supremacy in South Africa. Ross does not dwell on the military history of the South African War. Instead, he outlines the conflict briefly and then discusses its impact upon black South Africans. In his section on the birth of the Union of South Africa in 1910, Ross illustrates the development of African nationalism by including some verses by the Xhosa poet I.W.W. Citashe. The poem, which stresses verbal protest over armed confrontation, captures the rising influence of mission-educated Africans and is beautifully placed near the chapter's end.

Chapter four, entitled "Consolidation," covers the years between 1910 and 1948. Here Ross summarizes the main developments in Afrikaner nationalism without dwelling on the machinations of white politicians. He skillfully shifts to explore developments in African nationalism and describes the early ANC as gradualist, elitist, and largely ineffectual, but notes that "eventually its potential would be realized" (p. 86). When he incorporates relevant demographic and economic statistics (regarding population, infrastructure, and employment), he does so without becoming tedious. The material he presents supports his argument that "the cash economy, the demands of the government for taxes, the labour market, and the infrastructure of communications held the country together. Segregation was not designed to

split it apart, merely to maintain is hierarchies" (p. 88).

Ross clearly identifies the significance of the 1913 Land Act and argues that it cannot merely be explained by racism. As he suggests, the government sought to strengthen white commercial farmers and create a propertyless African proletariat. Thus capitalism was important as racism in shaping twentieth century South African society, according to Ross. But he never portrays Africans simply as victims. He discusses the significance of the ICU in coordinating militant African resistance to segregation in the 1920s, noting its strengths while not ignoring its shortcomings. He also discusses African women who resisted beer brewing restrictions. Such consistent inclusion of gender issues further strengthens the book and underscores its commitment to social history. When he discusses migrant labor, Ross is not content merely to outline the relevant laws and probe white motivations. Instead, he examines the impact of migrant labor on Africans of different genders and generations. He describes the life of migrant workers in terms of work discipline, authority, sex, housing, and links with home, and in so doing, captures how migrant labor affected the lives of generations of Africans.

When it comes to South Africa after 1948, Ross links the development of apartheid with the economic interests of whites. He races through the repression after Sharpeville, the establishment of the armed struggle, and the Rivonia trial in one paragraph. Perhaps a little more is needed here, given the significance of these events. Displaying his interest in economic history over political history, Ross uses six paragraphs to discuss the growth of the South African economy from the 1950s to the 1970s. He notes that white mining magnates benefited from apartheid in one sense, because it guaranteed them a cheap and controllable unskilled African workforce. But when white industrialists needed more skilled labor, they became frustrated because apartheid had

stunted the skills of generations of black workers. The shortage of skilled labor, plus heavy state involvement in the economy, meant that "...apartheid had left the country particularly vulnerable to the challenges of the world economy in the last quarter of the century" (p. 133).

Ross reveals the tragedies under apartheid by focusing on homelands and forced removals. But as harsh as repression was under Verwoerd and Vorster, voices of opposition were never totally silenced. According to Ross, the Soweto protests of 1976 marked the beginning of the end of apartheid for two main reasons: 1) students fleeing persecution resuscitated the ANC in exile; and 2) the government began a reform process that signaled that Verwoerdian apartheid was unworkable.

In order to underscore the long term damage done by apartheid, Ross has included an excellent chapter entitled "The costs of apartheid." In this chapter, which is more thematic than chronological, Ross links apartheid to a host of problems: poverty; violence and repression; drug and alcohol abuse; and the breakdown of African families. He stresses that the Bantu education system under apartheid produced poorly trained, under motivated workers, which stunted long term economic growth. Eventually black students channeled their energies into the political struggle, which further devalued their schooling.

The last substantive chapter of Ross's book focuses on the end of apartheid and the transition to democracy. He notes that the mixture of reform and repression under P.W. Botha caused both the Afrikaner right and the democratic left to mobilize against National Party rule. In his discussion of the anti-apartheid movement of the 1980s, Ross charts the development of the UDF and the "culture of resistance" it spawned. While he clearly sympathizes with the movement's goals, he doesn't shy away from noting the excesses of the revolt, such as vigilantism and "necklacing." He discusses the conflict between Inkatha and the

UDF by arguing that it was a struggle for territory fanned by the government's security forces. As he documents meetings between the ANC and the white establishment, Ross suggests on page 181 that it was Kobie Coetsee who initiated talks between Mandela and the South African government in the 1980s. This point needs some clarification. According to accounts by Anthony Sampson and Allister Sparks, it was Mandela who first wrote the government suggesting that talks be held.[1]

Students of South African history often debate the role of Botha's successor F.W. de Klerk, the country's last white president. Ross identifies a number of factors that led to de Klerk's dramatic speech in February 1990, in which he announced the unbanning of anti-apartheid organizations, the impending release of Nelson Mandela, and his intention to begin negotiations for a "new South Africa." Ross makes sense of de Klerk's bold steps by discussing the wider context: economic decline; rising military costs; international pressure; a lack of new investment; increased questioning of apartheid in business, church, and intellectual circles; and the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe. With the domestic uprising contained temporarily, de Klerk and his colleagues wanted to negotiate a new dispensation from a position of relative strength. "[T]here is no doubt," writes Ross, "that de Klerk and his fellows calculated that they could control the process of transition in such a way as to guarantee their own interests..."(p. 185). Once again Ross's analysis seems right on the mark.

Ross characterizes the period of negotiations from February 1990 to April 1994 as "chaotic and bloody, though not as bloody as it might have been" (p. 185). In analyzing the reasons for the explosion of violence during this period, Ross establishes the link between Buthelezi and the security forces without labeling the ANC as blameless. He is unsure of the degree of de Klerk's complicity in the violence. Ross notes the important role of both

Slovo and Ramaphosa in the negotiations, and identifies the key sticking points for negotiators on all sides: the form of the new government; the fate of Afrikaners in the civil service, police, and military; and the new provincial powers and boundaries. After a brief analysis of the April 1994 voting patterns and election results, Ross ends chapter seven with Mandela's inauguration as the first black president of South Africa. "...Nelson Mandela took the oath as the first president of a country in which the scars of the past were temporarily hidden before a vast and jubilant multitude" (p. 196).

The book ends with a brief epilogue in which Ross discusses how the new government fared after the euphoria of the 1994 elections faded. He asserts that the ANC showed fiscal discipline, although they lacked the cash to ease South Africa's socio-economic problems substantially. He praises the country's new constitution and lauds Mandela for symbolizing integrity and reconciliation. As controversial as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission proved to be, Ross admires that body as well because it allowed untold stories to be revealed, both from victims and oppressors. As Ross sees it, many scars inflicted by apartheid have yet to heal, but South Africa has finally begun to emerge from its painful past.

A Concise History of South Africa is richly illustrated with maps, drawings, and black and white photographs. Many of the photos are contextualized by detailed captions. These captions explain the significance of a wide range of historical phenomena, such as manyanos (the organizations for African Christian women); black South African jazz; rugby; endangered wildlife; even the braai. One example will suffice to indicate the value of these captions. A photograph of a 1950s beerhall and its accompanying caption on pp. 158-9 focus on the role of alcohol in South African history. Drawing on the work of social historians, the caption touches upon women's efforts to become independent; the conflict between the state

and Africans; the development of jazz; prostitution; and generational conflict. Photos and captions like this help the reader understand South African society and culture, not just its history.

In this work, Robert Ross has displayed a breathtaking command of South African history and historiography. He has produced an outstanding work of synthesis that is up-to-date, wide-ranging, and concise at the same time. His book is meant to be a starting point for those wishing to explore South Africa's history. There is no excess material or "fat" in this book--it is all "meat." I will use this book the next time I offer my lecture course on South African history; others who teach similar courses should consider it as well.

Note

[1]. Anthony Sampson, *Mandela: The Authorized Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), pp. 338, 340-1, 347 and Allister Sparks, *Tomorrow is Another Country* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 23-4.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-safrica>

Citation: Steven Gish. Review of Ross, Robert. *A Concise History of South Africa*. H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews. February, 2001.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4983>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.