

Death and the Mielieboer

The Eugène Terre'Blanche Murder & Poor-White Canon-fodder in South Africa

Michael Schmidt

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The murder, apparently at the hands of two black farm-labourers, of thuggish AWB leader Eugene Terre'Blanche on March 20 in what was once South Africa's white supremacist Western Transvaal heartland, was celebrated by anti-racists the world over.

Inside South Africa, it had the expected result of dire, unfounded panic over a looming race war, and the unexpected result of the rush by mainstream parties to defend the ultra-right's "right to exist in a democracy".

We hear a lot about race and continuing racism in post-apartheid South Africa, but who are the Boers, what function did the AWB serve the nationalist elites, and what does the debate over the killing reveal – or obscure – about the country's forgotten poor whites?

The death of the AWB

Sixteen years ago, as impoverished, browbeaten South Africans of all races were herded towards the slaughterhouse mass betrayal of their liberation dream by the African National Congress (ANC) and their midwives the National Party (NP), in the first multiracial elections aimed at propping up the teetering neo-liberal state, armed groups of the 70,000-strong far-right Afrikaner Resistance Movement (*Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging*, AWB) played their last desperate hands. These outriders of an ever-receding dream of ruling their own conservative white God-fearing state on the African highveld, the AWB embraced its *Götterdämmerung*.

The AWB's pre-election bombing spree failed to derail the relieved, yet lemming-like rush to the bourgeois polls, and its attempt to rewrite the 1900 Relief of Mafikeng by, unasked, coming to the aid of conservative black bantustan boss Lucas Mangope backfired as an outraged Bophuthatswana soldier gunned down three AWB members who had been wounded in the *kaf-firskietpiekniek* ("black shooting picnic") they had embarked on. The AWB callously celebrated their "glittering victory" with a claimed five dead AWB for 50 dead and 285 wounded blacks – and I callously celebrated the public murder of three AWB whites – one of whom, Nico Fourie, I had met and interviewed while covering an AWB rally on the Natal South Coast several years before. An inexperienced young anarchist militant, I took a photostat of the picture of the three dead men, scribbled across the top 'n *Boer sien sy moer!* (an Afrikaner farmer sees his ass!), stuck it up on the wall at work and congratulated myself for my daring and wit. Because despite the imbalanced death toll, it was those images of white supremacists shot down like dogs in the dirt by an ill-trained banana republic soldier right in front of media photographers that truly put paid to the AWB. It was a spent force thereafter.

Crucially, right-wing General Constand Viljoen, lauded as a "soldier's soldier" for his front-line actions against Cuban/East Bloc-backed forces in Angola, whose Afrikaner People's Front (Afrikaner Volksfront) forces had been called in by Mangope, took heed of the lessons of the failed incursion and told his substantial private army to stand down. He formed the Freedom Front – ironically today in cabinet alongside the ANC, without Viljoen – and threw his weight behind the democratic elections. This was the vital component in ensuring a relatively peaceful transition, and proved the salvation of the neo-liberal project of the ANC's Nelson Mandela from the stalemate between anti- and pro-establishment forces.

Demystifying the Boers

But who are the Boers, truly, beyond the cartoons of black-bearded back-countrymen, scare-crows in the corn, leaning on ancient muskets? Afrikaners today are often the sons, daughters, granddaughters and grandsons of the tens thousands of women who were deliberately starved to death in British concentration camps a century before as their farms were put to the torch. Do not brush aside this key fact because of the whiteness of their skin: their women-folk and children were *deliberately exterminated* in an imperialist war that generated so much global opposition at the time that it was the Iraq of its day: Scandinavians, Irishmen and Russians gave their lives on the far-away veld; angered Québécois burned down public buildings; and awed anti-American guerrillas in the Philippines learned their tactics by night. Scratch a highveld Boer and you will likely find a bitter hatred of British imperialism – based on living-memory *family* experience of the camps. And that war was provoked by the imperialists because Britain lusted after and finally burgled the goldfields of the highveld from a frontier people who had progressively retreated into the African interior away from the claws of the bankers, into the spears of the Bantu.

True, they were and often remain an austere, narrow people: one of their Calvinist sects, the Doppers, is deliberately named after the tin cap or *dop* used to extinguish a candle, the message being the need to extinguish the Enlightenment. And true, they often beat “their blacks” with an offhanded cruelty, and at best established a paternalistic overlordship over them known as *baasskap* (boss-hood). But in their warfare with, suffering at the hands of, and eventual enslavement of the Bantu, a strange relationship developed: alone among all white settlers on the African continent, they self-identified en masse as Afikaners, as *Africans*, not Europeans, and severed their ties to their distant motherlands. The they and their black neighbours lived, ate, thought and died, merged and became inextricably intertwined: well over 10-million more black South Africans today speak Afrikaans, the slave’s idiom-rich, story-telling pidgin-Dutch of old, than do whites; while *platteland* (big-sky farmland) Afrikaners are fluent in African vernacular languages. For the British-backed English-speaking elites, the mining bosses and big land-owners, this closeness was worrisome; something had to be done to divide and rule them. Racialised divisions worked successfully among the working class until multiracial revolutionary syndicalism mounted a challenge from 1917 – a challenge undermined and dissipated within five years by the black nationalist mystifications of the aspirant bourgeois party that became the ANC. It may be that despite their progressive approach to the racial question, the syndicalists lost their grip on the labour movement because of the allure of politics of racial polarity that pitted whites and blacks against each other, a politics seized on with fervour by the NP on its ascension to power in 1948.

Demystifying the AWB and poor rural whites

And who are the AWB other than strutting cartoon neo-Nazis spouting dire eye-for-en-eye, tooth-for-a-tooth rhetoric? Well, despite the childish shock-value of their swastika-like flag, they *aren’t* neo-Nazis (pagan Nazism gained little purchase in Protestant South Africa); no, they are ultra-conservative Calvinists who dream of a separate white bantustan of their own – this being the same stolen dream of generations of Boers; but no, they are not quietist, having established a violent armed outlaw militia presence since their formation in 1973, and yes, they attracted the

admiration of many on the international far-right including neo-Nazis. When hood-eyed charismatic leader Eugène Terre'Blanche (his surname meaning White Earth), famous for his outdated horseback parades and thunderous Old Testament oratory, exited jail in 2004 for a vicious assault on a black worker, an AWB Brigadier told me the movement was transforming itself from a militia into an Afrikaner cultural organisation. Terre'Blanche was viewed by the radical right – and most anarchist-communists in SA probably can only concur – as a conservative buffoon, useful to the “New South African” political-economic establishment as a scary outsider, patrolling the perimeter like an underfed, mangy Rottweiler on a chain, proof of their own smug centralism and “moderation”, of the palatability of the extremist shock doctrine of neo-liberalism they peddle to the poor.

And who are those poor? Of course, they are overwhelmingly black, coloured and Indian, in this, the world's most economically unequal country, one skewed by more than 300 years of racialised divide-and-rule. And yet a detailed study currently underway of early slave revolts in the Cape by veteran South African anarchist-communist Nicole Ulrich shows that Irish sailors, Malay slaves and indigenous cart-drivers launched combined, multiracial assaults on parasitic capitalist *baasskap*, a hidden history that refutes both black and white nationalists' view of our history as a classless struggle of white *against* black and black *against* white. These days, when the laid-off mine-workers of deindustrialised small towns like Stilfontein demonstrate, they do so shoulder-to-shoulder, poor blacks and whites together. Multiracial working-class consciousness is slowly rebuilding, but it is also seriously challenged by the ugly racialised climate in the country at the moment in which all questions of class, culture, transformation and so forth are always reduced to a crude white-over-black narrative. Not only does that narrative deliberately shut down any possibility of multiracial working class resistance, but it fails to address the fact that, genuine racist prerogatives aside, the NP elite could only make minority rule work if the majority, *the poor*, could be sub-divided, and this they did with substantial success, fragmenting working class black, white, coloured and Indian identities into different laagers, and fragmenting the black identity further into Zulu, Venda, Xhosa, Tswana, Pedi etc ethnicities. A 2009 University of Pretoria study shows that out of probably 50-million South Africans, the white elite consists of a mere 310,000 individual parasites – with poor and working class whites accounting for a staggering 3,3-million out of 4-million people.

So apartheid was about *all* whites oppressing *all* blacks? No, the paltry racial privileges given to poor whites under apartheid were a pitiful pay-off with the cynical intent of dividing their interests from those of poor blacks. Of course the apartheid state was *an explicitly racial state* (although the NP pretended they were separatists, not supremacists) in a way that few others outside of Nazi Germany were. I'm not saying that outright racism was not their motivating factor; in fact every NP leader until PW Botha had been pro-Nazi during WWII. But white supremacism was *more than a motive* for the Broederbonders and the elites: it was a *divide-and-rule tool*, a class-war tool, useful to run a smokestack economy by playing workers off against each other. Poor Afrikaners had been so utterly economically destroyed by the Anglo-Boer War that much of the later apartheid apparatus was solely directed at a *partial* social upliftment for the millions of malnourished poor Afrikaners – as part of a winning-hearts-and-minds strategy for maintaining the tiny Afrikaner elite in power. *In no way* can the brutality, torture, killings and mass dehumanisation of South Africa's poor blacks be compared to the more comfortable experiences of its relatively shielded poor whites. And yet poor whites were the canon-fodder of the elite's wars (no, really: drafted into the apartheid army in 1985, I met whites who had *never seen* cutlery be-

fore), their precarious livelihoods as mechanics, fitters and boilermakers constantly threatened by millions of cheaper, underpaid poor blacks. In other words, their *class* vulnerability was used to keep them *racially* loyal to the apartheid state. And when the NP slowly liberalised, they proved easy to scare into ultra-con organisations like the AWB. The racist class structure was forced to change in 1990–1996 not only by a partly-ANC-led internal insurrection and the collapse of ANC-backing Soviet Russia, but by the fact that the elites had no way to modernise the economy and to build a manufacturing sector without breaking the colour-bar and upskilling black labour. In other words, the apartheid racial state deracialised for reasons of capitalist *class* survival. To fail to recognise the primacy – but not exclusivity – of *class* in this situation, class rule wearing racial armour, is the weakness of both black and white nationalists. And the use of white extremist organisations to the elite? To book-end the frightened middle-class whites (and later, blacks too) between two false options, racist white nationalism and racist black nationalism, a scare tactic that continues today. The rush of the mainstream political parties from the South African Communist Party (SACP) on the left to the Freedom Front Plus (FF+) on the right to condemn the killing of Terre'Blanche perhaps betrays the dead man's true usefulness to our parasitic elites.

The death of the Boers

Unlike the killing of Fourie and his cohorts sixteen years ago, when I heard of the death of Terre'Blanche, which many heralded as poetic justice, I was not seized by a celebratory fever, although there was merry-making in many townships, especially by those like Martha Mokone, a victim of an AWB bomb who commented that he should “burn in hell”. I understand the need for ghoulish celebration: after all, I'd done it myself before. But this time, I felt strangely quiet and troubled. Terre'Blanche was so diminished from the terrible, looming figure of the past that my hatred of he and his ilk had all but drained away. The scrappy farm-house with the bare walls and boarded up front window in which the white supremacist was killed over Easter Weekend – seventeen years after the Easter Weekend when a right-winger assassinated SACP leader Chris Hani – was hardly the home of a wealthy man, although wealth is relative in this, the world's most unequal society.

Yes, he was a white *baas* to his alleged killers, two young black labourers, Chris Mahlangu, 27, and a 15-year-old youth, and yes it appears this was not a political assassination but a wage dispute with that spiralled out of control. Yet that clock-spring spiral which turned dispute into murder must have been wound tight by a potent combination of racial friction and class antagonism. And the way Terre'Blanche died was the way so... ordinary; it was the way many poor rural whites die, hacked to death in their beds for reasons grand and petty, criminal and (despite strong government denials) racial. It's not that there is a “Boer Genocide” (as yet) as many on the far right already proclaim, but some powder-keg combination of race and class is killing our white farmers at an alarming rate. This race/class volatility is nowhere more apparent than in the ANC government's complete failure to meet its own benchmark of redistributing 30% of the land to land-hungry rural blacks in order to ameliorate the apartheid ownership pattern whereby 80% of the population owned only 13 % of the land. Against this tense backdrop, the murder rate of white farmers is four times higher than the rest of the population – in a country with the highest murder rate in the world of any country not at war – and the viciousness which accompanies many killings belies purely criminal motive.

This is not to say that there have not been numerous well-documented, well-publicised cases of Boers torturing and killing poor rural blacks – but the point is that extreme violence committed on the Boers is almost totally ignored by the mainstream media which props up the statist-democratic farce. In one grim example, when two elderly white women in a small Free State town were gang-raped a year ago, allegedly by a black gang, tortured to death and the *severed breast of one woman used to paint anti-white slogans on the wall*, not a *single* media outlet named this a hate crime. Only one newspaper even covered the atrocity, the Afrikaans-language *Volksblad* – and then only to decry the “hate-speech” of the women’s traumatised relatives calling for a return of the death penalty for murder. Only with Terre’Blanche’s death is the mainstream belatedly making a tentative link between ANC hate speech calling for the killing of the Boers and, well, the actual killing of Boers. Pastor Martin Niemoller’s famous statement of his own ethical failing – that when the Nazis came for the communists he did not speak out for he was not a communist – runs naggingly around and around in my head. Did the white supremacist idea of the AWB deserve to die? Unquestionably. Did Terre’Blanche the racist thug, awful poet and great orator deserve to die? Quite possibly. Will I not speak out merely because I’m not a Boer? No; I’ve said my piece.

Racist, brutal Terre’Blanche may have got his well-deserved come-uppance, but there is little to genuinely celebrate for the country’s desperately poor blacks and whites for whom his death is insignificant and irrelevant; their circumstances of exploitation and exclusion are not likely to be improved anytime soon by the country’s ANC elite.

Glossary

- **Highveld** - the high-plateau grassland prairie / steppe of central South Africa which is the country’s primary grain-farming and mining region
- **Götterdämmerung** - zero-sum political end-game
- **1900 Relief of Mafikeng** - the lifting by the British in 1900 of the Boer siege of the city of Mafikeng – once situated next to the Bophuthatswana capital of Mmabatho
- **bantustan** - nick-name for the patchwork of quasi-“independent” black ethnic states, or “homelands,” in which half of all South African blacks lived, separated from white-controlled apartheid South Africa, from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s
- **Bophuthatswana** - a bantustan in the north of the country near the Botswana border, designated by apartheid South Africa for the separate settlement of the Tswana ethnic group and claiming “independence” under Lucas Mangope between 1977 and its reincorporation into South Africa in 1994 after the defeat of Mangope and the Afrikaner Volksfront
- **baas** - boss

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