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Ghost of apartheid haunts George — PW Botha's town

Michael Schmidt

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Pieter Willem Botha lies as cold and dead on the mortuary slab as Stephen Bantu Biko did in the back of a police van almost 30 years ago.

The Groot Krokodil, whose vice-like bite struck fear into so many hearts, evaporated into the night on Halloween like a wraith of mist on the Outeniqua Pass.

The nation is now at loggerheads over how his legacy should be assessed.

The comparison with Biko is partly unfair because PW Botha only ascended the pinnacle of racist rule in 1978, a year after the Black Consciousness leader had been murdered.

And yet, while Botha merely inherited apartheid's polarised world view, he alone transformed it into a death-star, giving it a baptism of fire that arguably even Nazi-sympathising nationalist Daniel Francois Malan had not foreseen.

Unfairly or not, Botha for much of the world embodied the final phase of white resistance to the "total onslaught" of democracy more than any other white Nationalist leader.

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Malan, who had once told parliament that national socialism was the wave of the future, was followed by Johannes Gerhardus Strijdom whose regime removed coloureds from the voters roll and unsuccessfully prosecuted liberation movement leaders who signed the 1955 Freedom Charter.

Hendrik Frensch Verwoerd, the acknowledged architect of grand apartheid – its petty version having been introduced by the British – succeeded Strijdom.

Having banned the liberation movements after the Sharpeville Massacre, Verwoerd was, in a denouement worthy of Shakespeare, assassinated by the ultimately sane Dimitri Tsafendas, a quintessential South African “person of mixed race”, the true common denominator that links us, in the year of my birth.

Verwoerd was followed by the descent into darkness that was Balthazar Johannes Vorster. Also pro-Nazi, Vorster lies buried under a large black marble slab in “heroes’ acre” in the remote Eastern Cape town of Kareedouw, at the foot of the Langkloof.

As late as 2002, the Kareedouw hospital still treated black and white patients at separate entrances, and despite the fact that it had a black, ANC-dominated town council, erected its new black housing development with a 200m gap between it and its nearest white neighbours.

This is the shocking continuity, under the ANC, of the physical, economic structure of “separate development” that allowed right-wing American writer PJ O’Rourke in his *Holidays in Hell* to describe the country as “a place of evil and perdition,” propped up by whites who found it normal to throw their cigarettes on the lawn – because there would always be someone darker to pick them up.

Botha, the alleged harbinger of the end of apartheid – a mantle and Nobel Prize assumed by his successor, Frederik Willem de Klerk – was, in fact, forced into adapting what he once called a mere corollary of “good neighbourliness” to changed circumstance.

Official apartheid was painted into a corner by a combination of the collapse of the bipolar Cold War order; the inability of the

colour bar to create a skilled black workforce with sufficient purchasing power to afford its own products; and the effects of the nationwide insurgency.

But a cynic would say the white nationalists only surrendered power to the black nationalists once the physical barriers that ensured that privilege would remain secure in its laager were unassailable.

Kareedouw points to this being true and shows how, as one township resident tells me, the ghost of Vorster still haunts its hills.

Is the same true of George Botha's former stamping-ground, the place where he built his reputation as a thug who broke up Union Party meetings — in much the same way as a young Nelson Mandela was bleeding himself at the expense of the Communist Party?

Botha was our Pinochet. An early supporter of the pro-Nazi Ossewa Brandwag who later turned to the uniquely South African version of fascism called Christian nationalism, he forged an already anti-democratic South Africa into a military dictatorship along Francoist lines.

If former law and order minister Adriaan Vlok's statements to the Mail & Guardian this year are true, Botha issued personal, private orders to chosen individuals from within the State Security Council.

This suggests that beyond his obvious responsibility for the nuclear weapons programme and numerous cross-border raids into neighbouring countries, Botha was personally responsible, like his Chilean counterpart, for the "disappearance" of perhaps hundreds of anti-apartheid activists in South Africa and abroad.

Among them are the estimated 200 Swapo detainees murdered in cold blood and dumped, Chilean-fashion, from an aircraft into the ocean.

This also suggests that the man also nicknamed Pieter Wapen, remained, like Pinochet in his dotage, beyond the reach of the law he so regularly flouted.

Gerald L'Ange describes Botha, in his seminal study *The White Africans* as someone who did not see himself as others did, "a vain bully whose sense of self-importance ballooned in the thin air of the highest office..."

For all his steeliness, Botha had a capacity for seeing immediate issues realistically, and he attempted — though seldom with much finesse — to deal with them pragmatically.

Despite his rearguard initiation of limited reforms like the scrapping of petty apartheid, driven it seems as much by a strangely sentimental attachment to the coloured people as by his kragdadigheid, it is for his single-mindedness and aggression that he will probably be best remembered.

But Botha was unceremoniously unseated by De Klerk in 1989 after having suffered a stroke.

Until the end, he was deeply bitter that his vision of ending apartheid — on his terms and doubtless with a permanent sunset clause for whites — lay in tatters.

Botha in retirement seemed toothless, less of a crocodile and more like the vanishing Knysna elephant he apparently once saw, looming large over the landscape one minute, then vanishing into the scenery as if never there.

But in death, his ghost still haunts the Outeniqua Mountains and its backlands like the legendary, spectral hitch-hiker on the Uniondale road.

His former constituency as a belligerent young MP is a weird mixture of retired old-school English-speaking CEOs, back-packing neo-hippies, bulky young Afrikaans aluminium-siding salesmen, and inbred backwoods folk straight out of Kringe in die Bos.

Here you will encounter both cheerful and helpful coloured municipal staff and will o' the wisp rumours of shadowy groups in nearby Sedgfield who continue to celebrate Adolf Hitler's birthday each April 20.

Despite the new roads and new licks of paint evident in the black township of Thembelihle and the coloured township of Pacaltsdorp, they remain racially distinct "locations", separated from each other by a deep ravine and from mostly white George by the N2.

These divisions are an entrenched feature of the South African landscape, despite all the hubris about national unity.

Rian Malan in *My Traitor's Heart* tellingly explains how the Nederduitse Gereformeerde dopper movement got its name from the tin cap that was used to put out a candle, a metaphor for the doppers' reflex to extinguish the illumination of the Enlightenment, plunging the world into darkness again.

With national flags flying at half-mast, it is hard to guess whether this week, Thabo Mvuyelwa Mbeki will come to George to bury Botha or to praise him.

With race-classification still legal and the geographical bulwarks of apartheid barely eroded, as mourners sing Botha to his rest amid the reek of polished piety in the Nederduitse Gereformeerde mother-church, it will be far from clear which will prevail: the daylight or the ghosts.