

South Africa Part Three Sitting with Apartheid

“Apartheid” means separate-ness in Afrikaans. Hendrick Verwoerd’s goal was to disengage the races — white, Black, Indian and “coloured” — with whites firmly in control. “Grand apartheid” established separate living areas, controlled Black housing and employment, segregated schools,



Six white guys in suits: This stamp commemorating 50 years of the Union of South Africa features the five prime ministers to date (l-r): Botha, Smuts, Hertzog, Malan, Strydom and Verwoerd.



Hendrik Verwoerd, the charismatic, hard-line architect of apartheid. He was assassinated in 1966.

hospitals and labor unions, and restricted Black mobility.

Then there was “petty apartheid.” This was the seemingly endless and demeaning intrusion into the daily life of blacks who ventured beyond their segregated settlements. The list of things that were off-limits boggles the mind, including: trains, buses, ambulances, swimming pools, beaches, universities, pedestrian bridges, drive-ins, graveyards, park benches, public toilets, movie theaters, restaurants, hotels and churches. Blacks were not allowed to buy hard liquor, and few were able to get passports.

It’s true that life for Black Americans before the 1960s also was brutally limited by racism in law and petty practice. Still, it’s shocking to be faced with such shameful evidence, no matter the country.

After 1948, apartheid was institutionalized by new laws, many of them self-explanatory: the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949); the Population Registraton Act (1950); the Group Areas Act



(1950); the Prevention of Illegal Squatting Act (1951); Native Laws Amendment Act (1953); the Bantu Education Act (1953). By 1960, millions of Black South Africans had been displaced, many to segregated homelands” or “bantustans.” In 1961, amid the continent-wide eruption of independence from imperialism throughout the continent, South Africa doubled down on apartheid by declaring itself a republic and cutting all remaining ties to Great Britain and the British Commonwealth. Over the years, thousands were arrested and went to prison for minor or major infractions.

The government maintained the fiction of “autonomous” Black tribal homelands. Yet the Bantu Investment Corporation revealed how dependent these tribal areas were on their white overseers for survival. Indeed, the cost of subsidizing these homelands was a factor in the demise of apartheid. (More later on the homelands — and their stamps.)

South West Africa, the vast, arid region mandated to South Africa after World War I, also was subject to apartheid laws. Amid international protests, South Africa’s mandate was lifted in 1966, and the territory officially became Namibia, nominally under the supervision of the United Nations. But South Africa clung to its territory, defying UN. One gesture of its defiance was to continue printing stamps for “SWA.”



Just a reminder: This stamp from South West Africa honoring Verwoerd underscores that his apartheid system applied in SWA as well as the RSA.

If only philately could run the world ... The United Nations issued all these stamps in the 1970s promoting independence for Namibia. Fat lot of good they did. South Africa held on to its mandate right up until the end, issuing its final “SWA” definitive stamp series just four months before Namibia’s independence day.



Above left is part of the last definitive set for “SWA” (South West Africa), issued in November 1989 in continuing defiance of the UN’s supervisory claims. After Namibian independence in March 1990, clever postal authorities decided a simple name switch would suffice. Virtually the same set was issued as Namibia’s first definitive series (above right).

Resistance to apartheid started with protests in 1949 led by the African National Congress. Soweto became a center of activism in the running standoff between protesters and apartheid authorities. A general strike against the new republic in 1961 led by Nelson Mandela and others provoked a government crackdown. Mandela would spend the next 27 years in prison. The Sharpeville Massacre of 1969 — 69 Black deaths — led to more repression. But protests continued, including sabotage. Labor unions joined the cause in the 1970s.

Not all the protesters were Black. Twenty percent of white South Africans opposed apartheid — including proud descendants of the Cape Colony’s John Molteno. In Parliament, Helen Suzman, Colin Eglin and Harry Schwarz led the fight, joined by authors like Nadine Gordimer.



Are you surprised there are no South African stamps that address apartheid? I’m not. Other countries criticized apartheid on stamps, like East Germany (DDR), above. The United States never condemned apartheid on a stamp.



Angola issued this stamp for “anti-apartheid year” in 1979, less than four years after gaining its own independence from Portugal.



These stamps from Sierra Leone were part of a remarkable series honoring Jews who fought apartheid.



Apartheid was an appalling blot in the history of South Africa and South West Africa. On a brighter note, consider the welcome developments that began in 1989 under President F.W. de Klerk (right). Within a year, Nelson Mandela (left) was free, South West Africa became independent Namibia, and the structure of apartheid was coming apart. In 1994 Mandela was elected president. (He served until 1999, and died in 2013, age 95.) South Africa



Finally, Black faces appear on South African stamps! This mini-sheet from 1996 honors Black Nobel Peace Prize winners the country “forgot” to celebrate at the time, including Albert Luthuli, Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela. Also pictured is novelist Nadine Gordimer, who won the Nobel in literature in 1991.

adopted a new, Y-shaped flag. Display of the old orange-white-blue banner (far-right) was declared a hate crime.



New flag (left) ... and old

South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation helped to move beyond national hatreds and divisions. However, the casualty count for the transition was high — 14,000 deaths due to political violence between 1990 and 1994, twice the official numbers compiled during all of apartheid. (Keep in mind some “suicides” during apartheid have been challenged.)

In 1993, South Africa suffered a historic blow when a right-wing white nationalist assassinated Chris Hani (right),



the leader seen as a possible successor to Mandela. He joined Steve Biko, Solomon Mahlangu, Victoria Mxenge and others who perished fighting apartheid. For 30 years South Africa has struggled to build and sustain a successful, multi-racial society on the ruins of apartheid. That is another story. For now, reflect on these heartfelt words of remorse over apartheid from F.W. de Klerk, who died in 2021.



“I apologize ... to the millions who suffered wrenching disruption of forced removals; who suffered the shame of being arrested for pass law offenses; who over the decades suffered the indignities and humiliation of racial discrimination.”

GALLERY

The display of South African stamps in this short essay may leave you wanting more. Feel free to consult a Scott catalog or online stamp site to review the entire archive. (By the way, if you can identify one Black person on a South African stamp before 1994, I'll eat my Voortrekker's *Hut*.) Just for fun, I have selected examples from my favorite set of South African stamps, from the 1980s, to display for your viewing pleasure. It's a long series, with engravings of Old South Africa's fine architecture. OK, it's a paean to imperialism, with monuments dedicated to sustaining white supremacy. That still can't ruin their beauty, or the fine work of the engravers and colorers. Feast your eyes on the set, how the stamps stand on their own and combine beautifully; enlarge the pictures even more to appreciate the clean lines and detail work. Aah! True philatelic pleasure.



NEXT: THE BANTUSTANS AND THEIR STAMPS