

## Book Reviews

### Health and Healthcare Provision for Exiles amidst the Liberation Struggle

**Melissa Diane Armstrong, *An Ambulance on Safari: The ANC and the Making of a Health Department in Exile***

McGill-Queen's and Kingston University Press, London, 2020

311 pp

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*An Ambulance on Safari* by Melissa Diane Armstrong sheds light on the important role of healthcare for South Africans living in exile during the anti-apartheid struggle. This book delves into the African National Congress (ANC)'s multidimensional role in exile, examining how it provided emergency treatment while also creating political legitimacy and advocating for national interests on a global stage. According to Armstrong, she initially came upon the topic of the ANC's expansion of its medical sector when beginning her Master's studies at Oxford University in 2012. Driven by her discoveries regarding the ANC's well documented endeavours, she continued to explore this subject during her PhD studies. Eventually, she converted her PhD thesis into a publication, *An Ambulance on Safari*, incorporating significant new information she had been unable to include in her original dissertation. *An Ambulance on Safari* explores the ANC's move into exile, documenting the history of the ANC's Health Department, while incorporating personal accounts of exile journeys and those who were involved in providing health care from the early 1960s to 1990.

Throughout *An Ambulance on Safari*, Armstrong delves into two important topics. First, she discusses the Health Department's organisational structure within the ANC and its approach to patient care, presenting a thorough examination of this department's internal workings and illuminating the ways in which its rules and procedures impacted the delivery of medical treatment while in exile. Second, she analyses the effects that the Health Department had on both patients and healthcare practitioners. This analysis includes interpersonal relationships among staff members, demonstrating how decisions made by the ANC leadership and department personnel had a direct impact on the wellbeing of individual patients.

*An Ambulance on Safari* is divided into five chapters, with a brief introduction and a conclusion. The first chapter gives a summary of the history of medical services within the ANC in exile and emphasises their crucial role in fostering positive international relations from as early as 1962, particularly between Tanzania and South Africa. This chapter also recounts a significant event involving dissatisfied

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white nurses who intended to leave their hospital posts amidst tensions with Tanzania's newly independent government, potentially leaving numerous medical facilities understaffed (pp. 16-17). However, through collaborative efforts between the ANC leadership and the Tanzanian government, a secret operation was conducted to replace these nurses with black nurses from South Africa (p. 17). This collaboration not only strengthened ties between the two countries but also made it simpler for South Africans who opposed apartheid to seek medical education abroad. Furthermore, the first chapter addresses issues related to healthcare in exile and highlights the role physicians played in raising awareness of anti-apartheid initiatives (pp. 17-20). The ANC's shift to non-military aid is evidenced by the creation of its Health Department in 1976. Thus, this chapter illustrates the goal of improving patient care and raising the organisation's political profile.

The second chapter looks at the collaboration between the ANC and its host countries, Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Angola. It emphasises the influence of geographic considerations on healthcare delivery while concentrating on the political and military environments of the late 1970s and early 1980s. The chapter discusses the strategies used by various branches of the Health Department to address medical care challenges in different regions, with Tanzania's close cooperation and the establishment of a hospital in exile being a key example. Additionally, the chapter explores and addresses the various challenges encountered by the ANC Health Department in delivering healthcare to South African exiles and uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK) members in host countries. These challenges include civil conflicts between the exiles and the locals, refugee influxes, and the widespread prevalence of malaria within the camps, highlighting the urgent need for effective strategies to combat the disease. Furthermore, it emphasises the political importance of HIV/AIDS, the ANC and its host countries' initiatives to tackle the pandemic, while also proposing potential policies to lessen its impact in South Africa.

The third chapter examines the important role that the ANC Health Department played in the anti-apartheid campaign from 1977 to 1990. It focuses on the ANC's Health Department's strategies, goals, and political moves to gain international recognition and draw attention to the inequalities in South Africa's healthcare system. Furthermore, by demonstrating that the Health Department provided care for South Africans in exile, the ANC established itself as a credible political alternative in the eyes of the international community, while also highlighting the shortcomings of the apartheid medical system. The ANC's Health Department also sought to position itself as an alternative medical service dedicated to women's reproductive rights through collaborations and conferences; yet it was unable to take a strictly feminist posture because it failed to create a liberal feminist perspective on abortion legislation.

The fourth chapter delves into the Health Department's infrastructure projects, demonstrating how they are an ideal illustration of the ANC's efforts to serve as a substitute medical representation for South Africa's healthcare system. This chapter also highlights the significance of international donor contributions and medical personnel selection, both of which had a substantial impact on patients' experiences at ANC clinics and hospitals. However, while the Health Department's involvement in the anti-apartheid struggle benefited the ANC politically and internationally, its efforts to provide medical care to South African exiles were important but ineffective. Thousands of patients were treated, and many suffered because of the department's inexperienced, and sometimes corrupt, staff. As a result, the chapter highlights that despite its goals to serve as a replacement healthcare provider advocating for South Africa's interests, the department failed to offer consistent, high-quality care, indicating a lack of leadership ability. Nonetheless, its global exposure helped the initiative to gain financial and political support, notably from Sweden and certain other Southern African countries. Therefore, this examination of healthcare delivery adds to a larger social history that focuses on the daily lives of those who went into exile.

The final chapter investigates the mental health crisis experienced by exiled individuals, particularly ANC and MK members. The emphasis was on prevalent mental illnesses such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), schizophrenia, depression, and severe anxiety, particularly in cases of traumatic apartheid-era experiences such as confinement and torture, which worsened these conditions and in some cases led to violent behaviour, substance abuse, and even suicide (p. 155). The chapter also describes cases of paranoia which ANC cadres and refugees were subjected to within the ANC itself. Despite the tremendous psychological pressures, there was little reporting on mental health in the 1960s and early 1970s. This lack of reporting is consistent with the general lack of health-related reporting during that period, partly because of the inadequate mental health services available. In addition, the chapter examines the various narratives on how mental health became politicised, including instances where outsiders provided the ANC with urgently needed specialised psychological care but were refused access due to their political stance.

Melissa Armstrong used archival materials, such as health reports, memoranda, personal correspondence, patient letters, speeches, and project proposals when compiling this book. She also looked at records from various sectors of the ANC. Moreover, Armstrong includes specific quotes from these key sources in their original language to ensure the veracity of the comments made. However, she admits that while these archival sources supplied useful information, they also had their limits. For instance, many of the texts had grammatical and spelling faults due to the contributors' different linguistic backgrounds. Also, records in the ANC's Fort Hare collection, for instance, were either in private collections or only accessible to

the public at the party's prerogative. Furthermore, only a minor percentage of Fort Hare's records date back to the 1960s, the important post-Sharpeville era, the formation of MK and the turn to armed struggle; the majority of records are from the 1980s and early 1990s. Aside from historical records, Armstrong used pre-existing interviews from oral history projects and conducted her own interviews with persons familiar with or involved in the ANC's medical services for exiled members.

*An Ambulance on Safari* provides a significant analysis of the ANC's Health Department, demonstrating how healthcare has developed into an important tool for solidarity and resistance. Furthermore, by focusing on the history of healthcare for South Africans living in exile from the 1960s to the 1990s, a topic that has thus far received little attention and by analysing the complex relationships between politics, international diplomacy, and healthcare delivery in exile, *An Ambulance on Safari* fills a major gap in the historiography of the South Africa's health history and the ANC's medical sector. Although the book broadens our perspective on South Africa's past, it would have been helpful to learn more about how the ANC's Health Department dealt with the health challenges of those living in exile from the 1970s to 1990s, aside from those mentioned in the book, such as tuberculosis. Additionally, a more in-depth analysis of the traditional healing practices used by South Africans living in exile as well as the concerns of poverty and race among refugee communities would have enhanced the narrative.

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### **Some Fresh Perspectives on Anticommunism and the Dutch Reformed Church**

Ruhan Fourie, *Christian Nationalism and Anticommunism in Twentieth-Century South Africa*

New York: Routledge, 2024

236 pp

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US\$ 180 if imported (SA price as yet unavailable)

Protestant Christianity, with its doctrine of *sola scriptura* (only the Bible), has a long tradition of nuanced criticism against the political philosophy of Communism. Whereas Protestants hold the Bible as the only authority for the vision of their God for humanity, the ideas of church fathers and philosophers carry with it substantially more weight in alternative Christian traditions, such as for example Catholic Christianity, amongst others. In South Africa, it is a well-established fact that the

anticommunism movement went way above and beyond mere reasonable objections by groups such as Reformed Christians. According to Dubow, 'Fear of Communism, verging on paranoia, was deliberately stoked by politicians, state television, as well as popular magazines.'<sup>1</sup>

Prominent Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) theologians such as B.B. Keet (1885–1974), Willie Jonker (1929–2006), Beyers Naude (1915–2004), who were known critics of the theological justification of apartheid by the DRC, are also known to have promoted theological criticism of Communism from a Protestant perspective. During the 20th century however, the Afrikaans churches in general, and the DRC in particular, developed into a hotbed of fundamentalist anticommunism. The DRC, historically the largest and most influential of the Afrikaner Reformed churches, was abused by some of its members for the promotion of their political philosophy of Afrikaner nationalism and white supremacy. In the book *Christian Nationalism and Anticommunism in Twentieth-Century South Africa*, Ruhan Fourie explores the manner in which the DRC's structures were utilised by political groups to promote a popular mythological narrative of Afrikaner nationalism, in which the Afrikaner people had a central and strategic role to play in the international fight against Communism for the preservation of Western civilization and the Christian faith.

It should be noted that similar studies have been undertaken in the past. As an example, there is the MA dissertation by Samuel Longford titled, 'The Suppression of Communism, the Dutch Reformed Church, and the Instrumentality of Fear during Apartheid', completed in 2016 at the University of the Western Cape, which is not referenced in Fourie's study. Tellingly, Longford and Fourie arrive at very similar conclusions, despite some differences in methodology. Like Fourie, Longford also traces the foundations of the anticommunism movement within the DRC to the growing urbanisation of Afrikaners in the aftermath of the South African War (1899 – 1902). Longford goes further and explores early interpretations of the famous 'Battle of Blood River' of 1838, which popularised ideas of the Afrikaners having received a sacred calling to spread the Christian faith in Africa, and which is rightly considered as one of the 'foundational myths' of Afrikaner identity, akin to that of Jan van Riebeeck (1619–1677), still annually being celebrated on 6 April by some Afrikaners as the 'founding father' of South Africa in 1652. Whilst there is some overlap between the studies by Longford and that by Fourie, both can be said to provide valuable contributions to the topic.

The history of the DRC will forever be tainted by the story of the theological justification of apartheid, which left many congregants questioning the authority of the church and even the foundations of their faith. According to Fourie, DRC discourse of 2024 is dominated by the Belhar Confession, the position of the DRC on

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1. S. Dubow, *Apartheid, 1948–1994* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 200.

same-sex relationships as well as the ordination of queer clergy, debates in which ‘a resurgence of anticommunist impulses emerges’ (p. 211). But the DRC is by a long stretch not unique in the way in which it grapples with questions surrounding the LGBTQI+-community. Christians from various different traditions in South Africa and abroad, hold conflicting interpretations of scripture. Critical liberal theology, which is dominant in the DRC leadership structures of 2024, and which effectively, by and large, relegates the Bible to fallible human words about God, as opposed to historical DRC foundational interpretations equating the Bible to ‘the Word of God’, threatens the maintenance of long-held patriarchal beliefs and power relations within Christianity.

LGBTQI+-relations also remain a burning issue in Anglican and Catholic churches. Can it be said that these churches also act out of anticommunist sentiments? Whilst the DRC continues with its rather unpleasant conversations surrounding LGBTQI+ relationships, other popular Christian denominations such as the Baptist, Charismatic, Pentecostal and even the former ‘daughter’-churches of the DRC, such as the Uniting Reformed Church (URC), are not even debating these matters, and continue on a strict heteronormative path. (This is not to mention the African independent churches, which happen to be the largest Christian denominations in South Africa). An interesting possible question for future historians of religion to ponder, is whether or not the URC do justice to the Belhar Confession, considering their approach to LGBTQI+-relations. With regard to the DRC, it should be noted that the Cape Synod, the oldest and most influential regional synod of the DRC, has already adopted the Belhar Confession fully, and Belhar is nowhere near as contested an issue in the DRC as it was 15 years ago.

Some inconsistencies emerged from a reading of Fourie’s text. According to Fourie, the 1987 DRC breakaway group, known as the Afrikaanse Protestantse Kerk (APK), only constituted some 8 000 individuals (p. 179). With reference to this passage, there are two sources cited, the one being by a certain Van der Merwe, simply titled ‘Ras, Volk en Nasie’. This source by Van der Merwe is not reflected in the final list of references and seemingly refers to a 1990 PhD thesis in Theology by one Johan Matthys van der Merwe from the University of Pretoria, with the complete title being: ‘Ras, Volk en Nasie’ en ‘Kerk en Samelewing’ as Beleidstukke van die Ned. Geref. Kerk: ’n Historiese Studie (this source does feature elsewhere in Fourie’s book). The second source cited is that of Hermann Giliomee’s *Die Laaste Afrikanerleiers*. However, in Giliomee’s *Die Afrikaners: ’n Biografie* (2004), the number of DRC members defecting to the APK is clearly noted as being 30 000 members in 1987, with some 70 000 more who joined the APK in the 1990s,<sup>2</sup> (around 100 000 in total). The establishment of the APK seemingly did inflict substantial damage to Afrikaner nationalism and the DRC, and amounted to significantly more

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2. H. Giliomee, *Die Afrikaners: ’n Biografie* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2004), 576.

than 0.44 % of former DRC members. The source of the 0.44 % is unclear, and appears to be Fourie's own miscalculation. Elsewhere, Fourie notes 'At the 1986 General Synod, the internal battle between the DRC's *verligtes* and *verkrampptes* was won by the latter' (p. 168). Since it was the so-called *verkrampptes* who broke away and established the ultra-conservative APK, it was probably supposed to read the 'former', not the 'latter'.

Despite some drawbacks, Ruhan Fourie's *Christian Nationalism and Anticommunism in Twentieth-Century South Africa* can be considered a useful contribution to the scholarship on anti-Communist politics and the 20th century history of the DRC. While not being original in every respect, the author went to great lengths to cover archival material and provides some fresh insights and perspectives. The book is divided into five chapters, of which the first four stands out. As the book sets out to explore 'overt opposition' to Communism within the DRC, it can be concluded that the text does achieve its aims. Whether the book is 'the first systematic approach to Afrikaner anticommunism, tracing its origins and developments over time' (p. 3), as noted in the introduction, is a whole different question, on which I cast some doubt.

While the historiography is saturated with studies on Afrikaners, apartheid, the DRC and anticommunism, the issues discussed in Fourie's book are not matters completely relegated to bygone days. More than three decades since the end of apartheid rule, Afrikaner identity continues to be hotly debated, and grandiose ideas regarding the global influence of Afrikaners persist. Writing for the online Afrikaans news publication *Netwerk24*, political scientist Alida Kok cautions against 'woke left liberalism', and argues that Afrikaners in 2024 are perfectly positioned to formulate a new political order for Western civilisation.<sup>3</sup> These ideas echo some of the sentiments of the anticommunism movement, which also allocated a central position on the global stage to Afrikaners as 'gatekeepers' of Western civilisation, culture and Christianity. This despite the fact that no clear and widely accepted definition of the concept 'Afrikaner' exists. Given these realities, Fourie's publication is a welcome addition, and will be a useful source to a wide range of scholars. The underestimation of the full impact of the APK, does unfortunately cast some doubt on the author's grasp of all the intricacies of Afrikaner politics of the 1980s.

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3. 'Alida Kok: Afrikaner het 'n unieke kans hier', *Netwerk24*, accessed 26 May 2024, at <https://www.netwerk24.com/netwerk24/stemme/menings/alida-kok-afrikaner-het-n-unique-kans-hier-20240522>.