

# Forced relocation in apartheid South Africa

## The impact of 'separate development'

Laura Evans

Explore conditions in the 'homelands', the regime that forcibly created them, and their legacy today

### Exam links



**AQA 1J** The British Empire, c.1857–1967 (The winds of change, 1947–1967)

**Edexcel paper 2 option 2F.2** South Africa, 1948–94: from apartheid state to 'rainbow nation'

**OCR Y224** Apartheid and reconciliation: South African politics 1948–1999

The Qwa Qwa homeland, 1980

The relocation of millions of black South Africans to rural dumping grounds in the so-called 'homelands' was one of the defining and most brutal aspects of the racist apartheid regime. While the urban impacts are well understood, the devastating effects of apartheid policy in the country's rural areas have often been overlooked.

### The discarded people

In April 1963, Nomathemba Memese and her family were forced by armed police to pack their belongings. They were rounded up, along with many other impoverished black families living in the small settlement of Cookhouse, and sent on a long and uncomfortable journey to the desolate rural dumping ground of Ilinge in South Africa's Eastern Cape. They were told by the authorities of the white supremacist apartheid regime that they were being sent to the homeland of the *amaXhosa* people. They did not know such a thing existed. Memese and her family had lived in Cookhouse and the surrounds for many years.

### Housing and disease

When they arrived in Ilinge — delivered from the train by government-owned trucks — they found only a few wooden one-roomed prefabricated houses in the middle of a vast dry valley. This was to be their home. Forced to survive on meagre rations of corn meal and to drink contaminated water from a nearby stream, many of those dumped at Ilinge in this way died from malnutrition and related diseases (such as pellagra, marasmus and kwashiorkor), tuberculosis and waterborne diseases, such as cholera.

### Laws and jobs

Ilinge was just one of many such 'resettlement townships' established in South Africa during the 1960s by the racist, oppressive apartheid government. The townships were designated for the occupation of black South Africans who had been expelled under the **pass laws** from towns and cities and evicted from rural areas reserved for white occupation only.

According to the government's plans for ethnic 'self-government', black South Africans were to be denied South African citizenship and compelled to live in tiny, impoverished and densely populated rural homelands, where they would exercise tenuous ethnic 'self-determination'. With very few local employment opportunities and little land for subsistence, the residents of these homelands continued to work on the white-owned mines, farmlands and in the industries of South Africa, which profited by paying low wages.

### Primary source

During the late 1960s, a catholic priest and activist, Cosmas Desmond, travelled the length and breadth of the country documenting the devastating impacts of these forced removals and the terrible living conditions that prevailed in 'resettlement' areas in the homelands. In 1969, he published his observations in a book entitled *The Discarded People*. Desmond's account was widely read in Britain and exposed the shocking realities of South Africa's racist and oppressive policies of 'separate development'.

### Colonialism

The National Party (NP) came to power in 1948 following a narrow electoral victory. Promoting the slogan of *apartheid*, meaning 'separateness' in Afrikaans, the NP pressed for more stringent racial segregation, for greater control over the African population, and for the protection of the interests of the white **Afrikaner** minority.

The policies of racial segregation pursued by the National Party were not new. South Africa's history of colonialism, racial segregation and white supremacy began during the mid-seventeenth century with the expansion of Dutch colonial settlement. The dispossession of indigenous lands was accelerated by nineteenth-century British imperialism — following the discovery of diamonds and gold in the late-nineteenth century the racist regime became further entrenched.

**apartheid** 'Separateness' or 'apart-hood' in Afrikaans. In 1948, the idea of 'apartheid' was little more than a slogan for segregation. Over the next two decades, the NP instituted an elaborate set of policies to entrench racial segregation, including the promotion of ethnic 'homelands'.

### homelands/bantustans

To lend legitimacy to apartheid by mimicking decolonisation, the government set about creating 'self-governing homelands' (or bantustans) for the African population (1959 Promotion of Bantu Self-Government Act).

**AmaXhosa** 'The Xhosa people' in isiXhosa, the African language spoken in South Africa's Eastern Cape. Two 'homelands' were created for the amaXhosa, the Transkei and the Ciskei.

### pass laws/influx control

The movement of people classified 'African' was controlled by 'pass laws' (also known as 'influx control'), which regulated permission for Africans to be in a 'white area'. Africans were compelled to carry pass books and could be arrested and forced to leave an urban area if their papers were not in order.

### Afrikaner/Afrikaans

Dutch settlers who spoke a creole language, Afrikaans. Afrikaner nationalists (the National Party) believed these settlers' claims to the land were legitimate, being 'white Africans'.



### Separate development

Throughout the 1950s, anti-colonial and African nationalist movements blossomed in South Africa, mobilising many oppressed people. Independent nations emerged across the African continent in the wake of the 'winds of change' of decolonisation that blew through the colonial world at the end of the 1950s. However, in South Africa, the white settler regime remained focused on repressing political mobilisation and entrenching white supremacy.

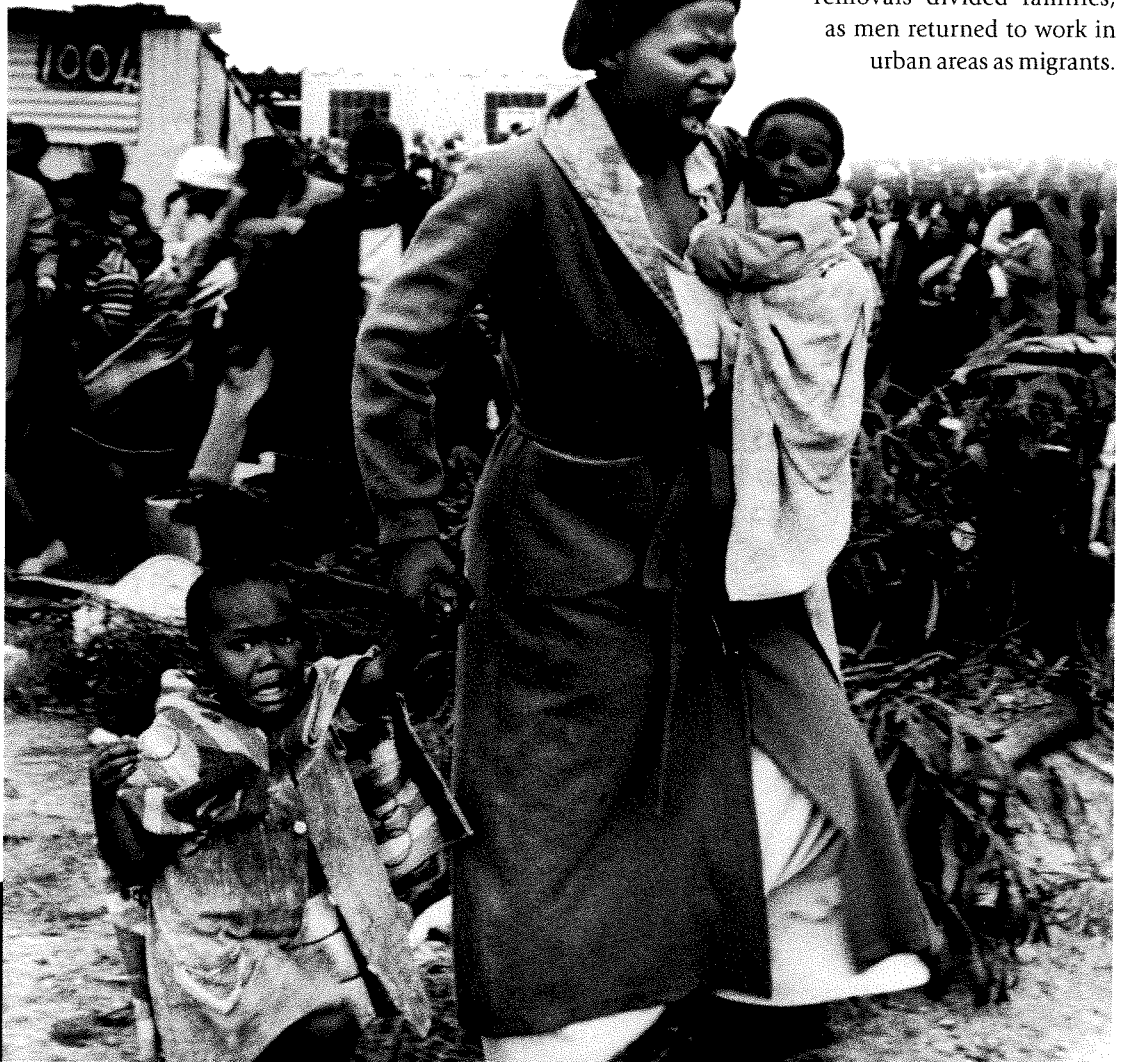
In the face of African nationalists' demands for change, the Afrikaner nationalist government sought to divide and rule the African population by introducing ethnic divisions. Under Prime Minister H. F. Verwoerd, the infamous 'architect' of apartheid, the government set about an elaborate process of implementing 'self-government' for Africans in ten ethnic homelands, or **bantustans**, as these areas also came to be known. In a grand exercise of social engineering, the government fabricated symbols of ethnic nationalism, installing African authorities who would implement apartheid policy, and forcibly removing millions of black South Africans to rural dumping grounds in these tiny entities.

### The impact of relocation

Between 1960 and 1980, more than 3.5 million people were forcibly relocated. Non-white urban residents were forced to move to segregated 'African', 'coloured' and 'Indian' townships, according to the racial classifications imposed by the regime. As many as 2 million people were moved to new settlements established in the bantustans, doubling the population of these already impoverished and deprived rural areas. The impacts of rural relocation were dramatic: sprawling rudimentary townships stretched for miles across what was once grazing land; piped water and sanitation were scarce; there was virtually no investment in public healthcare, and widespread unemployment meant that many people became destitute.

### Male workers

Those who arrived in the bantustans during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s came from a variety of places. Some were forcibly removed from towns and cities under the pass laws, or following the destruction of their homes by the government. For many of these people, forced removals divided families, as men returned to work in urban areas as migrants.



Millions of black South Africans were forcibly transported to rural dumping grounds before the end of apartheid in 1994



Forced to remain in the bantustans, many women lost the incomes they had earned in urban areas and became reliant on the wages earned by male migrants.

### 'Unproductive' people

For poor people living on white-owned farms, eviction was an ever-present threat. Following eviction, faced with no alternative and in spite of the terrible living conditions, many moved to the bantustan resettlement townships to find a more secure place to live. A significant portion of those relocated were women, children and the elderly, who were considered by racist employers and the state to be 'redundant', 'unproductive' dependents. Many members of the banned **African National Congress (ANC)** and **Pan Africanist Congress (PAC)** who had been incarcerated as political prisoners were also banished to the bantustans.

While the state dabbled in development in new bantustan townships by opening a handful of textile factories, which exploited the high levels of unemployment by paying low wages, residents of these areas faced the grinding poverty of living in a community of widespread unemployment and reliance on migrant labour.

### Resistance to homelands

By the early 1980s, organised resistance to apartheid was growing across the country, in urban areas as well as in the rural bantustans. Following the intense repression of the 1960s, urban struggles and labour movements re-emerged during the mid-1970s, especially after the Soweto uprising of 1976–7. The early 1980s saw the rejection of local apartheid authorities and the growth of civic organisations opposed to the oppressive regime.

Although some people benefited from employment in the various bantustan bureaucracies, or by gaining

## Box | Key figures

### H. F. Verwoerd (1901–66)

Prime Minister of South Africa (1958–66). A staunch Afrikaner nationalist, Verwoerd's premiership was characterised by the intensification of racial policies, most notably the homelands system.

### Stephen Bantu Biko (1946–77)

Steve Biko was a prominent African intellectual, leader of the Black Consciousness movement and enduring figure of black liberation in South Africa. He was arrested during the 1976–77 uprising and died from injuries sustained in police custody in 1977. His death stimulated worldwide protests.

access to the limited housing provided through resettlement schemes, by the late-1970s the notion of homelands as a site for independence had been widely rejected. While the white regime presented the bantustans as the answer to black demands for political representation, these regimes were far from democratic. Violent political repression was routinely meted out by homeland regimes, which were famously corrupt, as 'puppet' elites siphoned off the limited funding that came from the central state. The **Black Consciousness** leader Steve Biko famously described the bantustans as 'the greatest single fraud ever invented by white politicians'.

### The legacies of apartheid

By the mid-1980s, South Africa faced a stalemate: the regime could not contain widespread dissent, nor could the popular movement overthrow the government. The state was heavily indebted and, following the fall of the Berlin Wall, multinational companies began to realise that they could continue with business as usual while conceding political change. Tentative

### African National

**Congress** The ANC was a key African nationalist and anti-apartheid organisation. A prominent leader of the ANC before his imprisonment, Nelson Mandela led the ANC into government in 1994 following his release (1990).

### Pan Africanist Congress

The PAC broke away from the ANC in 1959. Led by Robert Sobukwe, it staged one of the most important campaigns against the pass laws in 1960.

### Black Consciousness

A movement with Christian origins based on instilling pride in the black population and refuting white-supremacist ideas of black inferiority.



Nelson Mandela was released from prison in 1990, and became South Africa's first post-apartheid president

## Questions

- What was 'apartheid'?
- How did apartheid impact on the lives of black South Africans?
- How and why did apartheid end?
- What are the legacies of this racist regime in South Africa?

## Further reading

Clark, N. and Worger, W. (2013) *South Africa: The Rise and Fall of Apartheid*, Longman, chapters 3 and 4.

Forced removals overview and further resources at the Overcoming Apartheid website: [www.tinyurl.com/ktljb9z](http://www.tinyurl.com/ktljb9z).

Documentary: *Last Grave at Dimbaza* (Chris Curling and Nana Mahomo, 1974): [www.tinyurl.com/ybn24lcm](http://www.tinyurl.com/ybn24lcm).

secret negotiations took place through the late-1980s, leading to formal political negotiations between the ANC, NP and other key organisations during the early 1990s. Although legislated change was afoot, these years were nevertheless characterised by widespread political violence.

The homelands were re-incorporated into South Africa with the end of apartheid and the birth of the democratic government in 1994, yet the legacy of homeland policy in post-apartheid South Africa is profound. South Africa celebrated 20 years of democracy in 2014, but the gains of freedom are not easy to decipher for the residents of impoverished areas of the former bantustans.

While all South Africans now enjoy the vote and the ANC government has pursued land reform policies to address the history of racialised land dispossession and forced removals, these policies have not tended to benefit the poor, black, rural population. The former bantustan areas continue to be the most deprived areas of the country, with high rates of unemployment, child malnutrition, poor educational provision and inadequate healthcare. Some rural communities have protested the enduring power of chiefs in the former homelands, arguing that the influence of such traditional authorities

undermines their democratic rights. Nevertheless, one significant success of post-apartheid governments has been the introduction of social grants (pensions, child support grants, disability allowances) which are a mainstay for impoverished families living in the rural bantustans.

## Conclusion

The history of relocation to the bantustans was perhaps the most substantial and enduring aspect of apartheid. The white supremacist National Party government pursued the policy of independent ethnic homelands as a response to decolonisation elsewhere. While these quasi-independent states were never accepted as legitimate entities by most other countries and were widely rejected as a political farce by black South Africans, the impacts of this policy have nevertheless been profoundly damaging and continue to outlive formal apartheid.

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# Using this article in your exam



How could this article be useful in your exam?

In this article, Laura Evans highlights an aspect of apartheid in South Africa that is often overlooked: that of relocation. You should notice the approach that the writer uses to draw in the reader. A personal, micro-account of an experience of relocation is used to emphasise how the lives of 'ordinary' people were impacted. This is a good example of a 'bottom up' view of history rather than 'top down'.

The apartheid topic is frequently studied with an emphasis on the role of key individuals, especially Mandela and Biko. What this article does indicate the importance of attempting to measure how the many and not just the few were affected by such a pernicious social, economic and political ideology.