



# SEGREGATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

The myth put about by the South African government during the *apartheid* era was that Africans had only ever occupied those areas ‘reserved’ for them in the Land Act of 1913. White settlers had come into the rest of the supposedly ‘empty’ land and provided rural and urban employment opportunities for those black people willing to work (for low cash wages). As shown in earlier chapters of *History of Africa*, the reality was very different. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century Africans were indeed in occupation (in one form or another) of almost all the land that was to become South Africa. But they were driven off it, or incorporated as ‘squatters’, by a process of conquest or the threat of violence. The areas that were finally ‘reserved’ for them were simply those of densest population that had been most successfully defended during the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Colonial authorities had been forced to recognise that it was not in their own interests to deprive Africans of all the land of South Africa. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was realised that the creation of ‘reserves’ served a number of purposes that were useful to white interests:



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(1) **Security:** the confiscation of all African land would have created a perpetual potential rebel population *within* ‘white South Africa’. The reserves thus relieved the pressure for rebellion.

(2) **Subsidy on labour costs:** it was presumed that African women in the reserves would engage in subsistence agriculture that would provide for the needs of the wider family, especially the young and the elderly; while the ‘economically active’ male population were recruited to work on labour contracts in ‘white South Africa’. Thus men were recruited on what were effectively ‘bachelor wages’ – just enough for a single man’s need, not enough to meet a whole family’s needs.

(3) **Pool of labour:** the areas reserved for Africans were never enough to meet even the subsistence needs of the population confined there. The reserves were thus a pool of ‘surplus’ labour from which contractors knew they could always find recruits as and when they needed, and at the rates dictated by them.

Thus segregation was in essence a form of labour control, and one on which the much-subsidised ‘white economy’ heavily depended.

The Natives Urban Areas Act of 1923 strengthened ‘pass laws’ in all areas of South Africa outside the reserves, and specifically prevented Africans from owning land in urban areas.

The Great Depression of 1929-33 was a serious blow to the white South African economy, impoverishing many rural Afrikaners and driving them into the urban areas in search of work. The government invested heavily in industry and agriculture in order to provide employment for a growing white urban population. The Afrikaner National Party, which was in government at the time, formed an alliance with the other main white party, the South African Party led by Jan Smuts. Together they now had a two-thirds parliamentary majority and could change the constitution. Using this power in 1936, they abolished the Cape's special non-racial franchise which had until now allowed a limited number of black people, if they had sufficient income and/or property ownership, to vote in South Africa's national elections. Black South Africans were now shifted onto a separate electoral role, from which they were allowed to elect three white people to represent them in parliament. At the same time a separate Natives Representative Council was set up onto which chiefs and headmen in the 'reserves' were allowed to appoint representatives, but this was a purely advisory body. Effectively, Africans were removed from direct participation in the national political process. Meanwhile, the Natives Laws Amendment Act (1937) reinforced the 'pass laws' which controlled all African movement in urban areas. Failure to carry one's 'pass', outside of the 'reserves', was now a criminal offence. The pass became an identity document which recorded your 'tribe' [that is, which 'reserve' you could be deported to] and the name and address of your employer. In other words, if you were unemployed, you were not allowed in the urban areas.

During the Second World War, when many white men were away doing military service and employers were desperate for labour, the pass laws were relaxed and there was a huge surge in black urbanisation. After the War, the Afrikaner National Party was easily able to play on white fears of being 'swamped' by blacks in the urban areas, competing for jobs previously reserved for whites and threatening the personal security of whites in their prosperous suburbs. The result: the Afrikaner National Party gained an overall majority in the 1948 election, which provided them with the necessary power to introduce a stronger, more codified system of racial segregation that was known to the world as *apartheid*.

**For reference, see in particular:**

W. Beinart, *Twentieth-Century South Africa* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, OUP, Oxford, 2001),

S. Dubow, *Racial Segregation and the Origins of Apartheid, 1919-36* (Macmillan, Basingstoke and St. Anthony's, Oxford, 1989), and

F. Wilson, *Labour in the South African Gold Mines, 1911-1969* (CUP, Cambridge, 1972)