

History, historians and the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission

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Abstract

Whether or not the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) intended to write history, it certainly engaged with the past while historians were virtually absent. This article therefore sets out to take a closer look at the relationship between history, historians and the TRC. An overview of the literature reveals that historians have examined the TRC from a philosophical perspective and analysed its report as a historical narrative. Although some historians praise the TRC, most of them stand critically towards its epistemology, ethics, methodology and content. In the same way, some historians are inspired by the TRC's alternative way of engaging with the past but others point to the dangers of its stress on a post-apartheid present. Overall, historians seldom explicitly write about or engage with the TRC because they consider it a flawed and even dangerous enterprise. The inaccessibility of the archives also impedes historians from picking up the road map the commission tried to provide. Some historians nevertheless felt inspired by the TRC to launch oral history projects or practice public history. Also, while the combination of history writing and reconciliation is often criticized, some historians claim to have written reconciliation history without violating their historiographical standards. All of this doesn't lead to a simple conclusion with regards to the impact the TRC had – and still does – on history writing, what it means to be a historian and the concept of history in post-apartheid South Africa. What is clear, however, is that the TRC engaged with the past in varying ways and therefore caused historians to approach it in equally diverging ways. This is reason enough to study the relationship between history, the TRC and historians in greater detail.

Keywords: Truth and Reconciliation Commission; History; Historiography; Public history; Philosophy of history; Historians; History and justice.

Introduction

My personal observation on historians and the TRC is that by large they were absent. There may well be reasons for this which in themselves may cast revealing light on the profession.¹

Albert Grundlingh is one of the many historians staffing the history departments of the universities in the new South Africa. Like most of his colleagues, professor Grundlingh witnessed the birth of the new nation approximately nineteen years ago. At that time, however, civil war was looming and one of the main vehicles which emerged from the political negotiations was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The TRC operated between 1995 and 1998 and had the ambitious goal of establishing the truth about the gross human rights violations which took place during apartheid (see Image 1 below).² Furthermore, through (public) hearings, research, reparation payments and the possibility of individual amnesty, the TRC hoped to reconcile both (mostly black/coloured) victims and (mostly white) perpetrators so that they could move beyond thoughts of vengeance. According to the TRC mandate, understanding the past meant:³

To establish as complete a picture as possible – including the antecedents, circumstances, factors and context of such violence as well as the perspectives of the victims and the motives and perspectives of the persons responsible for the commission of the violations, by conducting investigations and holdings hearings.

To achieve these ambitious goals, the TRC was given a wide range of powers and resources, including the ability to search premises, subpoena witnesses and seize evidence.⁴ The TRC produced the first five volumes of its report in 1998 and the final version was handed over to President Thabo Mbeki on March 21st 2003. Meanwhile, the TRC had faced both praise and criticism on an international scale. Indeed, scholars from a wide range of disciplines have

1 E-mail: A Grundlingh (University of Stellenbosch), 31 October 2012.

2 Although the TRC ceased holding hearings in 1998, it went on until 2003 to produce its final report and process all amnesty dossiers.

3 “Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act 34 of 1995” (available at <http://www.justice.gov.za/legislation/acts/1995-034.pdf>, as accessed on 18 June 2013).

4 P Hayner, *Unspeakable truths: Transitional justice and the challenge of truth commissions* (New York, Taylor & Francis, 2011), pp. 27-28.

studied the TRC ever since its conception.⁵ Whether or not the commission managed to reconcile South Africans has become the main question ever since.

Image 1: Members of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission



Dr. Alex Boraine (second from left), deputy chair; Archbishop Desmond Tutu (centre), chair; and Rev. Bongani Finca (right), commissioner—at the commission's first hearing, April 1996, East London, S.Af.

Source: Available at <<http://media-3.web.britannica.com/eb-media/88/137688-004-EC2CD3EB.jpg>>, as accessed on 18 June 2013.

This article will revolve around a different topic altogether and examines the relationship between the TRC, history and historians in South Africa. If historians can be defined as researchers of past events, what does it mean for them to be virtually absent in a commission which investigated the period from March 1st 1960 to May 10 1994? Whereas the effects of the post-apartheid era on historians and historiography have been examined extensively, the impact of the TRC on these subjects remains largely unexplored.⁶ This is regrettable because the South African case could provide insights into the nature of the historical profession in South Africa and beyond. By looking

5 For an excellent bibliographical overview of research on the TRC see A Verdoolaege, "The debate on truth and reconciliation: A survey of literature on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission", *Journal of Language and Politics*, 5(1), 2006, pp. 15–35; T Savage, B Schmid et.al, "Truth commissions and transitional justice: A select bibliography on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission debate", *Journal of Law and Religion*, 16(1), 2001, pp. 73-186.

6 See for example H Stolten, *History making and present day politics: The meaning of collective memory in South Africa* (Uppsala, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2007).

into commentaries and critiques by historians (or at least from a historian's or historiographical perspective) on the commission, this article will engage in the kind of reflection Grundlingh promotes.⁷

The first section will examine the TRC's history writing exercise by looking into two groups of common critiques. The first set of issues will be more of an epistemological and ethical nature and the second set will revolve more around content and methodology. Section Two will proceed by looking at the TRC from a more philosophical perspective: how does the TRC relate to the past, present and future of South Africa and how does it reflect different ways of engaging with the past? Section Three will then look into the legacy of the TRC by considering three topics: the TRC archives, the impact of the TRC on the historiographical agenda and the nature of the historical profession in South Africa. The closing section of this article will summarize the findings and consider if the TRC has had a significant impact – and still does – on historiography, what it means to be a historian and the concept of history in post-apartheid South Africa.

The TRC's history writing exercise: A critical evaluation⁸

The commission never perceived itself as taking on the kind of academic or historical brief which many of its critics have ascribed to it... The furthest thing from the minds of those involved in writing the Report was the need to write an academic history.⁹

Before criticizing the TRC's history writing exercise, one needs to note that it never claimed to mirror academic historiography nor wrote its report for the academic community. The report explicitly states that "it is not the Commission's task to write the history of this country".¹⁰ Furthermore, historian and previous member of the Research Department Janet Cherry

7 It should be noted that the bulk of the authors cited in this article are not historians but social-scientists from a wide range of disciplines commentating on the commission. This is in itself a revealing fact and tells us something about the involvement of historians in the TRC as well as about their attitude towards it. It is the opinion of the author, however, that these critiques are shared by historians in South Africa and beyond or that they are at least applicable to any scholar with a historical perspective.

8 While this section is divided into two subsections addressing different critiques, this division should be seen as somewhat artificial seeing as epistemology, ethics, methodology and content naturally relate to each other.

9 C Villa-Vicencio (Head of the TRC Research Department), "On the limitations of academic history: The quest for truth demands both more and less", J Wilmot & L Van de Vijver, *After TRC: Reflections on truth and reconciliation in South Africa* (Athens (OH), Ohio University Press, 2001), pp. 24, 31.

10 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, *Report*, 5, p. 257. The TRC report is integrally available at <http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/report/>, as accessed on 18 June 2013.

notes that the pressure of deadlines, the lack of time and the fact that some people were asked to write about topics they were unfamiliar with, influenced the quality of the report to an extent which can hardly be underestimated.¹¹ Authors were also forced to drop or summarize context and analysis because of the limited space available in the report for certain topics.¹² Many within the TRC therefore considered the report to be released prematurely. The following should therefore be approached with Cherry's preliminary comment in mind.

Nevertheless, the report resembles a historical narrative and mentions some form of consultation with "academic historians" as well as its task to "provide an understanding of the historical context".¹³ Historians or history writing are rarely mentioned elsewhere in the report. Indeed, the report only notes that "a range of scholars" participated in the Research Department.¹⁴ Had there been more clarity on what the commission was to write, who was to write it and what methodology had to be used, a lot of criticism could have been avoided.¹⁵ This lack of transparency and its apparent effects in the report led historians to deem the TRC's history writing exercise as essentially flawed.¹⁶ It is important to note, however, that the people in charge of writing the report (mostly working in the Research Department) were aware of its inevitable shortcomings and accepted criticism and the need for further research.¹⁷

The material will be of great value to scholars, journalists and others researching our history... The report that follows tries to provide... a road map to those who wish to travel into our past. It is not and cannot be the whole story... Others will inevitably critique this perspective - as indeed they must... Our understanding of history must accommodate all interpretations of the past. If we fail in this regard, we will fail to be a nation.

The third section of this article will evaluate whether historians have made use of this road map. However, the fact that the TRC openly invites criticism should be reason enough to examine its epistemology, ethics, methodology and content, especially for those (historians) wishing to make use of the road map.

11 J Cherry, J Daniel & M Fullard, "Researching the 'truth': A view from inside the Truth and Reconciliation Commission", D Posel & G Simpson, *Commissioning the past: Understanding South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University Press, 2002), pp. 27-29.

12 J Cherry, J Daniel et.al, "Researching the 'truth'...", D Posel & G Simpson, *Commissioning the past...*, pp. 28-29.

13 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, *Report*, 5, p. 374.

14 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, *Report*, 5, p. 376.

15 J Cherry, J Daniel et.al, "Researching the 'truth'...", D Posel & G Simpson, *Commissioning the past...*, p. 34.

16 M Fullard & N Rousseau, "Uncertain borders: The TRC and the (un)making of public myths", *Kronos*, 34(1), 2008, p. 215.

17 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, *Report*, 1, pp. 1-2.

Epistemology and ethics: “‘Truth’ and ‘the beast of the past’”¹⁸

Historical truth... cannot be ‘bottled’ (except in the realm of myth) and ‘administered’ as contemporary ‘medicine’ of the wounds of the past.¹⁹

Truth is both a powerful and dangerous concept. In that regard, Deborah Posel stresses the complex relationship any truth commission will face with one of their fundamental concepts:²⁰

Since the 1980s — exactly contiguous with the waves of postmodern scepticism — we have witnessed renewed global enthusiasm for, and confidence in, the idea of truth as the basis of justice and stability... Truth commissions are therefore charged with having to redeem the modern confidence in the idea of truth as the basis of a morally robust life, in the very act of acknowledging the past excesses — and therefore attendant dangers — of such a project.

Truth commissions thus have to respect both subjective and objective forms of truth without descending into epistemological chaos. Whereas some commissions have ignored this dilemma by sticking to positivistic notions of truth, the TRC faced this issue head-on. Although the TRC produced an authoritative account of the past which it described as objective, the report recognized at the same time that other readings were possible and that it built its narrative mostly on personal testimonies.²¹ By defining multiple “truths” and examining different perspectives, however, the TRC would open itself up to both praise and criticism.

On a positive note, Colleen Scott argues that the TRC approached reality not only by focusing on facts like a court of law but also by considering “emotional truth” as well as by putting a “human face on all those who suffered and continue to suffer”.²² The TRC refers to this as “personal truth” because it expresses the painful memories of the victims in their own words.²³ On the other hand, the TRC also discerns a “social truth” established through dialogue between people with different views.²⁴ Similarly, for Wilhelm

18 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, *Report*, 1, p. 22.

19 S Field, “Memory, the TRC and the significance of oral history in post-apartheid South Africa” (Paper, Conference: The TRC: Commissioning the past, Johannesburg, June 1999), p. 7.

20 D Posel, “History as confession: The case of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission”, *Public Culture*, 20(1), 2008, pp. 125, 127.

21 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, *Report*, 1, p. 112.

22 C Scott, “Combating myth and building reality”, C Villa-Vicencio & W Verwoerd, *Looking back, reaching forward: Reflections on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa* (Cape Town, University of Cape Town Press, 2000), p. 108.

23 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, *Report*, 1, pp. 112-113.

24 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, *Report*, 1, pp. 113-114.

Verwoerd, the TRC process resulted in a “moral truth” which was necessary to nurture a culture of human rights.²⁵ Vice-chair of the TRC Alex Boraine refers to this process as “healing truth” which results in “restorative truth” and reconciliation.²⁶ Yet, Boraine maintains that the TRC searched for “forensic truth” when examining the human rights violations.²⁷ Jakobus Du Pisani points out that victims would indeed prefer the TRC’s insistence on objective truth with regards to the examination of their traumatic experiences.²⁸

For some, however, this “wobbly, poorly constructed conceptual grid” of truths might render the concept void of meaning.²⁹ Historian Colin Bundy argues that although the TRC considered knowledge of the past subjective and constantly changing, a positivistic epistemology characterizes most sections and not only those on human rights violations.³⁰ In that regard, some hold the view that the report wished to produce a reconciliatory narrative in a positivistic language which stood above all the conflicting perspectives to prevent overexposing the past.³¹ It is a fact that truth commissions are faced with the arduous task of writing an account of the past acceptable for all groups previously in conflict in that same society.³² For Villa-Vicencio then, it is clear that “elitist experts” (i.e. historians) would only aim at producing an “authoritative version of the truth” and needlessly complicate matters.³³ This bias against historians will be dealt with further in the next section.

Although the debate on truth will most likely continue, the TRC clearly was not solely concerned with factual truth. The TRC report is a history of human suffering and hopes to engage South Africans in ethical and emotional reflection on their past.³⁴ Historians like Charles Maier dislike the idea of the

25 W Verwoerd, “Towards the recognition of our past injustices”, C Villa-Vicencio & W Verwoerd, *Looking back, reaching forward...*, pp. 155, 164.

26 A Boraine, “Truth and reconciliation in South Africa: the third way”, D Thomson & R Rotberg, *Truth versus justice: The morality of truth commissions* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 152. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, *Report*, 1, p. 114.

27 A Boraine, “Truth and reconciliation in South Africa...”, D Thomson & R Rotberg, *Truth versus justice...*, p. 151.

28 J Du Pisani, “Ná die Waarheids- en Versoeningskommissie: Uitdagings aan die historikus in ‘n demokratiese Suid-Afrika”, *Tydskrif vir Geesteswetenskappe*, 47(1), 2007, p. 3; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, *Report*, 1, p. 161.

29 D Posel, “The TRC report: What kind of history? What kind of truth?”, D Posel & G Simpson, *Commissioning the past...*, p. 155.

30 C Bundy, “The beast of the past: History and the TRC”, J Wilmot & L Van de Vijver, *Afier TRC: Reflections on Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa* (Athens (OH), Ohio University Press, 2001), p. 14.

31 D Posel, “The TRC Report...”, D Posel & G Simpson, *Commissioning the past...*, pp. 150-152.

32 D Posel, “History-writing...”, *Public Culture*, 20(1), 2008, pp. 120-121.

33 C Villa-Vicencio & W Verwoerd, “Constructing a report: Writing up the truth”, D Thomson & R Rotberg, *Truth versus justice...*, p. 289.

34 D Posel, “History-writing...”, *Public Culture*, 20(1), 2008, p. 128.

TRC report containing (implicit) lessons because its focus on reconciliation might have caused distortion. For example, according to Posel the report “reads less as a history, more as a moral narrative about the fact of wrongdoing across the political spectrum, spawned by the overriding evil of the apartheid system”.³⁵ Like Bundy and Posel, Maier wants truth commissions to provide information and leave the writing of narratives to historians because the latter do not promise “either justice or democracy”.³⁶ According to André Du Toit then, historians were largely absent within the TRC precisely because they pursued factual truth and did not want to promote reconciliation.³⁷

In its defence, the TRC held even-handedness and impartiality as one of its core principles, the bulk of the commission was occupying itself with collecting and processing data and the report only devotes a small number of pages on explicit reconciliation.³⁸ Furthermore, seeing the commission as a tool to legitimize the post-apartheid state ignores that it was critical of the African National Congress (ANC).³⁹ Indeed, the ANC tried (and failed) to prevent the report from getting released because it advanced the view that the ANC fought a “just war”, at times, by “unjust means”.⁴⁰ Then again, Lars Buur found that every time the report noted violations on the part of the ANC, it also mentioned the apartheid state or the “natural reaction of being threatened” as its causes.⁴¹

In any case, the issue remains that learning lessons from the past implies judging it and that this is something of which (especially contemporary) historians are trained to disapprove. According to Maier then, historians prefer the concept of accountability to that of judgment.⁴² Indeed, Grundlingh argues that historians were virtually absent in the TRC precisely because they tend to complicate notions of guilt and often move away from simple yes or no answers.⁴³ It might be troubling for historians then, that some sections

35 D Posel, “The TRC Report...”, D Posel & G Simpson, *Commissioning the past...*, p. 148.

36 C Maier, “Doing history, doing justice: The narrative of the historian and of the truth commission”, D Thomson & R Rotberg, *Truth versus justice...*, p. 273.

37 A Du Toit, “The moral foundations of the South African TRC: Truth as acknowledgment and justice as recognition”, D Thomson & R Rotberg, *Truth versus justice...*, pp. 132-133.

38 M Fullard & N Rousseau, “Uncertain borders...”, *Kronos*, 34(1), 2008, p. 224.

39 M Fullard & N Rousseau, “Uncertain borders...”, *Kronos*, 34(1), 2008, p. 218.

40 C Scott, “Combating myth and building reality”, C Villa-Vicencio & W Verwoerd, *Looking back, reaching forward...*, p. 112.

41 L Buur, “Makings findings for the future: Representational order and redemption in the work of the TRC”, *South African Journal Of Philosophy*, 20(1), 2001, p. 35.

42 C Maier, “Doing history, doing justice...”, D Thomson & R Rotberg, *Truth versus justice...*, p. 270.

43 A Grundlingh, “Herhistoriseren en herposisionering: Perspektiewe op aspekte van geskiedsbeoefening in hedendaags Suid Afrika”, *Historia*, 46(2), 2001, p. 319.

of the report explicitly judge the past or hold “some essential lessons for the future of the people”.⁴⁴ This controversial statement is a good example:⁴⁵

Those who fought against the system of apartheid were clearly fighting for a just cause, and those who sought to uphold and sustain apartheid cannot be morally equated with those who sought to remove and oppose it.

As with the debate on truth, the discussion on the relationship between reconciliation and historians remains pertinent among South African historians today (see below). Some, however, regret that the reconciliation-critique is the most popular form of criticism among historians because it oversimplifies the work of the TRC and diverts attention away from particular methodological issues and actual content.⁴⁶ As shall be pointed out below, some authors, however, did comment on the TRC (report) in this fashion. Examining these critiques is crucial in order to get a better understanding of the attitude of historians towards the TRC.

Methodological issues and content: Social scientific criticism

Evidence and information

One of the strengths of the TRC was that it was backed by the government and therefore had greater access to information than historians generally do.⁴⁷ Furthermore, by exchanging truth for amnesty, a larger amount of historical information has been uncovered and a greater extent of myths debunked than had blanket amnesty been approved.⁴⁸ That is not to say, however, that the commission could access all required information. Security forces and the army, for example, were notoriously reluctant to provide information.⁴⁹ Furthermore, the TRC archives remain largely off-limits to date (see below). Nevertheless, for many the strongest feature of the TRC remains that it

44 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, *Report*, 1, p. 4.

45 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, *Report*, 1, p. 67.

46 M Fullard & N Rousseau, “Uncertain borders...”, *Kronos*, 34(1), 2008, pp. 216-217.

47 D Posel, “The TRC Report...”, D Posel & G Simpson, *Commissioning the past...*, p. 149.

48 P Hayner, “Same species, different animal: How South Africa compares to truth commissions worldwide”, C Villa-Vicencio & W Verwoerd, *Looking back, reaching forward...*, pp. 27-29, 36. As a compromise between blanket amnesty and Nuremberg-type trials, individual amnesty would be granted only if the crimes involved were “politically motivated” and if the individual (excluding corporations and institutions) in question would appear at public hearings where they would disclose all information required and be subjected to questioning by victims and commissioners.

49 P Pigou, “False promises and wasted opportunities?: Inside South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission”, D Posel & G Simpson, *Commissioning the past...*, pp. 56-57.

prevented information from being forgotten and presented new information from a wide variety of sources.⁵⁰

In that regard, historians recognize that the TRC also gathered a lot of oral testimonies. However, not all of the information gathered during the hearings is necessarily trustworthy. For example, the TRC could be criticized for using testimonies and personal memories as evidence. The evidence-debate was especially fierce when dealing with the political motive requirement for amnesty. South African law defines an offense political if “it is committed under the orders of, or in furtherance of the goals of, a well-established political organization”.⁵¹ This means that in the end, someone can always be held accountable if they admit to have given the order. The TRC, however, often failed to get officials to admit to this act. For Grundlingh, this sort of evidence was poorly handled because historians were not given as prominent a role in the commission as lawyers and theologians. He argues that historians scrutinize testimonies to a greater extent than most professions, have a greater need for contextualization than those who wrote the report and are more reluctant to make the same kind of comparisons as the TRC.⁵²

Indeed, “history writing” was considered by most within the commission as hampering “the need for accountability and digging up the truth”.⁵³ Villa-Vicencio states that it is precisely the absence of historians which enabled the creation of “a pluralistic public account, generated by diverse individuals telling their own stories”.⁵⁴ Paradoxically then, historians seem to have been cast aside because they are both not enough and too much concerned with digging up the truth. Perhaps this explains why, according to Cherry, “both the lawyers and the historians shuddered at some of the sections of the report written by the opposite camp”.⁵⁵ Indeed, lawyers deplored the lack of empirical research and scrutiny while handling the evidence, while the historians complained that complexity and nuance were often lost because of the focus on “fact-finding”.⁵⁶

50 W Verwoerd, “Towards the recognition of our past injustices”, C Villa-Vicencio & W Verwoerd, *Looking back, reaching forward...*, p. 164.

51 R Slye, “Justice and amnesty”, C Villa-Vicencio & W Verwoerd, *Looking back, reaching forward...*, p. 179.

52 A Grundlingh, “Herhistorisering en herposisionering...”, *Historia*, 46(2), 2001, p. 319.

53 M Fullard & N Rousseau, “Uncertain borders...”, *Kronos*, 34(1), 2008, p. 234.

54 C Villa-Vicencio & W Verwoerd, “Constructing a report...”, D Thomson & R Rotberg, *Truth versus justice...*, p. 289.

55 J Cherry, J Daniel et.al, “Researching the ‘truth’...”, D Posel & G Simpson, *Commissioning the past...* (Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University Press, 2002), p. 23.

56 J Cherry, J Daniel et.al, “Researching the ‘truth’...”, D Posel & G Simpson, *Commissioning the past...* (Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University Press, 2002), p. 23.

Explaining the past: Causal analysis

Besides gathering evidence, the TRC was also mandated to explain the “historical, systemic, institutional and personal causes and motives for gross violations of human rights”.⁵⁷ It has already been pointed out that there was never a clear formulation of about which the TRC was to write or how it was to do so. Consequently, the TRC never really adhered to one methodology. Indeed, Cherry notes that most researchers within the TRC used an “often inadequate” interdisciplinary approach, but that the debate on methodology never stopped.⁵⁸ As Bundy points out, both the TRC and historians asked the same questions about truth, evidence, causality and explanation and it is therefore not surprising it considered historical approaches as well.⁵⁹ However, Posel notes that although historians might grapple with the same issues, they would not have to keep a complex mandate in mind.⁶⁰

Maybe it was the ambiguous mandate which led some members of the Research Department to see it as their task to write a “revisionist history”, giving voice to the previously voiceless.⁶¹ According to Du Toit, however, radical historians considered socio-economic change to be more important than symbolic reconciliation and therefore had trouble fitting in to the TRC mentality:⁶²

The radical model of historical scholarship... sought to harness the rigorous and critical study of the past to the ends of national liberation, human emancipation, and social justice. The TRC's dealing with past atrocities also had forward-looking functions, but these were concerned with the different objectives of post-conflict reconciliation and restorative justice. This made it difficult, if not impossible, for radical historians to participate in the TRC process itself.

The fact that radical historiography went into a crisis as the TRC was setting up (see below) did not help either and although there was never full clarity concerning methodology, “the dream of producing a radical new history

57 C Villa-Vicencio, “Introduction. What a truth commission can and cannot achieve”, C Villa-Vicencio & F Du Toit, *Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: 10 years on* (Claremont, New Africa Books Ltd, 2007), p. 2.

58 J Cherry, J Daniel et.al, “Researching the ‘truth’...”, D Posel & G Simpson, *Commissioning the past...* (Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University Press, 2002), p. 24.

59 C Bundy, “The beast of the past...”, J Wilmot & L Van de Vijver, *After TRC...*, p. 10.

60 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, *Report*, 1, p. 153

61 J Cherry, J Daniel et.al, “Researching the ‘truth’...”, D Posel & G Simpson, *Commissioning the past...* (Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University Press, 2002), pp. 18-19.

62 A Du Toit, “The owl of Minerva and the ironic fate of the progressive praxis of radical historiography in post-apartheid South Africa”, *History & Theory*, 49(2), 2010, p. 277.

[soon] began to falter” according to Cherry.⁶³ “Historical analysis” would be left to the reader and commissioners were told to stick to “empirical facts”.⁶⁴ However, problems soon surfaced after some researchers “reluctantly” changed style. For example, researchers had trouble narrating events for which no TRC statements were at hand:⁶⁵

The TRC was confronted by numerous and varied versions of the past, yet exactly how the TRC ‘managed or crafted into a coherent form the different versions of the truth it uncovered’ is left to conjecture... How and by whom were decisions taken about inclusion or exclusion of facts, analyses, etc?

This question proves remarkably difficult to answer. For example, the report maintains that the Research Department was to proceed along the “dialectical encounter between primary and secondary material”.⁶⁶ However, the use of secondary literature varied between the regional offices and this is reflected in their respective sections in the report.⁶⁷

Some researchers complain that there was simply no time for content management to take place and that this explains the poor link between the several chapters. Indeed, Posel also noticed the “rather disconnected compilation of discrete chunks of information” and that the report lacks “an attempt to integrate and synthesize these into a unified analysis”.⁶⁸ By analytically dividing the different chapters, the report failed to produce a powerful historical explanation. In that regard, Bundy notes that the TRC oddly disassociates the specific cases in the chapters on apartheid from the motives and causes section, rendering the link between them unclear.⁶⁹ Lastly, Posel argues that while mentioning Max Weber’s “ideal types” might have boosted the report’s academic credence, the Weberian method was wrongfully applied because individual cases couldn’t be explained with general inductions and vice versa.⁷⁰ For some, all of this makes the report read like a largely descriptive account, underlining its emphasis on factual truth.

63 J Cherry, J Daniel et.al, “Researching the ‘truth’...”, D Posel & G Simpson, *Commissioning the past...*, p. 19.

64 J Cherry, J Daniel et.al, “Researching the ‘truth’...”, D Posel & G Simpson, *Commissioning the past...*, p. 20.

65 K Mooney, N Niefertagdien et.al, “The TRC: Commissioning the past”, *African Studies*, 58(2), 1999, p. 214.

66 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, *Report*, 1, pp. 376, 379.

67 J Cherry, J Daniel et.al, “Researching the ‘truth’...”, D Posel & G Simpson, *Commissioning the past...*, p. 22.

68 D Posel, “The TRC Report...”, D Posel & G Simpson, *Commissioning the past...*, p. 160.

69 C Bundy, “The beast of the past...”, J Wilmot & L Van de Vijver, *After TRC...*, p. 14.

70 D Posel, “The TRC Report...”, D Posel & G Simpson, *Commissioning the past...*, p. 159.

Explaining the past: Inclusion and exclusion

As a research endeavour, the TRC's explanation strategy implied that decisions were made as to what to include and exclude. The consequences of such choices can be illustrated in the way the report analysed apartheid. Although researching apartheid had never been officially mandated, people like Posel find it striking that the TRC report "sheds remarkably little light on apartheid".⁷¹ According to Bundy, the commission failed to make use of the extensive research and historiographical debate on apartheid and reduced its complexity to racism.⁷² Grundlingh concurs that analysing apartheid solely in terms of human rights abuses prevents researchers from moving beyond an "oppositional framework" of victim and perpetrator.⁷³ The TRC also never addressed that apartheid is related to the history of racial discrimination dating back to early colonial times. While the report did claim that racism had been the motor of South African history, it failed to explain why.⁷⁴ Posel then wonders how South Africans are to transcend racism if the report fails to explain how it was produced and reproduced.⁷⁵

Furthermore, Mahmood Mamdani criticizes the report for producing a "diminished truth" because it failed to point out that apartheid not only tried to keep itself alive but also actively dispossessed people of their livelihood.⁷⁶ The issue of forced removals and everyday discrimination in general, for example, remained outside of the scope of the commission.⁷⁷ Although the TRC tried to address these topics by holding a series of institution-focused hearings dealing with the role of the church, press, business sector and so forth, these did not meet expectations.⁷⁸ All of this caused the TRC to focus only on a certain minority of victims (political activists) and perpetrators (state-agents) in certain parts of the country, causing others to slide into "social amnesia".⁷⁹ Indeed, people in local communities felt that the TRC's focus on

71 D Posel, "The TRC Report...", D Posel & G Simpson, *Commissioning the past...*, p. 163.

72 C Bundy, "The beast of the past...", J Wilmot & L Van de Vijver, *After TRC...*, p. 17.

73 A Grundlingh, "Herhistoriseren en herpositionering...", *Historia*, 46(2), 2001, pp. 318, 319.

74 D Posel, "The TRC Report...", D Posel & G Simpson, *Commissioning the past...*, p. 166.

75 D Posel, "The TRC Report...", D Posel & G Simpson, *Commissioning the past...*, p. 168.

76 M Mamdani, "A diminished truth", J Wilmot & L Van de Vijver, *After TRC: Reflections on truth and reconciliation in South Africa* (Athens, OH, Ohio University Press, 2001), p. 59.

77 M Mamdani, "A diminished truth", J Wilmot & L Van de Vijver, *After TRC...*, pp. 59-61; M Fullard & N Rousseau, "Uncertain borders...", *Kronos*, 34(1), 2008, p. 217.

78 P Hayner, "Same species, different animal...", C Villa-Vicencio & W Verwoerd, *Looking back, reaching forward...*, p. 38.

79 M Mamdani, "A diminished truth", J Wilmot & L Van de Vijver, *After TRC...*, p. 59.

generalizations impeded accounts for individual liability.⁸⁰ The gross human rights violations caused by the apartheid regime outside of South Africa are probably the biggest omission from the report in this regard.⁸¹

This shows how the TRC also (in)directly decided what was irrelevant. Indeed, facing the problem of relating the individual statements with the broader picture that the report tried to establish and vice versa, the TRC adopted an “interpretative grid” to codify testimonies.⁸² According to Buur, the commission “retrospectively re-framed and re-ordered” testimonies by deconstructing them in terms which had to fit the larger scheme of nation-building.⁸³ Annelies Verdoolaege also noticed that the TRC’s “reconciliation discourse” was dominant in the recorded testimonies.⁸⁴ On an important note, this “interpretative grid” caused only some “representative samples” to be selected as human rights violations, leaving many cases unentitled to reparations.⁸⁵ One might argue that if the socio-economic legacy of apartheid makes up one of the biggest challenges for South Africa today, the TRC’s decision not to bother itself with these victims was its biggest flaw.⁸⁶ Indeed, some historians have joined the Commission on Restitution of Land Rights (CRLR) precisely to help those left out of the TRC report.⁸⁷

The TRC and the philosophy of history

The TRC between past, present and future

Many note a general disinterest in the past and an obsession with the future in the new South Africa.⁸⁸ Some consider the TRC’s imposition that the past

80 H Van der Merwe, “National narrative versus local truths: The truth and reconciliation’s engagement with Duduza”, D Posel & G Simpson, *Commissioning the past...*, p. 214.

81 J Cherry, J Daniel et.al, “Researching the ‘truth’...”, D Posel & G Simpson, *Commissioning the past...*, p. 32.

82 L Buur, “Monumental historical memory: Managing truth in the everyday work of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission”, D Posel & G Simpson, *Commissioning the past...*, pp. 76, 78.

83 L Buur, “Monumental historical memory...”, D Posel & G Simpson, *Commissioning the past...*, pp. 75-76, 80.

84 A Verdoolaege, “Representing apartheid trauma: The archive of the TRC victim hearings”, S Gibson & S Mollan, *Representations of peace and conflict* (Houndmills, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 288, 297-304.

85 L Buur, “Monumental historical memory...”, D Posel & G Simpson, *Commissioning the past...*, pp. 78, 84.

86 M Fullard & N Rousseau, “Uncertain borders...”, *Kronos*, 34(1), 2008, p. 238.

87 A Bohlin, “Claiming land and making memory: Engaging with the past in land restitution”, H Stolten, *History making and present day politics, the meaning of collective memory in South Africa* (Uppsala, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2007), pp. 114-115, 119.

88 A Copley, “Does social history have a future? The ending of apartheid and recent trends in South African historiography”, *Journal Of Southern African Studies*, 27(3), 2001, p. 617.

should be forgiven as a main cause for this development.⁸⁹ Brent Harris, for example, argues that the TRC's objective was not to reinterpret or revisit the past, but to exhume and rebury it.⁹⁰ In the same spirit, Heidi Grunebaum-Ralph notes that as much as victims were urged to tell their stories, they were at the same time asked to forgive (and forget).⁹¹ As TRC Commissioner Glenda Wildschut put it:⁹²

[A]s Commissioners we had to navigate the difficult task of building a bridge between the past and the present, a link that fully acknowledged the harm that had occurred during the reign of apartheid, and the new society that embraced equality.

Many South Africans - especially those faced with the country's notorious socio-economic inequality - consider the idea of a post-apartheid present a bitter joke and find themselves standing at the other side of the bridge.⁹³ Grunebaum-Ralph also scrutinizes the idea of a temporal bridge:⁹⁴

Where do the fault lines that separate the pasts from the invisible moments of the present lie? What historiographical and commemorative practices are located along these arbitrary punctuations of continuity?

According to David Thelen, there is a danger in authoritative institutions like the TRC which (in)directly proclaim that the past is over and that issues of accountability are settled.⁹⁵ To be clear, the fact that the TRC stresses the need to break with apartheid is not the problem. The fact that it downplays apartheid's influence on the present is, however, problematic. In that regard, Berber Bevernage argues that the TRC promoted the notion of "irreversible historical time", emphasizing a clear break between past and present.⁹⁶ As

89 K Asmal, "Foreword", S Jeppie, *Toward new histories for South Africa: On the place of the past in our present* (Menlo Park, Juta Gariep, 2004), x. C Bundy, "New nation, new history? Constructing the past in post-apartheid South Africa", H Solten, *History making and present day politics, the meaning of collective memory in South Africa* (Uppsala, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2007), p. 75.

90 B Harris, "The archive, public history and the essential truth: The TRC reading the past", C Hamilton, V Harris et.al, *Refiguring the archive* (Dordrecht, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), p. 162.

91 H Grunebaum-Ralph, "Re-placing pasts, forgetting presents: Narrative, place, and memory in the time of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission," *Research In African Literatures*, 32(3), 2001, p. 199.

92 G Wildschut, "Some lessons for education to be learned from the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission", *Adult Education And Development*, 68 (2007) (available at http://www.iiz-dvv.de/index.php?article_id=162&clang=1, as accessed on 18 June 2013).

93 H Grunebaum-Ralph, "Re-placing pasts, forgetting presents...", *Research In African Literatures*, 32(3), 2001, p. 201.

94 H Grunebaum-Ralph, "Re-placing pasts, forgetting presents...", *Research In African Literatures*, 32(3), 2001, p. 203.

95 D Thelen, "How the Truth and Reconciliation Commission challenges the ways we use history", *South African Historical Journal*, 47(1), 2002, p. 168.

96 B Bevernage, *History, memory, and state-sponsored violence* (New York, Routledge, 2012), p. 49.

a reaction, some emphasize the past to be still “in” the present. Bevernage’s research focused on the Khulumani Support Group who opposes the notion of irreversible historical time and the lack of victim and community reparations.⁹⁷ They maintain that the government failed to adequately address the “unfinished business” of the TRC and that only the victims can proclaim the past to be over.⁹⁸ Another good illustration is the Western Cape Action Tour Project, an organization which attempts to show how some TRC statements are wrong and how it failed to address the direct causal link between apartheid and present-day socio-economic inequalities in townships around Cape Town.⁹⁹ These organizations illustrate how the TRC’s temporal divide is not just a theoretical issue.

The TRC and the past: Alternative interpretations

The TRC is... part of how we think about and process history.¹⁰⁰

Whereas some have argued that TRC caused a turning away from history, other scholars maintain that the commission precisely revived a public interest in history and brought discussions about evidence, truth, agency and apartheid into the public domain.¹⁰¹ Indeed, the TRC’s intense media coverage enabled South Africans to reflect about their past on a daily basis, on a scale no historian could ever have achieved. These alternative uses of history, however, are often dismissed by historians according to Thelen. This is regretful for him because the TRC’s focus on individual narratives rather than structural analysis (see above) can also be seen in a positive light. For Thelen then, individuals testifying for the commission wanted to “re-inhabit” the past and did not look for a historical explanation.¹⁰² In the same spirit, Aletta Norval argues that victims wanted to re-experience past traumas through

97 B Bevernage, *History, memory...*, p. 61.

98 B Bevernage, *History, memory...*, p. 64.

99 H Grunebaum-Ralph, “Re-placing pasts, forgetting presents...”, *Research In African Literatures*, 32(3), 2001, p. 203.

100 V Harris, R Ally et.al, “Archives,” C Villa-Vicencio & F Du Toit, *Truth and reconciliation in South Africa: 10 years on* (Claremont, New Africa Books (Pty) Ltd, 2007), p. 66.

101 J Du Pisani, “Ná die Waarheids- en Versoeningskommissie...”, *Tydskrif Vir Geesteswetenskappe*, 47(1), 2007, p. 2.

102 D Thelen, “How the Truth and Reconciliation Commission...”, *South African Historical Journal*, 47(1), 2002, p. 169.

“memory-work”, thereby giving them the ability to re-interpret them in a different light.¹⁰³

For Norval, remembering the past through memory-work is crucial to reconciliation and not opposed to it. Simply revealing what happened is not enough and memories need to be publicly recognized if South Africa wants to reconcile, even if that means accepting different versions of truths (see above):¹⁰⁴

The past is reworked so as to enable us to live in the present and construct a future... Change is brought about, not by appealing to ‘reality’, as if it existed unmediated, but by changing the very framing of that reality... To ‘hear’ the truth we have to be able to unlearn almost everything we think we ‘know’.

South Africans were both mentally and physically separated during apartheid and the TRC can create “collective memories”, enable “collective mourning” and shape the new national identity.¹⁰⁵ At the same time, a compromise needs to be found between dwelling too much on the past and getting enough closure. For example, the National Party refused to appear before the TRC on the grounds that if South Africans truly believed in reconciliation, they “shouldn’t dwell on the past [and] let bygones be bygones”.¹⁰⁶ According to Norval then, many key officials still need to engage in memory-work.

Although Norval maintains that the TRC “does not determine what it is that should be commemorated”, one should also note that, according to Gary Baines, “if ordinary voices do not fit the dominant narrative, they are silenced and exit the space of public memory”.¹⁰⁷ The important effects of inclusion and exclusion have been mentioned before. So, although Thelen shows how the TRC “could lead us to use history more actively, more empathetically”, this section has hopefully also pointed out that there are certain dangers in doing this.¹⁰⁸ These pitfalls should be kept in mind when dealing with the legacy of the TRC in the next section.

103 A Norval, “Truth and reconciliation: The birth of the present and the reworking of history”, *Journal Of Southern African Studies*, 25(3), 1999, p. 500.

104 A Norval “Truth and reconciliation...”, *Journal Of Southern African Studies*, 25(3), 1999, p. 514.

105 P Duvenage, “The politics of memory and forgetting after auschwitz and apartheid”, *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 25(3), 1999, pp. 11-12.

106 A Norval, “Memory, identity and the (im)possibility of reconciliation: The work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa”, *Constellations*, 5(2), 1998, p. 256-257.

107 A Norval, “Memory, identity...”, *Constellations*, 5(2), 1998, p. 258; G Baines, “The politics of public history in post-apartheid South Africa”, H Stolten, *History making and present day politics, the meaning of collective memory in South Africa* (Uppsala, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2007), p. 181.

108 D Thelen, “How the Truth and Reconciliation Commission...”, *South African Historical Journal*, 47(1), 2002, p. 190.

The legacy of the TRC archives and final report: Closing the books on the past or new paths for research?

The TRC archives: The locked treasure chest

The great contribution of the Commission may lie in the wealth of documentary material it will make available to future historians.¹⁰⁹
- Mary Burton (TRC Commissioner)

Considering the wealth of information it would provide, it is not surprising that there have been great expectations with regards to the TRC archive ever since its conception. Verne Harris, director of the South African History Archive (SAHA), notes that the TRC “engaged archive, rescued archive, created archive [and] refigured archive”.¹¹⁰ At the same time, the TRC recognized that the destruction of documents after apartheid hampered its functioning more than anything else and that not all of their audit requests had been approved.¹¹¹ In that regard, most military and intelligence records continue to remain off limits.¹¹² Except for the records of the Reparations and Rehabilitations Committee and the victim database, the full TRC archive is housed at the National Archives in Pretoria, although it remains unprocessed and virtually inaccessible to the public.¹¹³ Furthermore, certain documents remained in the hands of commissioners, the Ministry of Intelligence, the President’s Fund and the Department of Justice.¹¹⁴ Finally, recommendations to erect “centres of memory” and gather further information through oral history projects haven’t been put into practice.¹¹⁵

The Department of Justice denied full access due to “safety reasons concerning the people involved” and because this would constitute a transgression of

109 M Fullard & N Rousseau, “Uncertain borders...”, *Kronos*, 34(1), 2008, p. 235.

110 V Harris, R Ally et.al, “Archives,” C Villa-Vicencio & F Du Toit, *Truth and reconciliation in South Africa...*, p. 53.

111 C Bundy, “The beast of the past...”, J Wilmot & L Van de Vijver, *After TRC...*, p. 16. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, *Report*, 1, pp. 201-243. P Pigou, “Accessing the records of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission”, K Allan, *Paper wars: Access to information in South Africa* (Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 2009), p. 35.

112 V Harris, R Ally et.al, “Archives,” C Villa-Vicencio & F Du Toit, *Truth and reconciliation in South Africa...*, p. 55.

113 P Pigou, “Accessing the records...”, K Allan, *Paper wars...*, p. 18. For an overview of TRC material currently (available at http://www.saha.org.za/collections/trc_collections.htm, as accessed on 18 June 2013); The Department of Justice also put some document online (available at <http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/>), as accessed on 18 June 2013).

114 V Harris, R Ally et.al, “Archives,” C Villa-Vicencio & F Du Toit, *Truth and reconciliation in South Africa...*, p. 55; C Bundy, “The beast of the past...”, J Wilmot & L Van de Vijver, *After TRC...*, p. 16.

115 V Harris, R Ally et.al, “Archives,” C Villa-Vicencio & F Du Toit, *Truth and reconciliation in South Africa...*, pp. 56-57.

privacy.¹¹⁶ In that regard, the TRC archive contains a list of informers and much information was given to the commission confidentially.¹¹⁷ Although SAHA has been in contact with the designers of the victim database who explained to them methods of filtering individual information when accessing the databases of the TRC, the Department of Justice denied that this was possible.¹¹⁸ For Harris then, the troubles surrounding the archives stem from the TRC's implicit function as "an instrument of collective forgetting and reconciliation" rather than as a systematic historical inquiry into a contestable past.¹¹⁹ More specifically, Harris follows Jacques Derrida's fear that the TRC archives could cause people or events to be forgotten and leave the "official repository of memory".¹²⁰ As Verdoolaege points out, being part of this "repository" is important:¹²¹

It is quite likely that the elements of the past that were excluded from the archive... would only in a very limited way be (re)read, (re)visited or (re) interpreted... Being part of the TRC archive was therefore directly linked to the significance attributed to a certain event, document or person in post-TRC South Africa.

Radim Hladík suggests that after an intense political transition, countries which focus on legal retaliation prioritize archival research more than those concentrating on reconciliation.¹²² On the other hand, others maintain that the archives were ignored precisely because reconciliation and the TRC were considered less important in the post-Mandela era according to them.¹²³ Whatever the case, SAHA vows to keep fighting this bitter legacy of the TRC and demands the treasure chest to be unlocked.

116 P Pigou, "Accessing the records...", K Allan, *Paper wars...*, p. 36.

117 P Pigou, "Accessing the records...", K Allan, *Paper wars...*, pp. 32, 35.

118 P Pigou, "Accessing the records...", K Allan, *Paper wars...*, p. 47.

119 V Harris, R Ally et.al, "Archives," C Villa-Vicencio & F Du Toit, *Truth and reconciliation in South Africa...*, pp. 57-58.

120 B Bevernage, *History, memory...*, p. 48; C Bundy, "The beast of the past...", J Wilmot & L Van de Vijver, *After TRC...*, p. 15.

121 A Verdoolaege, "Representing apartheid trauma...", S Gibson & S Mollan, *Representations of peace and conflict*, p. 5.

122 H Radim, "Between resentment and forgiveness: Public histories in the Czech and South African transitions", *Teorie Vědy / Theory Of Science*, 31(2), 2009, pp. 113-114.

123 J Du Pisani, "Ná die Waarheids- en Versoeningskommissie...", *Tydskrif Vir Geesteswetenskappe*, 47(1), 2007, p. 6.

A road map to those who wish to travel into our past,¹²⁴ the historical profession, historiography and South African society in the wake of the TRC

The South African historiographical crisis, oral history and the TRC

For Du Pisani, historians are driven by a moral imperative to give voice to victims and point out accountability.¹²⁵ The TRC then seems an obvious topic for (South African) historians wanting to examine issues it did not address or contest the information from the report, even though the inaccessibility of the archives makes this somewhat difficult. However, in numerous interviews with South African historians in 2004, the TRC was mentioned only (i.e. critiqued) sparingly.¹²⁶ This turning away from the TRC and from history should be seen in light of the decline of the discipline of history since the end of apartheid.¹²⁷

This decline is surprising considering that, especially from the 1970s, South African radical historiography had been praised internationally because it recorded subaltern voices and explicitly challenged the apartheid narrative of the past.¹²⁸ Indeed, one might have expected this branch of politically motivated historiography to flourish as it did in other transitional societies in Africa.¹²⁹ It seems, however, that once the struggle was over, radical historians were at an ironic paradigmatic loss because the praxis linked to their discipline had lost its purpose.¹³⁰ Radical social history was unwelcome in a country now focusing on nation-building and history in general was seen as a dispensable luxury in the context of neoliberal Outcome-Based Education policies.¹³¹ Lastly, the arrival of postmodern criticism in South Africa during the 1990s

124 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, *Report*, 1, p. 2.

125 J Du Pisani, "Ná die Waarheids- en Versoeningskommissie...", *Tydskrif Vir Geesteswetenskappe*, 47(1), 2007, p. 7.

126 C Saunders & C Kros, "Conversations with historians", *South African Historical Journal*, 51(1), 2004, pp. 1-23.

127 J Bam, "The South African History Project", S Jeppie, *Toward new histories for South Africa: On the place of the past in our present* (Menlo Park, Juta Gariep, 2004), p. 168.

128 H Stolten, "History in the new South Africa: An introduction", H Stolten, *History making and present day politics, the meaning of collective memory in South Africa* (Uppsala, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2007), p. 47; M Legassick & G Minkley, "Current trends in the production of South African history", *Alternation*, 5(1), 1998, p. 104.

129 C Saunders, "Four decades of South African academic historical writing: A personal perspective", H Stolten, *History making and present day politics, the meaning of collective memory in South Africa* (Uppsala, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2007), p. 286.

130 C Bundy, "New nation, new history...", H Solten, *History making and present day politics...*, p. 76; A Du Toit, "The owl of Minerva...", *History & Theory*, 49(2), 2010, p. 272.

131 C Kros, "Telling lies and hoping to forget all about history", *South African Historical Journal*, 42(1), 2000, pp. 69-88.

also contributed to the decline of history's popularity.¹³²

While some historians were glad that history and politics could become less interconnected and that the “over-emphasis on struggle history” could be replaced with new postmodern themes, the end of apartheid did not mean the end of a practical dimension in historiography.¹³³ Historians fearing to get chased into the ivory tower have hinted at the unexplored legacy of the TRC. In that regard, Sarah Dryden-Peterson and Rob Siebörger would dispute the decline of radical historiography and notice a “new and growing dimension of oral history in South Africa that gained momentum with the TRC”.¹³⁴ Indeed, the commission's legacy has been used by some precisely in order to revive subaltern and oral history because it used personal testimonies to fill official and documentary black holes of the past in the same way.¹³⁵

A good example is oral historian Sean Field, who argues for the expansion of his discipline because its audio-visual character makes it ideal in furthering the mission of the TRC.¹³⁶ Somewhat paradoxically however, oral history became more popular after apartheid while also receiving less funding.¹³⁷ According to Field, the TRC is in a way both the cause and the solution of this paradox. Unintentionally it caused (oral) history to be deemed less necessary because the TRC “had already done all the work”.¹³⁸ If its mandate of establishing truth and reconciliation is interpreted as a long-term mission, however, then oral history projects should get more funding because they actively record victims' voices (other than those recorded by the TRC): “Who will have the skills, funding and courage to bear witness after the TRC has fulfilled its legislative responsibilities?”¹³⁹

132 T Nuttall & J Wright, “Probing the predicaments of academic history in contemporary South Africa”, *South African Historical Journal*, 42(1), 2000, p. 35; L Witz, “Contested histories at the end/s of apartheid”, B Zwede, *Society, State, and Identity in African History* (Addis Ababa, Forum for Social Studies, 2008), p. 421.

133 T Nuttall & J Wright, “Exploring beyond history with a capital ‘H’”, *Current Writing*, 10(2), 1998, pp. 56-57.

134 S Dryden-Peterson & R Siebörger, “Teachers as memory makers”, *International Journal Of Educational Development*, 26(4), 2006, pp. 395-396.

135 G Verbeeck, “Verzoening door herinnering? Historische cultuur in Zuid-Afrika”, *Nieuwste Tijd* 3(1), 2001, p. 66. G Minkley & C Rassool, “Orality, memory and social history in South Africa”, S Nuttall & C Coetzee, *Negotiating the past: The making of memory in South Africa* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 90.

136 S Field, “Memory, the TRC and the significance of oral history...” (Paper, Conference: The TRC: Commissioning the past, Johannesburg, 1999), p. 13.

137 S Field, “Memory, the TRC and the significance of oral history...” (Paper, Conference: The TRC: Commissioning the past, Johannesburg, 1999), pp. 2, 10.

138 S Field, “Memory, the TRC and the significance of oral history...” (Paper, Conference: The TRC: Commissioning the past, Johannesburg, 1999), p. 7.

139 S Field, “Memory, the TRC and the significance of oral history...” (Paper, Conference: The TRC: Commissioning the past, Johannesburg, 1999), pp. 2, 8, 11.

Public history, reconciliation and revisionism

It is clear that Field sees an opportunity to reinvigorate the praxis in historiography by engaging the TRC's legacy. Field therefore probably joined Alan Cobley in contemplating the future of the history discipline in the new South Africa:¹⁴⁰

[Do] the changing times, when the political talk [is] of reconciliation and healing, mean that the swords of struggle history should be beaten into the apparently more socially responsible and constructive plowshares of 'public history'?

It has been pointed out that "struggle history" indeed lost much of its former prestige and Martin Legassick claims that "if there has been any "break" in the production of history since 1994, it has been in the public sphere".¹⁴¹ Similarly, Tim Nuttall and John Wright argue that history departments have lost their largely-enjoyed monopoly on the production of historical knowledge since the 1980s and that the TRC is a case in point.¹⁴² In that regard, the TRC actively supported heritage studies and the preservation and erection of historical sites commemorating the liberation struggle.¹⁴³ At the time, museums and other heritage projects were popping up all over the country and research shows that history departments succeeded in attracting students with programs in heritage-studies in recent years.¹⁴⁴ Some joined this "new and exciting field" on the grounds that it could produce valuable historical knowledge, but others felt uncomfortable because of the lack of interpretation and its link with tourism and reconciliation.¹⁴⁵

Heritage projects were indeed also sponsored by both the government and the TRC because they could contribute to the nation-building effort.¹⁴⁶ According Bundy, nation-building greatly influenced the historiographical output in South Africa.¹⁴⁷ In that regard, the 1990s saw the rise of South African multicultural history which focused less on conflicts and more on

140 A Cobley, "Does social history have a future...", *Journal Of Southern African Studies*, 27(3), 2001, p. 618.

141 M Legassick & G Minkley, "Current trends...", *Alternation*, 5(1), 1998, p. 121.

142 T Nuttall & J Wright, "Exploring beyond history...", *Current Writing*, 10(2), 1998, p. 41.

143 M Legassick & G Minkley, "Current trends...", *Alternation*, 5(1), 1998, p. 104.

144 H Stolten, "History in the new South Africa...", H Stolten, *History making and present day politics...*, p. 6; C Saunders, "The transformation of heritage in the new South Africa", H Stolten, *History making and present day politics...*, p. 191.

145 C Saunders, "The transformation of heritage...", H Stolten, *History making and present day politics...*, pp. 183, 184.

146 T Nuttall & J Wright, "Probing the predicaments...", *South African Historical Journal*, 42(1), 2000, pp. 47-48.

147 C Bundy, "New nation, new history...", H Stolten, *History making and present day politics...*, pp. 80, 87-89.

shared experiences.¹⁴⁸ More attention was also given towards minorities and often neglected historical subjects such as immigrants and women.¹⁴⁹ A controversial case is Afrikaner historiography. Although nationalistic historiography was starting to decline already in the 1970s, the TRC's unveiling of the apartheid government's cruelty dealt a virtual death blow to the paradigm. Du Pisani notes, however, that precisely because the TRC helped shatter the nationalistic paradigm, a new history of the Afrikaners can be written.¹⁵⁰ This is not unimportant seeing as Afrikaners make up the majority of the South African history departments.

For many historians, however, the crucial question remains if historical narratives explicitly aimed at reconciliation can be written without violating professional standards. For example, it might be troubling for some that the TRC strongly recommended that its work and findings be included in the history curriculum.¹⁵¹ There are historians like Norman Estherington who have argued that they have successfully implemented the ideals of truth and reconciliation in their historical research without compromising methodological or epistemological values and that a history in the spirit of the TRC is ideal for the new democracy.¹⁵² In that regard, Elazar Barkan notes that historians simply must come to accept that their discipline actively contributes to the making of historical identity and that a rigid divide between academics and politics is naïve.¹⁵³ Christopher Saunders, on the other hand, notes that reconciliation shouldn't be the goal of historical writing (although it is a welcome side effect) because it leads to the distortion of reality, perhaps even an abuse of history.¹⁵⁴ For Wright and Nuttall, "reconciliation history" is simply unattainable for historians because they find mostly histories of conflict in the archives.¹⁵⁵

148 G Verbeeck, "A new past for a new nation? Historiography and politics in South Africa: A comparative approach", *Historia: The Journal of the Historical Association of South Africa*, 45(2), 2000, p. 399.

149 G Verbeeck, "A new past for a new nation...", *Historia: The Journal of the Historical Association of South Africa*, 45(2), 2000, p. 400.

150 J Du Pisani, "Ná die Waarheids- en Versoeningskommissie...", *Tydskrif Vir Geesteswetenskappe*, 47(1), 2007, p. 8.

151 G Wildschut, "Some lessons for education...", *Adult Education and Development*, 68 (2007) (available at http://www.iiz-dvv.de/index.php?article_id=162&clang=1, as accessed on 18 June 2013).

152 C Bundy, "New nation, new history...", H Solten, *History making and present day politics...*, p. 92.

153 E Barkan, "Introduction: Historians and historical reconciliation", *The American Historical Review*, 114(4), 2009, p. 907.

154 C Saunders, "Four decades...", H Solten, *History making and present day politics...*, p. 287.

155 T Nuttall & J Wright, "Probing the predicaments...", *South African Historical Journal*, 42(1), 2000, p. 31.

Indeed, some point to the risk of an anachronistic interpretation of the past (and the future) as being relatively without conflict.¹⁵⁶ In that regard, Merle Lipton argues that even if the truth about the role of business during apartheid would open up freshly reconciled animosities, academics have a duty to uncover the truth, especially if it involves socio-economic injustices and reparation payments in the present day.¹⁵⁷ According to Posel, the institutional hearings of the TRC on the role of business had little impact on historians.¹⁵⁸ Lipton, however, argues differently and maintains that it had the positive effect of reinvigorating historical research on the involvement of businesses during apartheid.¹⁵⁹ The goal here is not to give an extensive overview of this debate, but to point out that in any case one can say for certain that the relationship between reconciliation and (public) history still triggers intense debate and that the TRC's legacy is directly significant in this discussion.

Conclusion

Seeing as historians were virtually absent in the commission, this article set out to examine the relationship between history, historians and the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). While the TRC never proclaimed to be writing (academic) history, its report shares many characteristics with a historical narrative and the first section showed how historians and other social scientists did not refrain from approaching it as such. When it comes to issues of epistemology and ethics, the TRC's ambiguous handling of both subjective and objective notions of historical truth and its moral reading of history seems to have caused disapproval. At the same time, others praise the TRC for embracing the heterogeneity of historical understanding and hold that learning lessons from the past is desirable. Historians focusing on the TRC's methodology and content have pointed out that while it tried to advance different perspectives on the past, it also (in)directly excluded certain important topics and may have poorly handled some evidence. Furthermore, the report's poor causal analysis left

156 G Verbeeck, "A new past for a new nation...", *Historia: The Journal Of The Historical Association Of South Africa*, 45(2), 2000, p. 405.

157 M Lipton, "The role of business under apartheid: Revisiting the debate", H Stolten, *History making and present day politics...*, p. 295.

158 D Posel, "The TRC Report...", D Posel & G Simpson, *Commissioning the past...*, p.166.

159 M Lipton, "The role of business under apartheid...", H Stolten, *History making and present day politics...*, pp. 294-295.

many, especially historians, disappointed. As a result, many historians see the TRC as a flawed and even dangerous institution.¹⁶⁰

Section Two examined whether the same holds true when looking at the TRC from a philosophical perspective. In that regard, the TRC's imposition of a clear temporal divide between past and present is problematic both for historians wanting to research the past in a country focused on the future, as well as and especially for those who are still living with the effects of the apartheid regime in South Africa today. However, it has also been argued that the TRC could enable people to engage with the past in alternative ways. For example, the TRC provided a platform for people to re-inhabit the past on a tremendous scale due to its extensive media coverage. According to historians advocating these often ignored uses of history, the TRC did not want to close the books on the past, but promoted commemoration precisely as a way to achieve reconciliation.

The third section examined if and how the TRC's road map into history was picked up by historians. For historians eagerly wanting to engage directly with the TRC's "treasure chest", the inaccessibility of the commission's archives remains a bitter legacy and some warn that the TRC is turning into an exercise of forgetting. Understandably then, organizations such as the South African Historical Archive keep fighting the government for full access. Although radical historiography was dealt a severe blow at the end of apartheid, the practical dimension of history hasn't died and some point to the unexplored legacy of the TRC.¹⁶¹ For example, some (oral) historians have looked at the TRC's unique production of historical knowledge and have interpreted its mandate as a long-term mission to reinvigorate their discipline. Others started to engage in public history projects (at times promoted by the TRC) or "reconciliation history" aimed at the nation-building effort and focused on minorities. This combination of reconciliation and history has been severely criticized by some historians claiming that the combination would cause distortion or render certain topics off limits. Important and interesting cases in this regard are the role of business during apartheid and Afrikaner historiography.

All this information and analysis doesn't make it easy to provide a conclusive answer with regards to the relationship between history, historians and the

160 A Du Toit, "The Truth and Reconciliation Commission as contemporary history", S Jeppie, *Toward new histories for South Africa: On the place of the past in our present* (Menlo Park, Juta Gariep, 2004), p. 61.

161 C Bundy, "New nation, new history...", H Solten, *History making and present day politics...*, p. 74.

TRC. That in itself is, however, a revealing answer. Indeed, looking at the TRC in terms of a history writing exercise or through the lenses of the philosophy of history is not capable of grasping its relationship with history in a way that would explain all of its actions, results or legacy. It remains remarkably difficult to find out who made what decisions or exactly what role historians did or did not play in the commission. Indeed, although South African Historians often refrain from reflecting on their profession, their relationship with the TRC seems to be discussed especially rarely. However, an overview of the available literature suggests that they were largely uninvolved in the TRC process.¹⁶² Perhaps the opening up of the TRC archives or interviews with historians could shed more light on their relationship with the commission. For now, however, this article hopes to have illustrated how the TRC engaged with the past in a multifaceted way and thereby led historians to approach it in equally varying ways. Thus, although rather in the form of criticism than praise, the discussion on the TRC remains very much alive in South African history departments and beyond.

¹⁶² C Saunders, "Four decades...", H Stolten, *History making and present day politics...*, p. 281.