

# History of South Africa from 1902 to the present

**Author:** Thula Simpson

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## Introduction

The book explores South Africa's journey from the aftermath of the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902) to the democratic dispensation. Drawing on documentary evidence including letters, diaries, eyewitness accounts and diplomatic reports, the book tracks down South Africa's journey to liberation through battles, repression, resistance, political conflict, strikes, massacres, as well as economic and health crises. Furthermore, it covers the influence on the country's political landscape exerted by some of its key political figures such as Pixley ka Seme, Lilian Ngoyi, Nelson Mandela, H F Verwoerd, Jan Smuts, P W Botha, Steve Biko, Thabo Mbeki, Jacob Zuma and Cyril Ramaphosa. The book provides accounts of the events that shaped South Africa's character. These include the 1922 Rand Revolt, the Defiance Campaign, the Sharpeville Massacre, the Soweto Uprisings and the Marikana Massacre. The book also explores the role played by figures from further afield: Mohandas Gandhi, Fidel Castro, Winston Churchill and Margaret Thatcher. Global military conflicts such as the world wars, armed struggle and border wars are also explored in the book. It further explores South Africa's transition to democracy and traces the phases of the ANC's rule from the Rainbow Nation to transformation and state capture to "New Dawn". The book also examines the divisive and unifying roles of sport, economic challenges and the pandemics.

## 1. Title and pictures on the cover page

The title of the book has been clearly outlined in terms of what the book seeks to achieve. The period to which the narrative is confined, within the broader scope of South African history, has been clearly articulated (1902 to the present). The pictures on the cover page have been carefully selected to represent the themes covered in the book. Perspectives on the narrative accounts captured in the book are shared by scholars from various academic backgrounds:

*Narrative history at its best, with prodigious detail and eloquent prose, Thula Simpson places Black South Africans at the centre of the country's historical evolution and claims his place at the head table of contemporary historians... A masterpiece.* (Xolela Mangcu)

*Thula Simpson charts key episodes in South African history with a peaceful narrative and illuminating detail. His attention to sources and the role of individuals makes this a valuable reference and teaching text.* (William Beinart)

*In this pacy and compelling political history of South Africa, Simpson draws on fresh sources to extend the arc of Apartheid and resistance into the current moment. By doing so he skillfully illuminates the country's current predicaments.* (Saul Dubow)

*Two themes stand out in the industriously researched history of modern South Africa. One is the extent to which South African political and social life has been shaped by organised violence. The second one is the persistence of extreme forms of inequality between South Africans both in terms of power and with respect to livelihoods. These tragic features of this national story continue to shape South African life. For anybody interested in why we are where we are today, this engaging and illuminating book will provide powerful insights.* (Tom Lodge)

These enhance the credibility of the book and affirm its place in the mainstream accounts of political histories, particularly in the South African context.

A brief account of the various themes explored in the book on the cover page provides the reader with an idea of what the entire text entails.

## 2. Structure

### 2.1 Opening

In the opening section, the author provides perspectives from selected journalists on the composition of the book as well as the various themes of South Africa's political history:

*History of South Africa is a very readable and invaluable resource for general readers, students and academics. Covering the period from the aftermath of the South African War to the present, it is the first comprehensive history of South Africa to come out since those surrounding the achievement of democracy, is long overdue. (Alan Kirkaldy, Rhodes University)*

*Simpson's book is a magnificent achievement based on thousands of interviews, recounting what happened at all levels in an almost day-by-day way. Sometimes it feels as though one is right there, trudging through the bush with barely prepared soldiers or fighting back and forth across various borders committed and persistent infiltrators or setting bombs with the later saboteurs in the streets of South Africa's cities. (Shaun de Waal, Mail & Guardian)*

*For romantics like me who naively believed that armed insurrection was an option for South Africa, Umkhonto we Sizwe, the ANC's Armed Struggle by Thula Simpson is for you. Through the eyes and experiences of real soldiers and real commanders, Simpson tells the story of the people's army without over glorifying its history and achievements. (Mondli Makhanya, City Press: Book of the Year)*

*True to the military genre, the present tense narrative bloods the reader directly in the heat of the action with a vantage point from all operational angles. This is not a glorified historiography of Umkhonto we Sizwe or armed struggle. It respectfully treads the terrain of botched operations, leadership and command failures, ill-discipline, corruption in a matter-of-fact manner, depicting the historical dialectic of the armed struggle as a whole and all its internal contradictions without judgemental hindsight. (Jeremy Veary New Agenda)*

*Simpson has given us what is undoubtedly the richest collection of incident and claim assembled about MK. Most of the book consists of attacks, firefights, bombings, the capture*

*of fighters, disputes within the ANC and MK and cruelties on both sides. The accounts are drawn from among others interviews with MK fighters, court records and other scholars. Simpson writes each in the historic present tense. The style puts the reader in the situation being described which enhances the drama and readability. It will please the scholar looking for more empirical detail and others, adult or child who want to know how things happened. (Howard Barrell, *The Conversation*)*

*This recent and massive tome identities, extraordinary number of incidents including MK. (Ronnie Kasrils, *Daily Maverick*)*

*A text that illuminates many operations, trials, mistakes and challenges the ANC guerrillas faced as they duelled, often in the shadows with the Apartheid state. Furthermore, it is an excellent chronological history of MK's armed struggle. Through his rich engagement with primary sources, gleaned from government, security force and liberation movement archives and personal accounts. Simpson offers as balanced an account as possible of the many operations of the MK. (Toivo Asheeke, *Social Dynamics*)*

*A straight factual narrative of the three decades of Umkhonto we Sizwe told from the viewpoint of guerrilla fighters, policemen and soldiers on the ground. This history makes one painfully aware of the high proportion of fatalities and other casualties which as the inevitable trade-off which guerrilla war makes against the superior technology, budget and other resources of the state. This book is an antidote to the current revisionist fad of marginalising the armed struggle as irrelevant or trivial in our history. (Keith Gottschalk, *African Independent*)*

*This is not a triumphalist narrative depicting an inevitable popular victory over the evil Apartheid system. Rather it is a painstaking assembly of incidents and events from forgotten beginnings in the 1950s to the never-to-be forgotten glory of the 1994 democratic elections. This work is so comprehensive and takes such a ground-up approach that the great diversity of voices excludes bias. Simpson more than achieves the required distance needed by an historian. What Simpson has done with great success and as a result of meticulous and comprehensive research, is to gather and link the widest range of diverse voices and reminiscences. (Graham Duminy, *Pretoria News*)*

The above comments by journalists and intellectuals may lend credence to the

assumption that the book has been widely critiqued and highly commended. However, pointers to some weaknesses and aspects that need to be strengthened would have been welcome in order to improve on future editions. There may have been some pertinent issues within the ambit of South Africa's political history which were not covered extensively in the book. More balanced critiques by experts from diverse academic backgrounds would have been helpful.

## **Preface and acknowledgements**

In this section, the author clearly articulates the rationale behind the writing of this book. He also provides a brief outline of the chapters for the reader to get a sense of what the book entails.

## **Chapters**

The sub-heading of chapter 1 is somewhat confusing to the reader as it begins with the aftermath. The impression is thus created that the author chose to start with the consequences of South Africa's political history, thereby defeating the ends of logic. Providing specifics of the aftermath would have been more welcome, as South Africa went through several colonial wars that defined its history and national character. One may assume that it is the Anglo-Boer War that is being referred to here; however, there were two phases of this war, namely the First Anglo-Boer War and the Second Anglo-Boer War. The importance of specifics when referring to the wars the country was subjected to cannot be over-emphasised. On a more positive note, the author managed to take the reader down memory lane in terms of how South Africa was impacted by the Anglo-Boer War as well as the extent to which the political landscape of the country was shaped and influenced. Here, Simpson begins with Louis Botha's address to the commandos in Moelbandspruit in northern Natal in April 1902 and as one of the representatives of the Transvaal and Orange Free State in the peace talks with Lord Kitchener at Melrose House in Pretoria on 12 April 1902.

The subsequent chapters have been well coordinated, there is an organic link of events and coherence which makes it easy for the reader to grasp the import of the text. Simpson has succeeded in painting a clear picture of where we come from, where we are currently and, most importantly, where we are heading as South Africans, given our painful and complex history. The incisive accounts of South Africa's history enable the reader to get

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a fresh perspective on the current political climate of the country and to determine future possibilities. It is interesting how the author pays close attention to detail in his engagements with the historical themes he has chosen to drive his narrative. The chronology of events presented in the book is equally fascinating:

- Founders
- Union and disunion
- Imperial Impi
- Revolt
- Red peril
- Dominion
- Springboks and swastika
- Apartheid
- Defiance
- Charterists and Africanists
- State of emergency
- Freedom fighters
- Silent sixties
- Homeland
- Tar baby
- Adapt or die
- Total onslaught
- Ungovernable
- Rubicon
- Liberators
- The world turned upside down
- Born free
- The settlement
- Rainbow Nation
- Transformation
- The second transition
- Into the whirlwind
- Captive state
- False dawn
- The reckoning

Simpson is to be commended for providing a brilliant narrative account of South Africa's political history and for a good choice of themes that are pertinent to the country's experiences of oppression and liberation. The referencing style, particularly the end-notes on each chapter and the list of abbreviations used in the book, makes it easy for the reader to track references. However, the book does not have a conclusion, which would have been useful in highlighting the practical lessons from the discourses presented. Furthermore, recommendations and determinations of future possibilities could have been provided in the conclusion.