

Hermann Giliomee (2012), *The Last Afrikaner Leaders: A Supreme Test of Power*, Cape Town: Tafelberg, ISBN: 9780624049715, 448 pp.

Hermann Giliomee's previous book, *The Afrikaners: A Biography of a People*, was criticised for tending "towards the encyclopaedic".¹ The implication was that *The Afrikaners*, for all its depth of scholarship, is too vague and attempts to address too many questions. No such criticism can be made of Giliomee's most recent book, *The Last Afrikaner Leaders: A Supreme Test of Power*, whose purposes are clearly defined and which occupies a distinctive position within the historiography of Apartheid and its demise.

The Last Afrikaner Leaders sets out to characterise and explain the trajectory of Apartheid, particularly in its final years. In addressing this topic, Giliomee has two key purposes in mind: to highlight "the crucial role played by individual leaders" and to demonstrate the "contingent nature of developments". As such, the author aims to refute the large body of scholarly work which sees the history of Apartheid as determined wholly or largely by "social processes" and "abstract forces" (12).

In the book, Giliomee analyses the political careers of five key Afrikaner leaders. They include heads of government Hendrik Verwoerd, John Vorster, PW Botha and FW de Klerk, as well as prominent opposition politician Frederik Van Zyl Slabbert. The book gives thorough and detailed depictions of these leaders' ideas, motivations and approaches to politics. It demonstrates the ways in which these distinctive personalities were manifested in distinctive policies and, in turn, elucidates the political changes these policies helped instigate in South Africa.

More than half of the book is focused on the period between Botha's accession in 1978 and Apartheid's end under FW de Klerk in 1994. For Giliomee, both these leaders were crucial influences on political developments in this period. Botha was the first National Party leader to recognise the urgent need for change in order to avert revolution. His "Adapt or Die" speech in 1979 signalled a new era in National Party politics: "Gone was John Vorster's paddling about in a pool of complacent white supremacy" (141-2). Nonetheless, Giliomee argues, Botha's reform programme was circumscribed by his personal conviction that "racial and ethnic groups formed the building blocks of the political and social system, and that there could be no interracial democratic competition" (145). This limited the prospects of finding a successful solution to South Africa's problems. It is argued that "in creating a tricameral

1 Robert Ross (2004), Review of *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People* by Hermann Giliomee, in: *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 30, 4, Special Issue: Writing in Transition in South Africa: Fiction, History, Biography, 917-918.

parliament that excluded blacks, the government had made any future agreement with black leaders much more difficult”, and it is seen as significant that government failed to forge an alliance with moderate leaders like Chief Buthelezi (179, 164).

De Klerk is also accorded a significant role in determining the course of events. The decision to embark upon formal negotiations with the ANC is argued to have been partly the result of de Klerk’s pragmatic decision to abandon Apartheid, which he had judged to be “unworkable” (289). Also, Giliomee argues that de Klerk’s poor negotiating abilities and his inability to decide between a pro-federalist and a pro-centralist strategy affected the outcome of the negotiations (315, 340-1).

But *The Last Afrikaner Leaders* is more than a simple characterisation of these five key leaders and their roles in politics. It highlights the contingent nature of events, and even accounts for the roles played by other senior figures in the National Party. It offers a detailed description of the political debates which took place in the National Party cabinets and expounds upon the influence that party officials exerted on the National Party leaders. For instance, Giliomee provides an insightful description of the disagreements among the members of Botha’s cabinet regarding the future political role of black South Africans. Interestingly, he notes that Botha’s Minister of Constitutional Development, Chris Heunis, was thwarted in his proposal to include black representatives in Parliament (283-5, 188-9). Giliomee also notes that there were significant divisions and differences within de Klerk’s cabinet during the period of negotiations. Notably, Roelf Meyer is portrayed as being significantly more inclined toward compromise and settlement with the ANC than other senior National Party figures. Giliomee remarks on Meyer’s “non-racialism with an almost evangelical fervour”, which was all the more significant because Meyer became the National Party’s chief negotiator from 1992 (371). In drawing attention to these differences, Giliomee further underlines the importance of asking how particular Apartheid leaders “read the facts, and how they translated these interpretations into political schemes and visions” (414). Indeed, maybe the roles of both individual agency and the contingency of developments would have been clearer if Giliomee had emphasised these debates more in the book’s introduction and conclusion.

Giliomee’s account is not a simplistic history of “great men”. *The Last Afrikaner Leaders* also acknowledges the important role played by the circumstances in which the Afrikaner leaders were operating. Indeed, Giliomee states that Apartheid was “fundamentally undermined” by developments such as demographic shifts, economic changes and Cold War politics (15). Yet, Giliomee’s book aims to show that there was significant scope within

these circumstances for human agency to shape how and when Apartheid came to an end.

One criticism which can be made of *The Last Afrikaner Leaders* is that it does not undertake a rigorous analysis of where the limits of individual agency lay. It champions the role of Afrikaner leaders whilst acknowledging contextual influences; yet, it does not precisely delineate the correlation between those two sets of factors. Moreover, the book does not engage with the historiography with which Giliomee expresses disagreement in his introduction. In the author's defence, however, it should be noted that he has engaged with these interpretations elsewhere (see: Surrender without Defeat: Afrikaners and the South African "Miracle", in: *Daedalus*, 126, 2, Human Diversity, Spring 1997, 113-46 or "Brodertuis": Intra-Afrikaner Conflicts in the Transition from Apartheid, in: *African Affairs*, 91, 364, July 1992, 339-64).

This criticism aside, *The Last Afrikaner Leaders* is a compelling and excellently researched account. It is based upon an extraordinarily extensive array of primary sources, including interviews and official National Party documents. Not surprisingly, it thus provides insights into the subject that are unparalleled in terms of depth, detail and reliability. Furthermore, Giliomee uses this research as the foundation for cogent argumentation. The analysis contained in the book is sophisticated and the conclusions are properly substantiated. *The Last Afrikaner Leaders* is a valuable addition to the historiography of Apartheid politics.

- Adam Houldsworth