

REVIEW OF WIKIPEDIA ARTICLE

Reviewer: Steven Friedman

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Title of article: Apartheid

While the article does contain a great deal of useful information about apartheid, it does not offer anything like a ‘complete, thorough, and concise introduction to the topic’.

The first problem is that it is rambling – it jumps from topic to topic without any apparent reason and there is no logical structure: readers will not understand why one topic follows another. The second is that the choice of topic often seems eccentric: the pass laws, which restricted the movement of black South Africans and was absolutely central to the system are dealt with in a couple of passing references while much attention is paid to apartheid in television. Bantu education, crucial to the Soweto uprisings of 1976, is not discussed at all. The section on international recognition of Bantustans largely ignores the reaction of the major world powers and hones in on a request by the Swiss South African Association to the Swiss government pressing it to recognise them! (This claim is not referenced which is not surprising as serious histories of the time rightly pay no attention to this entirely irrelevant association which was, of course, ignored by the Swiss authorities). While there were campaigns against apartheid on many campuses throughout the world, the article fixes on the University of Illinois campaign which was hardly remarkable. Third, the choice of sources is odd – the article jumps from basic histories which offer only description to complex academic articles – no attempt is made to distinguish between them and the result is confusion. Fourth and perhaps most important, the reader will not derive from this article a clear sense of how the apartheid system worked. Even where the article is accurate in its description, it fails to explain adequately so that the reader is left with a set of often randomly selected facts rather than a coherent explanation.

One general point which is worth making is whether it makes sense for articles to attempt to analyse their topic rather than simply describing it. If the function of an on line encyclopaedia is to introduce readers to a topic, then analysis does more to confuse than to enlighten. Analyses by social scientists are rarely if ever undisputed – what one scholar argues another rejects. And yet the analyses are presented as if they were undisputed fact. This is extremely misleading. The problem is worsened by the fact that the author(s) make no attempt to distinguish between factual description and analysis: the two are lumped together and the result is both confusing and misleading.

At present, then, the structure and style of this article are sadly lacking. The solution, however, is not to tinker with it by changing a few paragraphs around. What is needed is a thorough rewrite in which it is clear to the reader why particular sections appear where they do and what the logical link is between them. At present, the article reads as if a range of authors who were not communicating with each other simply inserted the sections which interested them. If this is the case, what is needed is an editor/author who can knit the sections together (and discard those which don’t fit). If it isn’t, then the single author needs to provide the missing coherence to the article.

The content of the article is also often lacking. It contains factual errors: legislation introduced in 1950 to suppress opposition did not focus primarily on violent resistance - its key target was non-violent opposition. It is not correct to claim that there were no laws preventing interracial sport: while there was no law specifically outlawing sport between the races, a host of apartheid laws made it difficult or not impossible. We are told that, before the National Party came to power, the previous government introduced laws in 1951 – but the NP took office in 1948 so the previous government was no longer in power. It is not true that a mass black trade union movement developed only in the 1980s – there were mass movements in the 1920s and 1940s. The Immorality Act banned inter-racial sexual intercourse, not ‘racial intercourse’. Television was not banned until 1976 because the government feared English programming – the reason was that it feared foreign cultural influences. Labour unions did not start the strikes of 1973 – they grew out of them. Extra-parliamentary resistance to apartheid was not centred on the Communist Party and the Black Sash but on many other organisations. The Lusaka Manifesto did not appease the apartheid government or recognise its autonomy. It was never ‘proven’ that the government was responsible for violence between black political groups – it was alleged. Black labour unions were never illegal – they were not allowed to negotiate legally binding agreements with employers. It is also important to mention that the term ‘nonwhite’, used at the beginning of the article, while not factually accurate, is considered offensive by many black South Africans and is therefore not currently used.

The factual inaccuracies are the exception rather than the rule. But a problem throughout the article is a failure to understand and explain the facts which are presented. The article fails to understand the difference between grand and petty apartheid: grand apartheid was the system which forced black people to exercise their economic and political rights in poverty stricken ethnic Bantustans and also sharply restricted their access to the cities, while petty apartheid was segregation in access to facilities. This is not reflected in the article. It also does not understand the difference between Group Areas, which applied only to Indian and ‘coloured’ people, and resettlement to separate Bantustans which applies to black Africans. It misunderstands the sequence of events which led to Vorster’s refusal to allow an English cricket team including Basil D’Oliveira to tour South Africa. It also seems to think that the SA Non-Racial Olympic Committee (Sanroc) was set up by the apartheid government – it was actually established by those campaigning for its isolation. It devotes a (short) section to the role of the Catholic Church in opposing apartheid when it was actually the Protestant Churches represented by the World Council of Churches, which were responsible. Crucially, it does not explain – and does not seem to understand – the ‘total onslaught’ which was used by President Botha to unleash a ‘total strategy’ which sought to militarise government in its attempt to preserve the apartheid system. This was the key to government strategy in the last years of apartheid and requires serious treatment. It suggests that apartheid was the preference of only Afrikaans speakers when most current history shows that all the white language groupings supported racial discrimination. It is unclear why the white opposition politician Harry Schwarz, who is not regarded by any history as an important figure in the end of apartheid, is singled out by the article.

Finally, the guide to reviewers suggests that new source material be suggested to improve the article. This is unnecessary in this case since a wide range of sources has been used – perhaps the only notable omissions which spring to mind are Leonard Thompson’s *A History of South Africa*, the *Oxford History of South Africa* edited by Thompson and Monica Wilson, and Carter and Karis’s *From Protest to Challenge*. While these sources would add much, it would be possible to present a clear, understandable and accurate account of apartheid using the

sources currently used to compile the article. It is also important to note that referencing is highly uneven – at times contentious claims are made but no reference is cited in their support. The chief problem, however, is not the use of inappropriate sources but the way in which the information available to the author(s) is used. It is this which requires attention if the article is to provide readers with what they need.