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The response to apartheid, c1948-59

KEY QUESTIONS

- What was life like in South Africa in 1948?
- Why was the National Party victorious in the elections of 1948?
- How was apartheid codified and implemented, 1948-59?
- How did African nationalism develop, 1948-59?

INTRODUCTION

Between 1948 and 1994 the white, largely Afrikaner, National Party ruled South Africa. Successive governments aimed to ensure white domination, by defining racial and ethnic categories more rigorously than before and by allocating rights on the basis of these definitions. Black South Africans were subjected to tighter controls in respect of their political rights, their movement and the spaces that they could occupy. Ultimately, at their most ambitious, apartheid planners envisaged 11 states in South Africa, including ten for the separately defined African ethnic groups in the country.

How did white South Africans arrive at so extreme a solution?

This chapter begins in 1948, the year that the National Party won the election that brought them into office. A cornerstone of their policies was a dramatic social engineering project, known by the Afrikaans term **'apartheid'**. The first section of this chapter outlines the social and historical background, describing the composition of South African society and highlighting some existing political trends, to show how there was already a foundation for the architects of apartheid to build on. The second section explores how such an idea was able to find acceptance among the electorate. The third section examines early apartheid legislation, from laws strengthening the concept of race to those controlling the allocation of space. The chapter concludes with a look at how black South Africans responded to these challenges.

The apartheid plan was still very new in 1948, with many aspects of the project still open to debate. Politicians such as Hendrik Verwoerd were instrumental in forging the blueprint that would slowly come to fruition over the course of the 1950s and 1960s. Others vehemently opposed any designs for the separate development of racially defined groups within South Africa. New black leaders, such as Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo, entered into political opposition with fresh ideas and approaches that drew inspiration from successful campaigns in India, the United States and anti-colonial movements around the world.

The changes that took place during the 1950s completely shifted the social and political landscape, and set the stage for 40 years of struggle over the future of South Africa.

KEY TERM

Apartheid

An Afrikaans word meaning 'the state of being apart' or, literally, 'apartness'. Operating in South Africa, it was a system of racial segregation enforced by the dominant National Party governments.

EXTEND YOUR KNOWLEDGE

Walter Sisulu (1912-2003), Oliver Tambo (1917-1993) and Nelson Mandela (1918-2013) were key leaders of the ANC, all hailed from the Xhosa speaking regions of the Eastern Cape. They were all on the first executive committee of the ANC Youth League in the 1940s, and each shared a vision of a more radical, mass-based approach to liberation politics.

Sisulu was born in 1912. After leaving school at 15 he travelled to Johannesburg looking for work to help support his family. This period gave him some valuable experience that helped to forge his political identity: he worked at a gold mine, and met Clements Kadalie (the head of the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union). Finally he settled in Johannesburg where he became active in the Orlando Civic Association in Soweto, organising strikes and boycotts, before joining the ANC in 1940. After working at an estate agency, Sisulu set up his own real estate business, which evolved into an important destination for young radicals to discuss ideas and strategy. Sisulu became a mentor for several younger activists, including both Mandela and Tambo. Sisulu was a member of the South African Communist Party and developed a reputation for building bridges between political organisations.

Oliver Tambo was born in 1917. He attended missionary schools where he excelled, winning a scholarship to Fort Hare university, where he studied physics and mathematics. During his time at Fort Hare Tambo met Mandela and they both became involved themselves in student protests that led to their expulsion from the university. Tambo returned home and taught at a local high school before moving to Johannesburg. In 1942 he met Sisulu and agreed that the ANC required reinvigoration. He trained as a lawyer and set up offices with Mandela, whilst at the same time holding several elected positions within the ANC.

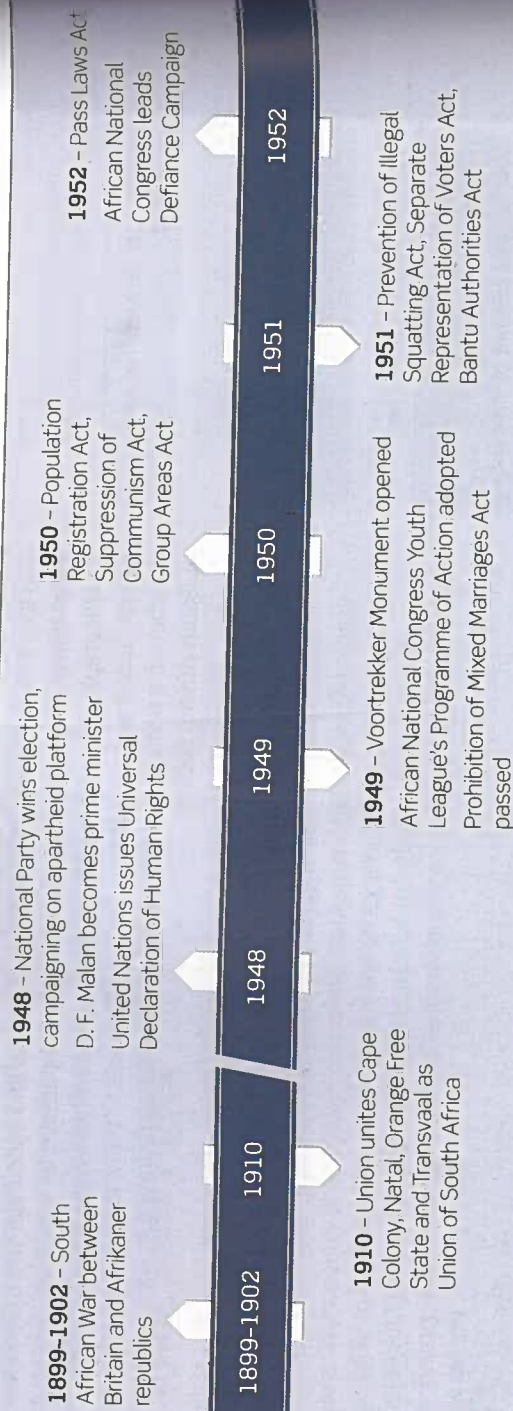
Mandela was born in 1918. In his teens, he became a ward at the Thembu Royal house and became familiar with the operation of African chieftaincy in the Transkeian Territories. Like Tambo, Mandela was educated at missionary schools before attending Fort Hare university. After his expulsion for his role in student protests, Mandela ran away to Johannesburg where he got a job as a mine security officer. Soon afterwards he met Sisulu, who encouraged him to join the ANC. After training as a lawyer he went into practice with Tambo.

From 1948, Sisulu, Tambo and Mandela became increasingly prominent figures in the ANC. Mandela and Sisulu were imprisoned together on Robben Island after the Rivonia Trial in 1964, while Tambo went abroad to lead the ANC in exile.

WHAT WAS LIFE LIKE IN SOUTH AFRICA IN 1948?

Race

When the National Party came to power in 1948, South Africans were already categorised in four racial groups: whites (or Europeans); Africans (or 'Natives' in the official language of the time); Coloured people; and Indians (or 'Asiatics'). They were counted in this way in censuses and these racial identities shaped key rights, such as their right to vote. It is difficult to describe South Africa's people without using the racial categories that became so entrenched, especially in the apartheid period. But we should try to do so because identities were more diverse, and multi-faceted, than these racial labels suggest.



Africans

The original inhabitants of South Africa were San or Bushmen people, hunters and gatherers with a profound knowledge of the natural world who left a rich legacy of rock paintings. Around 2,000 years ago black African farming people migrated into the region. Some San adopted their livestock farming practices and became identified as Khoikhoi. Africans gradually formed larger and more powerful chiefdoms or kingdoms and many of the San and Khoikhoi were displaced or absorbed into these units.

In the first half of the 19th century the Zulu became the largest African kingdom. This process left a deep legacy. Although Britain conquered the Zulu kingdom between 1878 and 1885, Zulu identity remained a significant force in the 20th century and Zulu language was the most widely spoken first language in this linguistically diverse country. The Sotho, Pedi, Tswana, Xhosa, Mpondo and Thembu also became centralised states in the 19th century with distinct languages and cultures. Although they shared many social features, the difference between the Zulu and Tswana language, for example, was as wide as between French and Spanish. A major challenge facing African nationalists during the 20th century was to create a common African identity.

By the time of the 1951 census, at the beginning of the apartheid era, Africans numbered 8.5 million.

Whites

Those classed as whites in South Africa came from a variety of backgrounds. The two most dominant groups were the Afrikaners and those of British descent. South Africa's Afrikaner population, roughly 60 percent of whites or around 1.6 million in the 1951 census, was descended largely from the Dutch, French and German settlers who came to South Africa in the 17th and 18th centuries. During the 19th century, they achieved some shared identity and spoke a local version of Dutch but remained politically divided between those in the British Cape and those in two separate **Boer** republics in the interior.

The whites who spoke English as a first language in South Africa were descendants of British colonists who arrived after the Cape became part of the British Empire in 1806. Irish, Jewish and other minorities joined them, especially after the discovery of valuable minerals in the late 19th century. Numbering about one million in the 1951 census, they tended to be wealthier and more highly educated than other groups, and dominated business and the professions.

Coloured and Indian people

By the beginning of the 20th century most of those in the Cape Colony who were not classed as white or African were called Coloured. They included the descendants of the San and Khoikhoi, of slaves brought from South East Asia and other parts of Africa by the Dutch, and of relationships between whites, Africans and others. Coloured people numbered roughly 1.1 million people in 1951, nine percent of the population. They were largely based in the Western Cape and were mostly **Afrikaans**-speaking.

KEY TERMS

Boer

Afrikaans for 'farmer'. It was used to denote people of Dutch heritage living in South Africa. Later they called themselves Afrikaners, or Afrikaans-speaking people of Dutch, French and German descent. The states of Transvaal and the Orange Free State were known as Boer republics because they were created in the mid-19th century by Afrikaner emigrants unhappy with British rule at the Cape.

Afrikaans

A language spoken by several groups in South Africa. It evolved from Dutch, which came to the region with the first European settlers. Afrikaans developed locally and adopted African, Indonesian, Portuguese and English words and phrases, and developed its own grammar and spelling. It became a distinctive language, officially replacing Dutch in 1925. A majority of white and Coloured people spoke it as their first language and many Africans, especially on the farms, knew Afrikaans as a second language.

For fifty years, settlers in Natal imported indentured Indians, many of them Tamils from south India, to work on the sugar plantations. Some Indian traders, largely from Gujarat, were also allowed into the country; they formed another significant minority, three percent of the total population, mostly based in Natal and Transvaal, who became English-speaking.

Segregation and discrimination

Racial discrimination existed in South Africa before 1948. In handing South Africa self-government in 1910, Britain did not require whites to share power with black people despite the fact that whites were a minority of the population. Members of Parliament (MPs) and most of the electorate were white, though a small exception was made for Coloured and African people in the old Cape Colony who could meet certain property and educational qualifications. After 1930 white women were able to vote but Africans were completely disenfranchised in 1936. The 1948 election was therefore almost entirely decided by the minority white population, then about 21 percent of the total. Before 1948 most African people in the cities were forced to live in separate areas known as townships. This policy, called segregation, entrenched discrimination before the apartheid era.

EXTEND YOUR KNOWLEDGE

Domestic servants

Despite formal segregation, black and white lived at close quarters in South Africa. By the middle of the 20th century, most white people with any wealth employed black domestic servants. In the cities, many of them lived on the premises of their employers in backyard rooms. Servants started work every morning in the kitchen and sometimes came into white bedrooms to serve tea or coffee. It was not unusual for white children to receive a good deal of their childcare from black women. Yet, despite this closeness, racial discrimination was intense. For example, for most white South Africans it was unthinkable to use the same cutlery and crockery as their black servants, who were generally given separate utensils and plates. Whites and blacks ate separately and, while servants sometimes received the remains of a family meal, they more often cooked for themselves.

Urbanisation, industrialisation and townships

Urbanisation and industrialisation Gold was discovered in the Witwatersrand area of Transvaal (also known as 'the Rand') in 1886. The city of Johannesburg quickly grew up to provide services to the mines. The mines needed workers and the city grew from nothing in 1886 to around 100,000 by 1900. Some of the miners were African migrants from rural areas, who temporarily lived in huge, male-only compounds. By 1948 the population of Johannesburg was approaching a million people with African numbers outstripping whites for the first time. Although other cities also experienced population growth, none matched the rapid increases seen in Johannesburg.

The gold mines were the motor of the South African industrial economy for the first few decades of the 20th century but gradually industry diversified from gold to producing textiles, clothing, food, chemicals and some machinery. The state developed a major iron and steel industry (ISCOR) and generated electricity, largely from coal. During the Second World War, it was difficult to import goods from Britain so South African industry further expanded to supply the home market. With around 180,000 white men serving in the armed forces employment opportunities increased for blacks. When the war was over, black and white people competed for jobs and space in the cities.

While the majority of African people lived in the countryside, the majority of whites lived in towns and cities. There were many poor white Afrikaners who had not been able to make a living on the land. The 'poor white problem' became a particular concern to government and to churches, both determined that whites should be kept as a separate and distinct group. Many were absorbed into expanding state employment, especially on the railways.

Poor whites had the vote and the nationalists appealed to their sense of insecurity with the promise of protected employment in government service and factories. Whites wished to avoid the ignominy of working under black supervision, or doing the kind of manual labour that was demigrated as black people's work.

Townships

Governments and municipal councils prior to 1948 had been keen to maintain cities as predominantly white spaces but the influx of migrants was too large. This led to the establishment of informal or shack settlements. In response, areas outside the cities, called townships, were hastily allocated to house black migrants. The biggest of these, 20 kilometres to the south west of Johannesburg, later became Soweto (an acronym for South Western Townships). The land rights of residents in these townships were tenuous, and health care and sanitation were often poor.

Rural society

South Africa had long been primarily a rural country with the majority of people living on the land and in small towns. By 1948 land ownership was deeply divided by race and by class. Whites owned over 80 percent of the land in the country, most of it as large farms held as private property. It is important to stress, however, that the land was white-owned but not inhabited only by whites. Black people were in the majority on most farms, where they worked as wage labourers and tenants. White owners and black staff lived together on the same land and worked with each other on a daily basis but generally in a strict hierarchy. In the rural areas, whites were able to maintain racial authority – sometimes called *baaskap* (boss-hood) – more effectively. Whites did not usually do manual labour. Black workers looked after the livestock, drove the ox teams that still often ploughed the land, weeded the

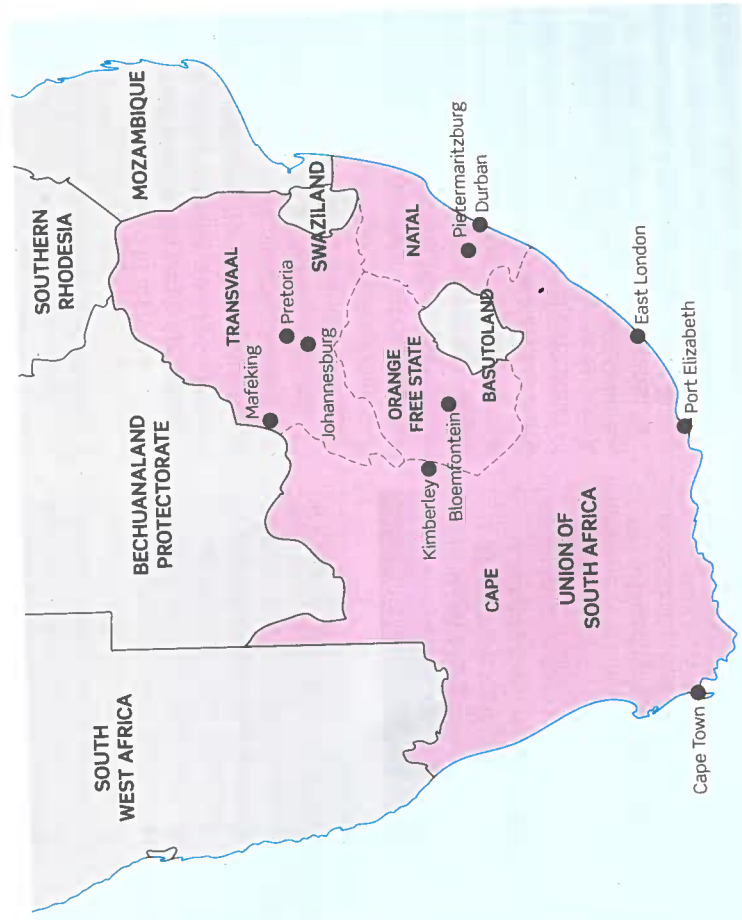


Figure 1.1: South Africa in 1948.

fields and harvested the maize (known locally as mealies) that was South Africa's staple crop. They cut cane on the sugar plantations of Natal, and picked grapes in the vineyards of the Western Cape. Wool from merino sheep was the most valuable product, much of it exported to Britain where it fed the textile industries of the northern cities such as Bradford and Leeds.

Most African rural communities either lived on the white-owned farms or on **reserves**. Life in the African reserves had changed greatly over the previous hundred years. Missionaries from a wide range of Christian denominations found their way to every corner of South Africa and Christianity had become the dominant religion. African independent churches vied for congregations with the older mission denominations, such as Catholics and Methodists. Missionaries had started schools, and many of the most successful educational establishments were in the rural areas. Taxation had forced African people into the cash economy, and consumer tastes had grown. The great majority of people wore modern clothes and even traditional dress was made from imported textiles.

Women worked particularly hard and were the lynchpin of the rural economy: it was their duty to fetch water from streams (carried in buckets on their heads); to collect firewood; and to do much of the domestic and agricultural labour. On average, those in the African reserves produced about 50 percent of their food in 1948, though this varied greatly between homesteads. Men often became migrant labourers working in the cities.

It is important to emphasise that rural society was not divorced from the cities, nor from the processes of social change. But the economy of the reserves was essentially a peasant economy, supplemented by essential income from migrant workers, with very little local industry and few employment opportunities.

Afrikaner culture and politics

Between 1899 and 1902, Britain fought the South African (or Anglo-Boer) War against the two Afrikaner republics, to cement control of the region. This left a bitter legacy. After Union in 1910, politicians such as Jan Smuts attempted to unify the white population within the British Empire. Yet some Afrikaners remained resentful about the lingering imperial presence and about the role of English-speaking South Africans in supporting Britain. Smuts was opposed by J. B. M. Hertzog, who founded an exclusively Afrikaner National Party in 1913. Hertzog won the election of 1924 and secured major gains for Afrikaners, including bilingualism in the national civil service, Afrikaans rather than Dutch as a national language (alongside English), and compulsory teaching of both languages in white schools. But the Great Depression so undermined him that, in 1934, he and Smuts joined together in a United Party – in effect a government of national unity. D. F. Malan split from Hertzog to re-found the National Party. Afrikaners were deeply divided by these two political directions. The 1920s and 1930s saw an increased pride in Afrikaner culture. In 1938 the centenary of the **Great Trek** was commemorated by a dramatic and popular re-enactment. Afrikaans bibles, Christian tracts, newspapers, books and magazines such as the *Huisgenoot* ('housemate') poured off the presses. Afrikaners were creating new communities in the towns, often in largely Afrikaans-speaking

suburbs. Studies of nationalism emphasise the importance of media and symbols that create an 'imagined community' even when old ways of life have disintegrated.

In 1948 the Afrikaner vote had become significant. It was the culmination of a rising Afrikaner sense of themselves as a people (or *volk*), with their own language, religion and culture. This sense of self could be appealed to by politicians.

The influence of Britain

In 1948 South Africa was a self-governing part of the British Empire. A Governor-General, based in Cape Town, was the representative of the British monarch, whilst a parliament sat in imitation of the system found in Westminster. People of British descent made up about 40 percent of the white population. British investors dominated mines and industries; English was the joint official language; and British sports, such as rugby, football and cricket, were popular across South Africa. These strong cultural and political links had encouraged South Africa to join in the Second World War on the side of Britain. But, by 1948, these ties to Britain provoked strong reactions among some Afrikaners, who were attracted by the possibility of a republican government.

KEY TERMS

Reserves

The heartlands of the old African kingdoms, protected for occupation by Africans in two key Acts of the white parliament: the Natives Land Act of 1913 and the Native Trust and Land Act of 1936.

Although these measures stopped whites from taking the reserved land, they were also deeply discriminatory in that they forbade Africans from purchasing private land outside of the reserves. On the reserves African people held land in customary or communal tenure, meaning that land was controlled by the community rather than by an individual or organisation. Each married man had the right to a rural residential plot and also, if there was sufficient land locally, to fields for growing grain, usually maize. African families in the reserves kept a small number of livestock, usually cattle and goats, for milk and meat.

Great Trek

In the 1830s about one quarter of Afrikaners left the Cape Colony, which was then under British control, to establish independent republics in the interior of South Africa known as the Transvaal and the Orange Free State.

ACTIVITY CONSOLIDATION

Life in South Africa

- 1 a) List the advantages and disadvantages of being a poor, urban white person in South Africa in 1948.
b) Do the same for a wealthy, urban black person in South Africa in 1948.

You will need to think about the social, economic and political opportunities available to people at that time.

- 2 On balance, who do you think had it better in South Africa in 1948, poor whites or wealthy blacks?

WHY WAS THE NATIONAL PARTY VICTORIOUS IN 1948?

The 1948 election was a major turning point – a moment when white politics and the parliamentary system mattered deeply. In 1938, on the eve of the Second World War, Afrikaner votes were almost equally split between the two parties: the United Party under Smuts and Hertzog; and the National Party under Malan. In 1939, parliament voted to support the British war effort and Hertzog resigned from the United Party, leaving Smuts in control. Malan's National Party mobilised Afrikaners behind their vision for a future South Africa. Central to their message was an idea of how Afrikaners could survive in such a culturally mixed society.

The growth of Afrikaner nationalism

The idea of Afrikaners as a *volk* (Afrikaans for 'people'), with a distinct identity separate from other South Africans, gained increasing political currency after 1939. A society of carefully chosen Afrikaner white men, called the **Broederbond** (band of brothers), provided ideological direction in favour of a Christian, nationalist, republican outlook. The Broederbond had initiated an Economic Movement to promote Afrikaner business so that nationalist interests were advanced on this, as well as political and cultural fronts.

KEY TERM

Broederbond

A secret and exclusively male Afrikaner Calvinist organisation, dedicated to the advancement of Afrikaner interests. In the years 1948–94, many important people in South African political life, including all leaders of the government, were members of the Broederbond. It sought to promote its members and supporters in state, church, education and other organisations.

Religious institutions were also at the heart of nationalism. Many Afrikaners professed a deeply held Christianity, mostly in the Calvinist Dutch Reformed Churches, which supported the idea of an autonomous *volk*. In their reckoning, black and white people played different parts in God's plan. The boundaries between the races, therefore, had to be maintained and strengthened, to avoid racial impurity that would sabotage divine designs. Inter-marrying between races was a key concern for many voters in 1948.

Many Afrikaner nationalists adamantly opposed the decision to go to war in 1939. In part this reflected their unease about fighting for the British Empire. Some Afrikaners also had fascist sympathies. A mass anti-war movement, the *Ossewabrandwag* (Ox Wagon Guard), was launched by Afrikaners and at its peak claimed 300,000 members. Uniformed militias staged mass rallies and formed shooting associations. Critics compared them with the Nazis and a few of the leaders were clearly influenced by German fascism. After the war, most joined Malan's National Party.

By 1948 the Afrikaner influence within society, as well as its political potential, was sufficient to provide a formidable base upon which to contest the election.

International context

Before the Second World War legal discrimination and segregation by race or colour was common in many countries, including British colonies. In the United States the southern states had 'Jim Crow' laws (Jim Crow was a disparaging term for black people), which restricted registration for the franchise and segregated schools and public facilities. South Africa's early segregationist legislation was harsh but not so fundamentally different from that experienced elsewhere.

Following the Second World War (1939–45), the major powers increasingly articulated a concern for universal human rights. The war against fascism and the legacy of the Holocaust underpinned a slowly growing consensus that all people had a right to self-determination and to basic human rights. The colonial empires were gradually dismantled in the two decades from 1947 when India became independent. In this context, South Africa's policies jarred.

However, in the United States, racial division remained a significant issue. While the civil rights movement gathered pace, segregation still had its supporters in the southern states in the 1940s and 1950s. White South Africans were convinced that they stood for Western, Christian and anti-Communist values and they found some international sympathy.

The 1948 election

In the glow of allied victory over fascism, and with Smuts playing a major role in the formation of the United Nations, his United Party government flirted with more liberal policies. Smuts was no liberal himself and in many respects shared the racial attitudes of his Afrikaner peers. But he was a pragmatist. If industry needed more black workers, he was prepared to facilitate this. His Minister of Health, Henry Gluckman, advocated an urgent expansion of health services in the country, along the lines of the British National Health Service, which would serve both white and black (though in segregated hospitals).

For many insecure whites these developments were threatening and in the 1948 election campaign Afrikaner nationalists harnessed everyday racism in promoting fear of the *swart gevaar* (black danger). They opposed *oorstroming* (flooding) of African people into the cities where they competed for jobs with whites. Malan's National Party still had its major support in the countryside, and here they were able to play to a related concern, that African workers were streaming to the cities and creating a labour shortage for farmers. Nationalists stirred fears of sexual relations across the colour line – in their eyes the inevitable outcome of threats to the racial hierarchy. They accused Smuts and his Party, conservative though they were, of being sympathetic to black people, and failing to control these political dangers. In Afrikaner nationalist hands, the language of race, never absent in South African politics, was becoming more intense.