

South African Short History



Historical Background of South Africa

The Landing at the Cape

Jan van Riebeeck European settlement in South Africa started in Cape Town, which is why it is still called the Mother City to this day. After the British had decided against establishment of a colony at the Cape of Good Hope, it was the Dutch who realized the strategic and economic importance of the Cape. On a commission for the Dutch-East India Trading company the merchant Jan van Riebeeck anchored in the picturesque bay at the foot of the Table Mountain on April 6, 1652.

He was accompanied by 82 men and 8 women, his own wife amongst them. They had been instructed to establish a strong base to provide the Company's ships with fresh groceries, mainly meat and vegetables on the long journey from Europe to Asia.

Maria de la Queillerie First of all, van Riebeeck's men erected the "Fort de Goede Hoop" for their own protection, and they laid out a large garden and started to grow fruit and vegetables. They tried to obtain the meat provisions through trade with the natives. (Please click on "Next")

The Great Trek

The historical events in 19th century South Africa are marked

by the "Groot Trek". Starting in 1835, more than 10,000 Boers, the Voortrekkers, left the Cape Colony with their families and went north and north-east. The reasons for this mass exodus were their economic problems, the threatening danger of conflict with the Xhosa, who settled on the other side of the Fish River, and primarily, discontent with the English colonial authorities who didn't provide sufficient protection and had forbidden the slave trade and postulated the equality of whites and non-whites.

In the border area at the Fish River constant conflicts with the Xhosa occurred and the central government in Cape Town was neither willing nor able to give the Boers efficient military protection. Absolutely incomprehensible to the conservative Boer communities was the approach of the British colonial government towards the black inhabitants of the colony, who were held as slaves on most of the white farms. From 1833 on the slave trade was declared illegal and the "Emancipation Act" demanded that white masters set their slaves free, against payment of a small compensation by the state. The Voortrekkers felt that the British policy destroyed their traditional social order which was based on racial separation, and would undermine white predominance, which they saw as God's own will.

The Zulu Kingdom

Towards the end of the 18th century, all over southern Africa small tribal groups were amalgamating into larger communities. This was by no means a peaceful process, but the result of protracted wars. The rise of the Zulu Kingdom falls into this period. Through incredible atrocities and cruelties the infamous Zulu warrior Shaka gained control over a number of Zulu clans. He expanded his territory systematically. Shaka's warriors raided Zulu villages and burnt them down. Women and children were gored to death; young men were called up and chiefs tortured and forced into allegiance.

Shaka was the illegitimate son of the Zulu chief Senzangakhona and the young girl Nandi, a member of the Langeni clan. As a young man, Shaka joined the army of Dingiswayo and soon became its highest commander. With the support of Dingiswayo he gained supremacy over the Zulu clan, enforcing his claim against his opponents with the most ferocious brutality. Under Shaka the Zulu territory expanded phenomenally. All the clans had to subject themselves to the one leader. At the beginning of the 19th century, Shaka had created the most powerful kingdom in the whole of southern Africa.

Towards the end of his reign, Shaka used his power even more destructively. He chased his army from one battle to the next, and the cruelties against his enemies became more outrageous. Eventually Shaka was assassinated by his half-brother Dingane in 1828.

For southern Africa an irreversible process of restructuring came to an end with Shaka's death. Thousands of people had become refugees, fights between settlers and refugees broke out everywhere, and all these disturbances led to regroupings. At the end of this period, the small and widespread chief-led clans had disappeared and were replaced by bigger communities which had come together merely for reasons of safety and self-defence.

The Battle of Blood River

After the Voortrekkers had failed to negotiate with the Zulus the secession of land for settling and grazing, and had endured a number of catastrophic assaults, they assembled at the Ncome River for a decisive battle. On December 16, 1838, 464 Boers under the command of Andries Pretorius defeated more than 10,000 Zulu warriors. The deeply religious Boers did not ascribe the military victory to their technically superior armaments, but interpreted it primarily as a sign of God. Before the battle, they had prayed and made a vow that if God would grant them victory over the Zulus, they would

commemorate the event annually. With that battle behind them, they believed even more strongly that white predominance over blacks is God's own will.

The monument at the Blood River, a fort of cast-bronze wagons, brings to life the terrible events of 1838, which meant the beginning of the end of the Zulu Kingdom. This monument stood alone for many years as a reminder exclusively of the heroism of the white settlers, who suffered no fatalities at Blood River on that day.

Finally, in December 1998, a memorial for the 3,000 Zulu soldiers who died in the battle, was inaugurated by Zulu Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi across the river from the Afrikaner monument. The historic anniversary of the 'Day of the Vow' has been renamed 'Reconciliation Day' in the New South Africa.

The Anglo-Boer War

After the Voortrekkers were defeated by the British in Natal in 1842, the Great Trek moved on further north-east and eventually the trekkers settled north and south of the Vaal river. First, they formed the independent Transvaal to the north, which would later become the South African Republic.

Paul KrugerIn the meantime, the Cape Colony had spread further and all the land between the Vaal and Orange rivers was declared British territory in 1848. The English, however, had not taken into account the strong resistance of the Boers who had already settled there. Because the area was economically of little interest to them, they soon gave it up again. On the 23rd of February 1854, the contract of Bloemfontein was signed, which led to the foundation of the Orange Free State. The "Oranje Vrystaat" developed into a politically and economically successful republic. But this positive process was overshadowed by various negative events in the second Boer state, the South African Republic in Transvaal (today Mpumalanga). By now British sentiment was in favoured of

amalgamating their own colonies and the Boer republics into one union, with the primary purpose of gaining possession of the Transvaal gold mines.

The Premier of the Cape Colony, Sir Cecil Rhodes, first tried to achieve this union through a putsch that failed due to wariness on the part of Paul Kruger, President of the Boer Republic. Soon the new Governor of the Cape, Lord Alfred Milner, succeeded with the use of armed force. The Orange Free State, which had formed an alliance with the South African Republic, became involved in the conflict. On October 11, 1899 a war broke out between these two Boer Republics and the two British colonies of Cape and Natal.

The Apartheid Era

The policy of consistent racial separation was introduced in 1910 through a group of laws that further curtailed the rights of the black majority. The "Mines and Works Act" of 1911, for example, limited black workers exclusively to menial work and so guaranteed the availability of cheap labour and secured the better positions for white workers. The "Native Land Act" of 1913 set aside 7.3 per cent of South African territory as reservations for black people and barred them from buying land outside these areas.

Deprived of the right to vote or to strike, the black population had no means of political influence, and so the ANC, African National Congress, and other resistance and liberation movements formed. They were all initially badly organized and minimally effective. The white governments pursued their politics virtually without obstruction. After the Second World War, the conflicts intensified and black workers went on a number of wild strikes. The whites became nervous and helped the right-wing National Party to an overwhelming election victory in the elections of 1948.

The NP was led by D.F. Malan, who stood for drastic measures

against the "black menace," coined the concept of "apartheid" and consistently enforced this devious policy. From then on, it was not "only" about the separation of the races in the economic sector, but increasingly the private domain of all non-white people was regulated and controlled as well. Marriage or any love relationship between members of different racial groups were forbidden, and in all public institutions and offices, in public transport and on public toilets, racial segregation was introduced. More detrimental because of long-term consequences was the education system, the so-called Bantu education, which tried to keep the black children at a very low standard. Subjects were even dish washing and the weeding of flower beds.

The New Democratic Republic of South Africa

Only months after taking up office, Frederik Willem de Klerk rang in the end of Apartheid in an historic speech in Parliament in February 1990, and declared himself in favour of a democratic South Africa. The ANC was unbanned. Some days later, Nelson Mandela, the President of the ANC, was released from prison on Robben Island, after 27 years behind bars. Earlier, in secret negotiations the ANC and the government had agreed to refrain from violence and work for a peaceful transition and a new constitution. The process of rapprochement was slow in the beginning, particularly because of differences and power struggles between the Xhosa-dominated ANC and the Zulu-led Inkatha Freedom Party, resulting in violence in the townships.

In the meantime, de Klerk had to deal with growing criticism from his own National Party. To counter that, he had his policy confirmed in a referendum voted on by the white population. Almost 70 per cent supported a continuation of the reforms.

After a further two turbulent years, eventually a new constitution was drafted. In April 1994, the first democratic

elections were held in South Africa. As expected, the ANC gained the overwhelming majority.

Nelson Mandela was inaugurated on the 10th of May 1994 as the first black African President of the New South Africa. The first Vice-President was Thabo Mbeki. F.W. de Klerk, whose National Party had gained 20 per cent of the votes, became second Vice-President of the Interim Government.

The Nobel Peace Prize laureate Nelson Mandela retired in 1999. Thabo Mbeki, his First Vice President, became president of the ANC and President of the Republic of South Africa. The ANC got almost a two third majority of the votes in those elections.

Mbeki's style of government was progressively seen as been autocratic. And his disastrous stand on two of the most pressing problems of the country, AIDS and the regime in neighboring Zimbabwe, earned him critique in large parts of the population.

When Mbeki suspended his vice president, Jacob Zuma, who was facing prosecution for rape, corruption and racketeering, the resistance against him grew tremendously, especially among the youngsters in the ANC Youth League, who are Zuma's most ardent followers.

At the ANC convention in Polokwane on December 16, 2007, the populist Zuma was elected new party president and thereby automatically as candidate for the presidency of the country. Some months later Mbeki was pressurised into resigning from the office of State President.

In the meantime, an opposition party has formed under the leadership of former defence minister Mosiuoa Lekota. Numerous intelligent people are gathered in its ranks, mostly from the ANC, who are willing to fight corruption and restore democracy. They often appear in newspapers, but are virtually banned from TV.

Taking the state of education of the vast majority of the South African population into account, COPE does not stand a chance against the ANC in the elections later this year, also not in a coalition with the DA (Democratic Alliance), a mostly white party around Cape Town's famous mayoress Helen Zille. – It looks like Zuma will become president. He still has to stand trial on charges of corruption and racketeering. He gives the overall impression of regarding democratic values not highly. He is relatively uneducated, sucks up to the left wingers, at the same time leads a traditional life with a big collection of wives – the latest added only weeks ago – and is prone to violence talk and to bullying minorities. Many South Africans fear for the future.