

# ZEERUST: A PROFILE OF RESISTANCE

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CIVIL war, police terror, and the withdrawal of social services—these are the blessings which Dr. Verwoerd, Minister of Native Affairs, has brought to the Bafurutse tribe of the Western Transvaal in the name of apartheid.

Today heavily armed police columns strike nightly terror into sleeping villages, and a hundred houses lie in smouldering ruins; scores of women serve hard labour sentences, and Zeerust's jail is choked with tribesmen held on murder charges.

Yet only a year ago the 30,000 strong Bafurutse were known as a peaceful and prosperous tribe, and fourteen policemen sufficed to control their 1,500 square mile Reserve. Half the tribe farmed their well-watered land, whilst the rest worked on farms or in 150 mile distant Johannesburg to raise money for the White man's poll tax.

Throughout the country there have been disturbances of one sort or another whenever the Government has tried to move a tribe from its land, whenever a person of standing in the tribal hierarchy has been deposed or banished, and whenever an attempt to issue 'reference books'—i.e. passes—to women has been made.

The Bafurutse, whether by co-incidence or design, have been subjected to all three of these evils, the latter two descending on them simultaneously.

On the whole, the Bafurutse were satisfied with their land, which forms an extensive and well-watered unit bordering on Bechuanaland. Organized in villages roughly corresponding to highland clans, they were ruled by Abraham Moilwa of Dinokana—the land of many streams—as hereditary Senior Chief.

The tribe's overt struggle against the Nationalist Government dates back to the arrival in '54 of a new Native Commissioner, Carl Richter, who determined to put into effect the Bantu Authorities Act which makes a Native Affairs Department (N.A.D.) employee of every tribal chief and which Abraham Moilwa had refused to endorse. On finding, moreover, that the two villages of Leeufontein and Braklaagte were situated outside the Reserve on farms bought from Whites at the turn of the

century, Richter announced that they were "Black spots" in White areas and would have to be moved.

Chief Abraham now headed the resistance of almost all the villagers to the proposed move. He took legal advice and led a delegation which obtained an assurance from a senior N.A.D. official that no move was planned. This constituted a personal setback for Richter, who had already made himself unpopular amongst the Bafurutse by setting up a network of spies and informers in the Reserve, and increased his dislike of Chief Abraham, whose prestige amongst his people had been greatly enhanced.

Abraham, although a shrewd politician with his finger on the tribe's pulse, had a fondness for the bottle, and in 1952 his administration had become so lax that some headmen complained. Richter now arranged for these long answered and forgotten charges against Abraham to be re-opened by the N.A.D., and had some new ones added. The most interesting of these was an allegation of slandering Dr. Verwoerd, Minister of Native Affairs, about whom Abraham was alleged to have said:-

"Who the hell is Verwoerd? He is just a minister and there will be other ministers after him. I am not afraid of him, and Dinokana will stand here forever."

The enquiry concluded in October '56, but when no report was published and no action taken, Abraham and his people settled back into their accustomed ways.

The dénouement came early in 1957. On March 22, Government notice No. 421 informed the Bafurutse that their women were to be issued with reference books, the streamlined version of the hated pass system which leads to the daily arrest as criminals of more than 1,000 Africans in the Union.

Abraham opposed the extension of passes to women, and when the mobile pass-issuing unit came to Dinokana on April 1—perhaps a symbolic date—only 76 women out of some 4,000 took out the pass-books. Abraham was ordered to call a tribal gathering on April 4, at which he was contemptuously informed by the Regional Chief Native Commissioner that he had been deposed and had fourteen days in which to leave the area.

The stunning effect of this pronouncement, made on the assembled tribe without any explanation, is difficult to describe, and from that day to this the Bafurutse have known no peace.

Four months later, having ignored continual letters from Abraham's attorneys, the N.A.D. finally condescended to inform

him that his deposition had been authorized three months before it was announced — though the Department had never authorized his deportation.

When news of the Chief's deposition and the attempt to force passes on their women reached 150 mile distant Johannesburg, a Bafurutse Association was formed by the men working on the Reef to investigate these incredible happenings in their homes. Two buses were chartered, and on April 13, the indignant tribesmen returned to the Reserve. That night most of the reference books taken out in Dinokana were burnt, and a tribal meeting was called which rapidly turned into a people's court. Linking the Departmental enquiry, the deposition and the Chief's opposition to the issue of passes, the tribesmen branded four of Richter's informers as traitors and allegedly condemned them to be thrown to their death in the 75 ft. deep pit of Mamokoti.

The police allegedly intervened in the nick of time. Mass detentions followed and, after a protracted court case against 23 Bafurutse, 5 men were sentenced to terms of five and three years' imprisonment with hard labour for incitement to murder. An appeal is now pending.

The events that followed the pass-issuing unit's visit to Dinokana were to become the pattern of the tribe's future. Women arrested for burning their passes were sentenced to fines of £50 or six months hard labour by Commissioner Richter, sitting as a magistrate. Tribesmen meeting to discuss the deposition of the Chief were arrested and fined for holding unauthorized meetings.

When the African principal of the 1200 pupil local primary school supported passes, his school was boycotted for two days. On the third it was permanently closed down on instructions from Pretoria, the names of the 1054 absent children being circularized to prevent them from ever attending a school again.

The local post office was closed down "to protect government property", and the railway bus which is the only link between the Reserve villages and the outside world was withdrawn for the same reason.

Old age, widow's and military pensions have been refused to women without passes. Their dignified response has been to hand in their pension books, thus permanently renouncing their pittance of 17s. 10d. a month. Tax payments have been refused from men unable to produce their wives' passes, young women wanting to marry have been driven back to heathen

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as next in line of succession, he had unsuccessfully offered the still vacant Senior Chieftainship only a short while before.

Indignant and puzzled, Sgt. Rousseau, commanding Zeerust's police, blamed the attorneys who had destroyed respect for the force by defending arrested tribesmen—and getting them off. A similarly refreshing approach to legal problems was displayed by Lichtenburg's Native Commissioner, who recommended that agitators should be banned without a hearing, since they would only use it to make political capital.

The mayor of Zeerust, Mr. du Plessis, called in passing for the establishment of a 5,000 strong army camp near the Bechuanaland border, but reserved his particular venom for the Rev. C. Hooper, the town's courageous young Anglican rector. Father Hooper is the only local White champion the Bafurutse have found, and he and his wife symbolize the tragically difficult task of the 'Church Militant' in South Africa. Branded as "kaffir-boeties", they are ostracized by Zeerust's Whites. The local White congregation, after unsuccessfully demanding Hooper's removal from Bishop Ambrose Reeves of Johannesburg, has almost completely deserted him and his church, whilst the immense goodwill and respect which he and his wife have so deservedly earned amongst the Bafurutse cannot save his African congregations from the disintegration of established tribal life brought on by civil war and police terror.

The pattern of events which emerges from the evidence heard by the Commission is a relatively simple one. Outside of Dinokana, trouble developed only in the four villages whose chiefs forced their women to take passes. The smouldering resentment of these women, who believed that the babies on their backs were their passes from God, was blown into flame by their menfolk from Johannesburg coming home on long weekends, and pass burnings resulted. But when the men had returned to their jobs in Johannesburg, chiefs like Edward Lencoe of Witkleigat put into practice the lessons they had learnt from Police Sgt. van Rooyen. 'Smelling out' their victims, they first assaulted them brutally and then handed them over to the police to be tried before Richter in his capacity as magistrate. The increased resentment caused by the vicious sentences he imposed, and by the withdrawal of social services, found expression in retaliatory arson. This led to further police raids and assaults by the chiefs' bodyguards on all and sundry arriving from Johannesburg, for fear that they had come

to avenge their womenfolk.

The irony of the pass struggle is that even at the time of writing it is not an offence for a woman to be without a pass, as the deadline date has yet to be gazetted. On learning of this, many women impoverished themselves by selling their all-important cattle, and used the money to pay part of the fines imposed when they subsequently burnt their books, which are considered to be "government property".

The impasse reached over the issuing of passes was best described to the Commission of Inquiry by Lieut. E. H. D. Coetzee, officer temporarily in charge of criminal investigations at Zeerust. Stressing the strength of the women's resistance to passes, the Lieutenant pointed out that if all the women who did not have pass books by a certain date were to be arrested, an impossible situation would be created. There would not be enough police to arrest them, not enough courts to try them, and not enough jails in the district to hold them.

He therefore proposed that sanctions should be applied against the tribeswomen to make them feel, "I must get my book". Nothing if not systematic, the Lieutenant suggested that African women refusing pass books should not get medical attention, draw pensions, receive registered post or be permitted to use the railway bus. Striking an original note doubtlessly inspired by biblical dicta, he also suggested that African children should not be admitted to school if their mothers did not have pass books.

No opportunity was ever afforded the tribe's counsel to cross-examine the pro-Government witnesses, but their own witnesses were invited to appear on November 6th. On November 5th, a Government order prohibiting gatherings of more than ten Africans in the Zeerust area was promulgated, and doubts cast on the authority of Attorney Shulamith Muller and Advocate George Bizos to appear for the tribe had to be resolved by the circulation of a petition signed by 7,000 Bafurutse.

Understandably unaware of the Government order promulgated on the previous day, more than a thousand of these tribesmen streamed along the only road into Zeerust early on November 6—to be turned back after a brief clash at a road block by forty police armed with sten guns, revolvers and rifles with fixed bayonets. When, however, another thousand Bafurutse, again consisting mainly of women, came along the same road about an hour later, they were 'buzzed' by eight Harvard training planes of the South African Air Force.

The planes carried the day, but Advocate Bizos refused to lead evidence whilst they roared overhead, claiming that only two of his expected 30 witnesses had succeeded in reaching Zeerust. A week's postponement was granted, and on November 13, 118 Gopane villagers were injured in an unheralded police baton charge whilst making their way to Zeerust.

The Commission's report is still awaited, but events have already overtaken it. The struggle has become one between a few pro-Government chiefs, utterly dependent upon the forces of the State which have been marshalled in their support, and the people of the tribe. To Chief Edward Lencoe of Witkleigat, a protégé of Dr. Verwoerd himself, the logic of this situation was finally brought home just before Christmas, on what is now known in South Africa as the Day of the Covenant. News of the indiscriminate rule of terror which he had been imposing on his village had reached Johannesburg when Mrs. Makgoro Maletsoe, who had joined in a pass burning in Witkleigat, was admitted to Baragwanath Hospital, where she lay for some days in a state of mental derangement. She had lost the use of her right arm, which Lencoe smashed with his kierie whilst kicking her in the face and ribs after the pass burning. Members of the Johannesburg Bafurutse Association made a special point of returning to Witkleigat on the long week-end before Christmas. On arrival, they were attacked by Lencoe's bodyguard, but fought back so effectively that the tables were turned. That week-end Lencoe's £2,000 house and his 1948 Chrysler car were burnt down, his wife beaten up, and he himself forced to flee in terror on horse-back into Bechuanaland. In the village, one of his cronies lay dead, and by the New Year, 36 houses in Witkleigat were gutted. Lencoe's story has been repeated in lesser degree in the villages of Motswedi and Leeufontein. In the latter, Israel I. had found it expedient to put into effect the move mooted by Richter in 1953, and more than 15 houses have been burnt down in his village since December 16.

The attitude of the Supreme Court to the sentences imposed by Richter for pass burning is most interesting. The Act provides for a maximum penalty of £100 or six months. Dismissing an appeal against the severity of the £50 or six months sentence on 31 Witkleigat women who had burnt their passes with Mrs. Maletsoe, Mr. Justice Boshoff of the Transvaal division of the Supreme Court said on December 7, 1957: "It was reasonable to suppose that he (the Native Commissioner) knew that they

(the appellants) had no resources or earnings. It could not therefore be said that he imposed a fine to keep them out of prison. A small fine would defeat the aim—to impose a sentence which would have the necessary deterrent effect." Since these women burnt their passes in November, the charges on which arrests are made have increasingly become those of attempted murder and arson, even where juveniles are concerned, and bail has been refused in most cases.

The reaction to the attempt to force the tribeswomen to carry passes has been such that, at the time of writing, it is almost impossible to find a Bafurutse woman possessing one, outside of those working on White farms and those living in Zeerust's location. As a direct result of the struggle against passes, everything connected with the Government has become suspect and is resisted, even where, as in the case of cattle inoculations against foot and mouth disease, it is beneficial to the tribe.

In January the fantastic licence which pro-Government chiefs are given by the police was illuminated for the first time by the stark light of newspaper publicity. Two reporters from the non-White paper *Golden City Post* were arrested on their arrival at Witkleigat by Edward Lencoe and his men and brought before Sgt. van Rooyen. Ignoring a press card countersigned by the Deputy Police Commissioner of the Witwatersrand, van Rooyen helped Lencoe to work his followers into a homicidal frenzy and then handed the reporters over to them for questioning. After the reporters had been methodically beaten by Lencoe and his men, Sgt. van Rooyen sent them on their way with a homily on how lucky they had been that he, as a police officer, had been there to stop Lencoe from killing them as they deserved. The *Golden City Post* reported this surrealist atrocity on January 12 and has demanded an official inquiry in the interests of law and order.

Recognizing the fundamental nature of the challenge which the events around Zeerust have posed to the whole concept of Whites governing voiceless Blacks, the Nationalist Government seems to be planning a show-down with the Bafurutse as a tribe. The impressive array of V.I.P.s who have graced Commissioner Richter's Zeerust office has been headed on two occasions by Maj. Gen. C. I. Rademeyer, Commissioner of the South African Police, who was preceded by Major Att. Spengler, head of the Union's C.I.D. Early in January Dr. Eiselen, Secretary of Native Affairs and the organizational power behind Verwoerd, spent two days in Zeerust. Heavy police reinforcements have

been drafted to the area, and a determined effort has begun to smash the Bafurutse Association in Newclare Township, Johannesburg. Having recently extended the notorious Natal Code, which provides for tribal fines and punishments, to the whole of the Union, the Government may well be preparing to use it against the Bafurutse.

It should be stressed that, far from giving a lead to the Bafurutse, the African National Congress has lagged behind them so pathetically that even today it has no real organization in the Reserve. Individual members of the Bafurutse Association are, of course, very often also members of the ANC, but their primary motivation has been the protection of their women-folk and families back home in the Reserve. It would perhaps not be surprising if latterly the desire for revenge had entered into their activities.

It should not, of course, be thought that events in the Marico district are an isolated episode in Verwoerd's South Africa, as close parallels can be given throughout the country, not only for the spontaneous and deep resistance of African women to the acceptance of passes, but to the reactions of tribes to attempts to move them from their land and depose their Chiefs. What makes the story of the Bafurutse tribe, now being forced into what may well prove to be a bloody and tragic final act, of particular significance is that it shows at work all the policies and forces seen separately elsewhere.

Nor should the tribe's kinship with the neighbouring Bechuana be forgotten. They have seen how the deposition of Seretse Khama has demoralized their cousins. They also know that any Mofurutse need only walk into Bechuanaland to hold his head up and be treated as a man—no policeman will ask him for a pass, and none gainsay his right to drink as he pleases. Many Bafurutse have made their way to the British hospital at Lobetsi rather than to their 'own' one at Zeerust, and the increasing police persecution of Bafurutse men rather than women may presage a growth of that very political consciousness in the tribe which Verwoerdism is intended to abort.

Much will depend on the extent to which the Bafurutse will wish—or be able—to link their struggle with the wider one of the Union's other Africans, for on their own they will soon be crushed by the State and irreparably consumed by civil war. When a nailed boot descends on small pebbles, they do not shoot upward, but grind against one another.