African farmers at Driefontein, 1988.

6

Sharing the land

OUR NARRATIVE thus far has considered the successes and defeats of different groups populating the eastern Transvaal, with a focus on the 19th century as a time of conflict, and the 20th century as a time of economic growth as well as economic disempowerment. This chapter considers the struggles over land of the 20th century – in effect a continuation of the dispossession and subordination of Africans that had begun with the arrival of the Boers in 1845 and continued first with the ideology of segregation, which had its roots in Britain and its colonies, and then with the ideology of apartheid, which had its roots in Afrikaner Nationalism. We consider some of the most significant laws and policies that shaped the province and the lives of people living there in the course of the 20th century. But events are not only shaped by laws and policies. This chapter also tells the story of the struggles of African communities that faced the loss of their land during this conflict-ridden period. We pick up the narrative at the end of the South African War, when the Milner administration betrayed Britain's African allies. Africans had high hopes of positive consequences for them of a British victory, and the crucial part that many had played in making this outcome possible. But they were in for a rude shock.

After the South African War

The South African War ended in 1902, with the British as victors. They set up an administration headed by Lord Alfred Milner, British High Commissioner in South Africa. The old Boer Republics – the Transvaal and Orange Free State (renamed the Orange River Colony) – became British colonies. In the Transvaal the new administration was more powerful and more effective than the old ZAR government had been, and it began to reconstruct the region, which was in disarray after the war. One of its early initiatives was to resettle Boers who had left their farms during the hostilities. But this meant neglecting the claims of its African allies who expected to get land after helping the British to win the war. The British were in a difficult situation. Many Boers were still armed, and the new administration was reluctant to do anything that might spark

Homestead of an African farmer in the eastern Transvaal.

further hostilities. Instead, the British supported Boer interests at the cost of African interests.

The interim British administration lasted until 1910 when, on 31 May, the Union of South Africa was inaugurated. During this time the ideology of segregation took root in South Africa. Imported from Britain and its colonies, this was based on the idea that whites and people of other races could not – and should not – live together in integrated societies. Indeed, the notion of segregation was substantially based on the superiority of whites – and specifically people of British descent – to indigenous communities in the various parts of the British Empire. A cornerstone of the Union government's unfolding segregationist policies was the 1913 Land Act.

The 1913 Land Act

The purpose of the 1913 Land Act was to divide the country into separate areas for occupation by whites and blacks. According to the Act, 'natives' would not be permitted to acquire, hire, or have interests in land in white areas. Areas would also be set aside for Africans, where whites would not be allowed to own land. The core of these areas included the existing reserves set up by previous governments. This amounted to about 7 per cent of land in the country. While the Act would change the country profoundly, this happened over several decades.

Table 1: Land occupied by Africans in the eastern Transvaal (morgen)

District	Native reserves or locations	Mission lands	Native owned farms	Crown lands occupied by natives	Lands owned by Europeans but occupied by natives	Total land under native occupation	Total area of district
Barberton	0	0	0	226 190	148 000	374 190	1 515 010
Bethal	0	0	0	0	170	170	384 035
Carolina	0	47	272	0	2 549	2 868	633 704
Ermelo	0	0	350	0	400	750	908 178
Lydenburg	120 175	0	1 197	149 764	521 800	792 936	3 077 276
Middelburg	30 603	19 051	17 335	2 000	338 442	407 431	1 520 664
Piet Retief	0	1 819	0	21 804	71 507	95 130	488 625
Standerton	0	0	0	0	1 097	1 097	605 855
Wakkerstroom	5 078	0	8 151	0	2 000	15 229	664 559
Totals	155 856	20 917	27 305	399 758	1 085 965	1 689 801	9 797 906

The Beaumont and Stubbs Commissions

After the 1913 Land Act was passed, the Union government needed to decide precisely how to divide up the land, and in 1914 it set up two commissions of inquiry to examine this issue. The Beaumont Commission examined the 'land question' across the whole country, and the Stubbs Commission probed the land question in the eastern Transvaal. The latter commission produced a table that showed how land was divided between blacks and whites in 1914.

Among other things, the commissions asked farmers, both black and white, how they thought land should be divided. The responses of some white farmers – recorded in the commission reports – give a telling insight into their thinking at that time:

> I think the idea should be for the natives to be able to buy their land as well as the white man; I do not suggest, however, that they should be allowed to buy ground where adjoining farms are occupied by whites. – W Gillespie, Wakkerstroom

> We do not say that you should define small areas in the adjoining districts of Carolina or Piet Retief, but some areas might be placed elsewhere. Let them have their own Local Government and do what they like, but they should be separated from the Europeans. – A G Kleinhause, Ermelo

> The area I have recommended in the Barberton district is almost too good for natives, but still one has to give them good land, where they can live. – A Steyn, Carolina

> I think they won't blame us for recommending that these farms along the river, which are eminently suitable for wheat and oats, should be kept for Europeans, as the Natives never grow wheat and oats. – S R Coetzee, Lydenburg

Land and labour in the 20th century

The 1913 Land Act was implemented slowly, and for the first half of the century segregation was not very rigidly applied. Older systems of land ownership, labour tenancy, and rent tenancy existed in many parts of the province up until the 1970s and even the 1980s. But during the first half of the 20th century, at least, Africans could still make a living from the land. They could become tenants on farms, live on mission stations, live on land they had bought themselves, or live in a reserve.

Working on a farm

For many years, white farmers in the eastern Transvaal and elsewhere had made use of tenant labourers, partly because this was the only form of labour many farmers could get or afford. Under the tenant labour system, African families provided farmers with labour at certain times of the year in return for a piece of land on which to live, a small plot to cultivate, and grazing for their livestock. Heads of these households expected their wives and children to work for them as well as for the white farmer. This could lead to tensions when both the household heads and farmers wanted women and children to work for them at the same time. Most often, the farmers had the upper hand. Although this meant that there was less labour and time available for the small plots of land cultivated by African families, they generally still managed to produce enough food for their own subsistence and to sell for small amounts of cash. They would use this for taxes, clothing, and 'luxuries' such as tea and sugar. Tenant farmers could therefore survive on the land of their white masters, but would never prosper. White farmers were not always prosperous either, and were not always trying to make life difficult for their tenants. Tyranny and abuse may have been the order of the day on some farms, but some white farmers were also concerned with the wellbeing of their tenants. If the tenants left the farm out of protest, as they sometimes did, the farmer had no labour.

An African farmer at his homestead on the eastern Transvaal highveld.

Many farmers in the region struggled to get labour. Unless Africans were given access to land for grazing and cultivation, it was very difficult to get them to work on one's farm. But some smaller farmers were not happy about acceding to the demands or needs of their African tenants. Similarly, big capitalist farmers did not want to set aside land for the use of African tenant families, because to do so would reduce the amount of land available for their production, and reduce their profits. When the apartheid government came to power in 1948 it was determined to control African farm labour systematically. The apartheid state and larger commercial farmers implemented policies and created conditions that made it possible for farmers to establish more controlled labour systems. We will look at how they did this later in the chapter.

Some Africans paid rent in cash in order to stay on farms. Unlike labour tenants, they were relatively free, and were largely able to live without the interference of whites. The crops they cultivated were their own, they could divide the land as they wished, and they had a sense that the land belonged to them. The communities living on these farms were ruled by chiefs or sub-chiefs. Some of these people lived on land owned by companies, and some on state-owned land.

But often the most prosperous African farming communities were those which owned the land they farmed. While there were many black-owned farms in the eastern Transvaal, we will focus on Boomplaats and Driefontein. We saw in the last chapter that the Boomplaats community was a progressive

Pixley ka Isaka Seme.

and entrepreneurial one, made up of the descendants of Pedi Christians who had lived at Botšhabelo and then moved to Mafolofolo, where they were attacked and defeated. Boomplaats became their next home. It was bought by Chief Micha Dinkwanyane and other community members. There were also tenants on the farm who saw it as a refuge after having lost land, or wanted to escape exploitative conditions on white farms in the vicinity. Tenants had to pay rent of £1/10 to the chief, and £2/10 to the owner of that portion of the farm. Boomplaats became prosperous, and the way of life on the farm was peaceful and disciplined. The community lived according to rules based on their Christian faith.

Black ownership of the farm Driefontein did not start in quite as wholesome a way as that of Boomplaats. This story begins at a horse race, where a horse belonging to an African man, Ntshebe Ngwenya, outran all the others. Some of the white farmers present took offence at this; one man in particular thought it was unacceptable that a horse owned by a black man should beat his own. So he decided to give Ngwenya a hiding. Ngwenya took offence at this in turn, and gave the man the 'beating of his life'. Having won a horse race, and beaten up a white man, Ngwenya realised that his life and his community might be in danger.

One day he met Pixley ka Isaka Seme, founding member and first treasurer of the South African Native National Congress (later the ANC). Seme recognised the need of Africans to own land, and founded the Native Farmers' Association of Africa (NFAA). He helped them buy Daggakraal, Driefontein, and Driepan, at £3 a morgen, in the south east of the province.

Driefontein became a popular refuge for Africans. The farm was divided into stands where people could live and grow crops. Tenants paid about R25 a year. Members of the Black Sash wrote:

> Successful farmers sell their surplus on the local market, where there are long-established homes, fields of maize, sugar beans, potatoes and pumpkins, and where sleek cattle graze on uneroded pastures.

As the years passed, the population grew and the farm became overcrowded. People from many ethnic groups – Zulu, Swazi, and Sotho – all made Driefontein their home.

Africans living on mission stations also managed to escape some of the effects of discriminatory state policies for much of the 20th century. Of course, they had to comply with a different set of rules and regulations that were often quite strict, and rejected many aspects of 'traditional' or pre-colonial African

Livestock and stone kraals on an African-owned farm.

culture. The most famous and successful mission station in Mpumalanga was Botšhabelo (see chapter 2). In the 20th century it became one of the most illustrious educational centres in the country.

These communities of tenants, farm owners, and residents at mission stations were all threatened by the 1913 Land Act, but while a few may have had some anxieties, they were only removed decades later. In the meantime, immediately after the passing of the Act, it was labour tenants, farm workers, and chiefs in the reserves who were most concerned about what the Land Act meant to them. The Act regulated terms of employment for labour tenants and farm workers, and the chiefs were concerned about the way in which land would be divided up as a consequence of the Beaumont and Stubbs Commissions, since this would have implications for the amount of land available to their chiefdoms in the future. Organisations such as the Transvaal African Congress (TAC) and Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU) came to the fore in attempting to resist deteriorating conditions on the land.

The Transvaal African Congress

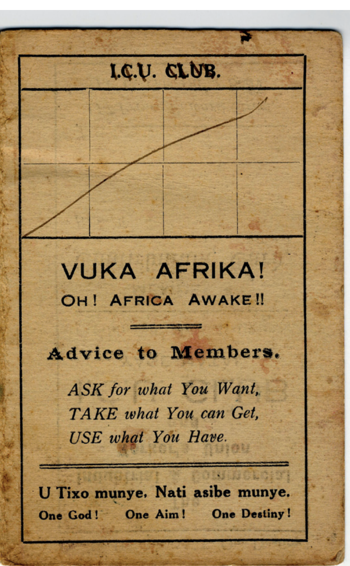
When the 1913 Land Act was passed, some organisations highlighted its negative implications. Among these were the TAC, the provincial wing of the ANC. After 1913 the TAC made representations to the Beaumont Commission in support of Pedi and Swazi chiefs, trying to ensure that the division of land in the Transvaal would either favour them, or not be too detrimental to them. But the TAC's most dramatic intervention took place only in January 1921. The

organisation sent Mandhlesilo Nkosi, son of a Natal chief, to the districts of Ermelo, Standerton and Witbank to organise farm workers. He began to collect 'tickets' (subscriptions) from farm workers, and informed them that a meeting would be held in Standerton on 21 January.

At the meeting Nkosi railed against the unjust 'squatting system', and called on farm workers to demand cash wages. While the 'squatting system' – a more negative term for 'labour tenancy' – was in many cases preferable to working for cash alone, it could also be very exploitative, providing no way of generating an income for tenants while making unreasonable demands for labour. A few of the newly paid up TAC members from Standerton were so inspired by Nkosi's speech that they began to demand cash wages. They went on strike, and some were arrested for 'breach of contract', but were released again since their contracts did not in fact comply with the requirements set out in the 1913 Land Act. The strikers' actions might have persuaded some farmers to give their workers a cash supplement. But the TAC's influence did not last long. Nkosi was restricted by the state, there was discord within the TAC, and farm workers stopped supporting it once the initial euphoria had worn off.

The ICU Red Ticket

It was around workers and workers' land that some of the most successful political and resistance movements arose. One of the best known of these was the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU). Formed in 1920 in Cape Town, the ICU entered the eastern Transvaal in 1924 and established successful branches all over the province, promising workers 'land and freedom'. It also promised to buy farms for workers where they could live free from the interference of whites. Not only industrial and commercial workers responded to this call; many farm workers joined the ICU as well. In the early decades of the century the ICU also mobilised around working conditions on farms, and so attracted a large following in the countryside.



An ICU member's contribution card.

ICU members were given a red membership card that seemed to embody the promises made by the organisation. With this card, one man thought, he would

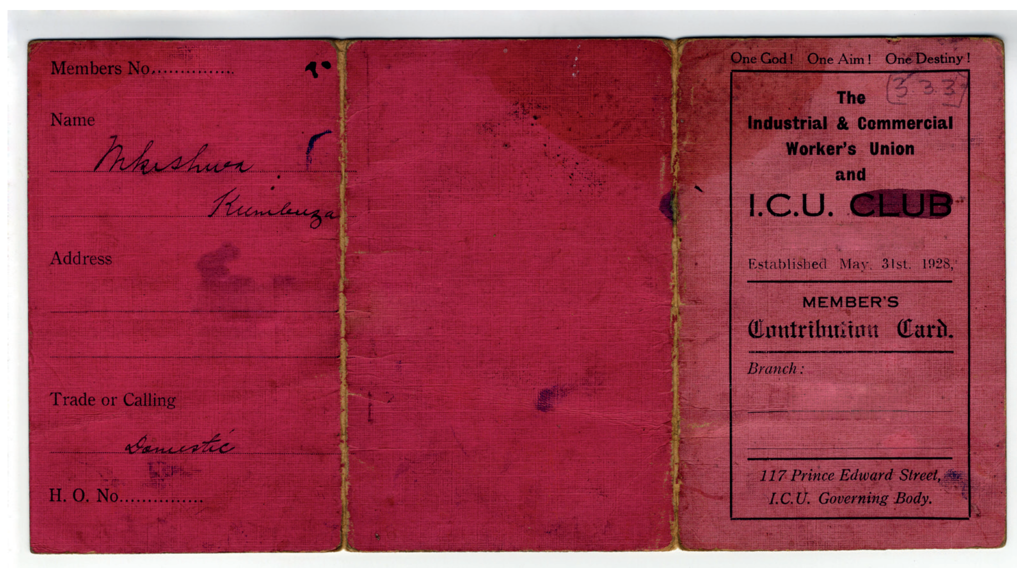
> live better after taking over the farm from the white man. … When the top leaders came, you had to show this card, after which he would leave the farm to you.

The ICU inspired worker protests across the province in the mid- to late 1920s. It won the right for Africans to walk on pavements, and for farm workers to

attend meetings without needing written permission from their employers. In the 1920s it began a campaign against carrying passes. In Nelspruit, 9 000 people marched against passes:

> [They] sang Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika, and demanded that they should all be arrested … the police spoke among themselves, wanting to know where they were going to put all these people, and it was said that they should all go; there were three cheers, and they left for the location.

ICU recruits were often treated brutally by the police and other whites. Many continued to go on strike, organised by local leaders. Sometimes strikers, white farmers, and police would come to blows. This happened in Bethal in 1928. Tensions ran so high that strikers began to shout that they were going to kill all the whites and the blacks who were helping them. Violence was an ever-present threat, and many farmers feared for their lives and livelihoods in particularly tense periods. But things changed in the early 1930s. This was the time of the Great Depression, a major global economic recession. Farmers struggled to make ends meet, and couldn't do anything that might jeopardise their farms. Demands and restrictions on workers were relaxed. The ICU lost its momentum, and its support base dwindled. An opportunity for change in the countryside had been lost.



Members No...............

Name

Address

Trade or Calling

Domestic

H. O. No...............

One God! One Aim! One Destiny!

333

The Industrial & Commercial Worker's Union and

I.C.U. CLUB

Established May. 31st. 1928.

MEMBER'S

Contribution Card.

Branch:

117 Prince Edward Street,
I.C.U. Governing Body.

The 1936 Land Act

The 1936 Land Act followed the 1913 Land Act. It increased the amount of land reserved for Africans to 13 per cent of the country's territory. It also contained a chapter that brought back the squatter laws first passed at the end of the 19th century. The 1936 Land Act thus attempted to restrict the rights of African labour tenants while increasing the amount of labour they owed to their landlords. But this could only be implemented by proclamation.

In 1938 this section of the Land Act was applied to the Lydenburg district as an experiment. White farmers believed that workers would now be required to work for at least 180 days a year. They would also have to be registered at a magistrate's office, so that their movement and employment could be monitored. The farmers hastened to make this known to their workers. Predictably, farm workers were not impressed with the change in their conditions of employment. Many decided to leave the farms in the area and seek work elsewhere, where they were not as heavily restricted. The loss of labour that resulted from this, and the threat that workers might move en masse, was a real problem to farmers and the government. The government decided to withdraw the proclamation.

The advent of apartheid

In 1948 the National Party (NP) – largely representing Afrikaner nationalists – rose to power, and introduced the notorious policy of apartheid (separateness/apart-ness), a legally enforced system of racial separation or segregation. As noted earlier, previous governments had pursued segregationist policies for several decades. This was marked by undermining African rights to land, denying them political rights, and turning them into a source of cheap labour for white economic enterprise.

However, the NP government implemented segregationist policies more systematically and with greater force than any of its predecessors. In the 1950s it refined and elaborated its policy of apartheid into the ideology of 'separate development' – the notion that all Africans should become citizens of ethnic 'homelands' which would eventually become fully independent states. Africans living in 'white' areas would be forced or encouraged to return to their 'homelands', or areas of ethnic origin. Those still working in 'white South Africa' would be regarded as 'temporary sojourners', would be strictly segregated from whites, would be unable to own property or businesses, and would have no political rights.

To this end, the government began to consolidate the African reserves. It also intensified and elaborated the 'pass laws', measures for controlling the

movement of Africans and regulating the African labour force. All Africans had to carry 'pass books' recording their permission to live and work in specified areas. Africans from the 'homelands' could only enter 'white' urban areas for limited periods to seek work as migrant labourers. Africans who had been born in the cities were allowed to remain there under circumscribed circumstances, but were also eventually meant to return to the 'homelands'.

Dr H F Verwoerd, architect of 'separate development' and unidentified 'Bantu Affairs' officials survey rural land earmarked for incorporation into a 'homeland'.

Police staged large-scale 'pass raids' in the urban areas, aimed at arresting Africans who were there illegally. Those caught were tried, given prison sentences, and deported to the 'homelands'. At the height of apartheid, hundreds of thousands of Africans fell foul of the pass laws every year.

African farmers and farming communities living in rural areas outside the African reserves were regarded as anomalies. Described as 'black spots' in official apartheid nomenclature, they were meant to be expropriated and removed to the nearest 'homelands'. Four 'homelands' were established which impinged on the eastern Transvaal: KaNgwane, in the east of the province;

KwaNdebele in the north west; and Lebowa and Gazankulu in the north. Given the region's particular history, there was also a relatively large number of African farmers and farming communities who owned land in the 'white' rural areas, and were therefore earmarked for removal. Many of them resisted. These fateful struggles around land – some of them landmarks of resistance against apartheid – will be dealt with later in this chapter.

Controlling labour tenants

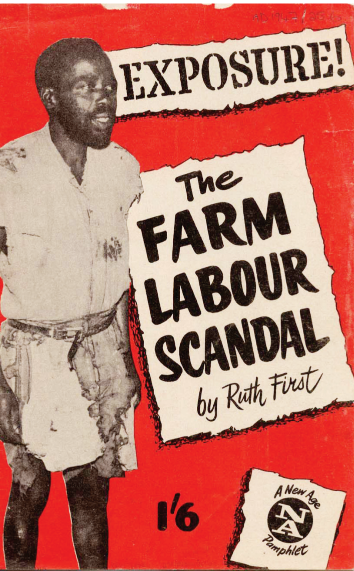
The apartheid government introduced a range of measures to exercise more effective control over Africans working on white-owned farms. It wanted to distribute African labour more evenly so that some white farmers would not benefit more from such labour than others. If Africans were not given the choice of freely moving to farms where conditions were better, whites would have more authority over Africans, and would be able to force them to work for lower wages.

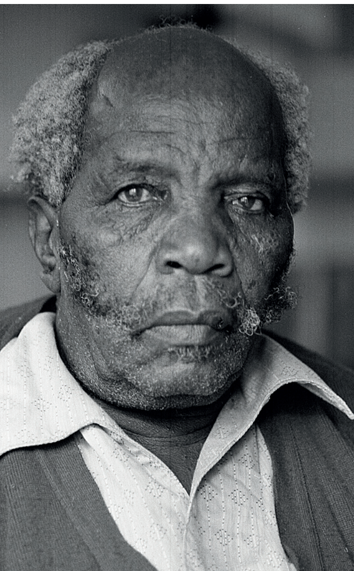
To this end, the government set up labour tenant control boards in the 1950s. White farmers considered to have too many tenants were forced to evict some of them. These tenants then passed through a system of labour bureaux, which would send them to work on farms with a shortage of labour. Sometimes tenant families would resist eviction and try to remain on the land where their family had lived for a long time, sometimes for generations. A common experience of those who resisted was a convoy of government trucks coming to remove them and their possessions from their family homesteads.

Not all white farmers were happy with this new approach. Some had built up strong relationships with their tenants. On some farms generations of white land owners and black tenants had lived together and co-operated to work the land and make a living. It was hard for white farmers to evict black tenants when they had played together as children, grown up together, and watched their families grow. But this is what happened. One farmer in the Lydenburg district could not decide which families to evict, and left it to the African tenants themselves to decide who would go and who would stay.

But these measures did not really work, and labour tenancy continued, at least in some districts, much as it had before. The government decided to end labour tenancy, and between 1967 to 1972 it was banned, district by district. Some families could stay on the farms, but their grazing and ploughing rights were abolished. The rest had little option but to move to the reserves.

Tenant farmers facing eviction, Wakkerstroom, 1989.





The first exposé of labour conditions on Bethal potato farms; Gert Sibande, photographed in the 1980s.

Bethal

It was very difficult to get Africans to work on farms marked by exploitative measures and poor living conditions. Among the reasons was the existence of reserves, where Africans could move if they had nowhere else to go, and better wages and working conditions offered by mines and the manufacturing industry. But some Africans, particularly the very poor, were caught in exploitative labour contracts. An infamous story of exploitation is that of the potato farms around Bethal, a major centre in the south west. Labour conditions on large commercial farms had been poor for decades, but were made public in the late 1940s and 1950s thanks to a fast-growing political consciousness and the use of media in highlighting social ills. The conditions and recruiting practices used on Bethal farms were exposed by a small group of activists and journalists.

The first of the activists in this story is Gert Sibande, who became politically active in the 1930s, and by 1956 was elected to the national executive committee of the ANC. He was nicknamed 'Lion of the East' because of his bravery in the risky activity of organising farm workers. In the mid-1940s he disguised himself as a labourer and acquired first-hand experience of the conditions on the potato farms around Bethal. He passed on the information to Ruth First, a courageous journalist and activist, who wrote an exposé for *New Age* in 1947. The story had a limited impact, but a few years later the journalist Henry Nxumalo, or 'Mr Drum' to his admirers, encouraged the editor of *Drum* magazine to allow him to write an article about Bethal.

Nxumalo set off for Bethal with the photographer Jürgen Schadeberg. The latter posed as a journalist, and Nxumalo as his 'boy'. They toured farms, and witnessed extreme exploitation and suffering.

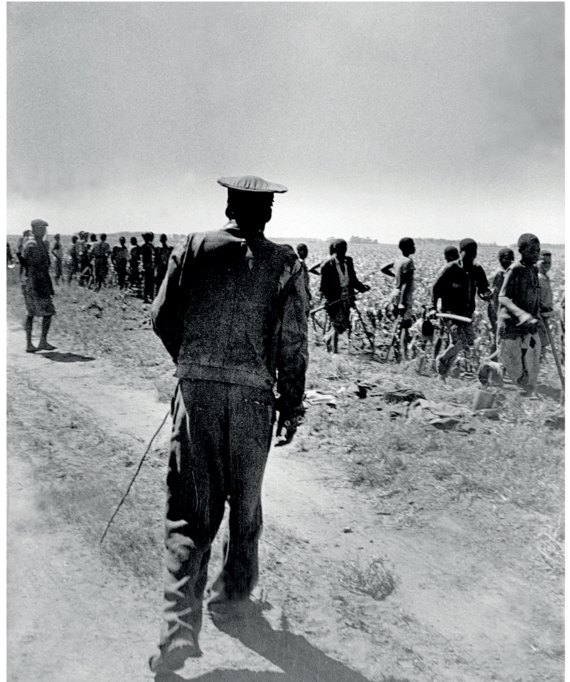
On some of the worst farms Africans lived in compounds surrounded by barbed wire. They worked very long hours, and were often beaten. On some farms workers were even denied proper clothing; instead, they were given sacks to wear, which helped to prevent them from running away.

When Nxumalo arrived back in Johannesburg he did some undercover work to expose the questionable recruitment methods used by Bethal farmers. He dressed like a poor African labourer, and waited around pass offices in Johannesburg. A tout offered him a job on a farm in Bethal (or 'Middelburg', once rumours had spread about Bethal); all he had to do to get the job was touch a pencil held by the tout, who then filled in a contract. Nxumalo didn't touch the pencil, but witnessed others who did. From the pass office they would be taken to Bethal, where they would be treated like slaves.

The article Nxumalo wrote was published in *Drum* in March 1952, and the magazine sold out. Bethal became a byword for exploitation, and potatoes the

A Bethal farmer collects convict labour from the Johannesburg Fort, 1959.

A child labourer dressed in sacks on a Bethal farm, 1959.



Child and convict labourers on farms in Bethal, 1952.

Participants in the potato boycott of 1959.

Potatoes pile up at the Johannesburg market.

symbol of oppression. While the government slated the article and protected the exploitative farmers, the ANC approved a plan in 1959 to launch a protest campaign, to become known as the potato boycott. A newspaper report described the fate of the potatoes as follows:

> Over 1 500 tons of potatoes, equal to between 90 000 and 100 000 pockets, are lying piled up in a 750 foot by 60 foot shed at the Johannesburg produce market and if the half a million Africans in Johannesburg townships continue their boycott, it may well be that most of these potatoes will have to be destroyed as rubbish.

The boycott was called off in September 1959, but a new spirit of resistance to exploitation had taken root.

Black spots

As noted earlier, the NP government regarded all land rented or owned by Africans in 'white' rural areas as 'black spots'. It began a programme to remove these communities. We will now look at a sample of the communities that were removed. We begin with the Masha, a community that paid rent to live on land that was sold from under their feet to a land company in the 1920s.

The Masha

As the 20th century progressed, land prices rose, and renting land to Africans became less politically acceptable. As a result, land-owning companies preferred to rent their land to whites. This was the case on the farm Kalkfontein in the Steelpoort Valley, near Lydenburg, which belonged to the Lydenburg Platinum Areas Company. The Masha – a small community with ties to the Pedi kingdom – had lived on the land for about 100 years. In the 1920s they began to pay rent to the Lydenburg Platinum Areas Company. In 1943 the company sold the land to a local farmer, Martin Nieuwenhuize. Nieuwenhuize told members of the community that they had to work for him or face eviction. The Masha would not accept this; they would fight for what they considered to be their land – land they had occupied for generations – and they would not accept Nieuwenhuize's authority over them. This struggle was led by Gawie Masha. He sold ICU 'tickets' to members of the community and told them: 'This money I am collecting is to protect you. … Mr Nieuwenhuize can do nothing. You go on ploughing.' For six years the community went on ploughing while the ICU, led by Robert Malatji, fought

a legal battle on its behalf. Even when Nieuwenhuize evicted them in 1947 they simply moved back.

But this was an increasingly bad time for African independence, and the community's lawyers could not win against Nieuwenhuize and the state. The farm was in a white area, and the Masha constituted a 'black spot'. On 27 June 1949 government trucks arrived, along with 60 armed policemen. While people and possessions were loaded onto the trucks, the policemen systematically destroyed their houses. This time the eviction was final.

Another chiefdom with historical ties to land, the Ngomane, had a similar experience. In the early 20th century the Ngomane were paying rent to live on state-owned land. This farm, Tenbosch, was situated in Barberton's Komati ward, on the Crocodile River. This land had been set aside for use as an African reserve, so the Ngomane were in a relatively secure position. But in 1926 this ceased to be the case. The government chose other land to include in the African reserve, and ownership of Tenbosch passed to the Transvaal Consolidated Lands and Exploration Company. The Department of Lands continued to have some responsibility for the farm. For many years white farmers came and went, and no one was really sure what to do with the land. When one farmer managed to start running a successful vegetable and tobacco farm on the land, things began to change more drastically for the Ngomane.

In 1945 the Department of Lands bought Tenbosch when it realised that commercial agriculture was possible on the farm. It wanted to use it to settle white farmers. After trying unsuccessfully to remove the Ngomane, the department went ahead and advertised 29 plots. The farmers who took up the offer would themselves be responsible for removing the insubordinate Ngomane. The Ngomane resisted fiercely by organising themselves, withholding labour from surrounding farms, and declaring that they would 'fight and die' for the right to stay on their land. However, by now the state was better equipped for the job of removal. In August 1954 the trucks arrived, and 7 000 people were removed.

What happened to the Masha and Ngomane was a common experience for many African communities. Their plight was complicated as they were not the legal owners of the land, but tenants who could be evicted. However, many of these communities had historical claims to the land, having lived there for generations, and had not been party to the transactions in which the land was bought or sold. The land restitution policy of the ANC government, begun in 1994, made it possible for communities dispossessed of land in this manner to claim it back, and many communities have done so.

The most blatant acts of discrimination and violent dispossession were

the removal of land-owning communities, who fought bitterly for their right to stay on land they had bought generations earlier. Two such communities were those who lived on Boomplaats and Driefontein – farms we have already mentioned in this narrative.

Boomplaats

In chapter 5 we looked at the farm Boomplaats, a successful farm established by a Christian community led by Chief Micha Dinkwanyane. Boomplaats was one of the best-run farms in the district, but while white farmers may have been jealous of its success, they were mostly concerned about labour. Boomplaats had become a refuge for many Africans who wanted to escape the labour conditions on neighbouring white farms. This became a sore point for neighbouring farmers, who claimed, in an exaggerated fashion, that Boomplaats 'stole' their labour. Local white farmers also thought that Boomplaats harboured criminals.

Two members of the Driefontein community, early 1980s.

In the 1950s officials of the Bantu Affairs Department (BAD) began to visit the leaders of the Boomplaats community to discuss its removal. They offered to compensate the community for the land, and find a new farm for them where they could all settle. Johannes Dinkwanyane, his son, Thomas, and other members of the community did not want to sell. However, in 1950 Johannes Dinkwanyane died. His son, Thomas, died two years later. Leadership passed on to Johannes's widow, Victoria Thorometsane.

Victoria was not as resistant to the entreaties of the BAD as Johannes and Thomas had been. After a few years she and her committee gave in to the BAD. They selected a farm called Sterkspruit (known today as Phiring), where they would be moved. Victoria and 36 families moved there on 12 November 1956, and 13 more families joined them soon afterwards. But many more did not want to move, and resisted. Two men led the struggle on the farm. They were migrant labourers called Hezekiel Mpanye and Petrus Magabe, who was elected as 'chief of the Dinkwanyane BaPedi tribe.' Their first move was to enlist the services of a black Johannesburg law firm, Mandela and Tambo – run, as the name suggests, by Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo, who later played key roles in the ANC and in South African political history.

The two partners set to work writing a petition to send to the BAD. They wrote that their 'social, economic and spiritual aspirations are closely associated with the soil of Boomplaats … it would be sacrilege for us to leave our dead behind to inhabit another land, however fertile and productive'. The BAD wrote back that 'the prayers of the petitioners cannot be favourably considered'. In 1957 it recognised Victoria Thorometsane as regent of the 'Dinkwanyane BaPedi tribe of Sterkspruit.'

Boomplaats residents were angry and dispirited. They resisted removal in various ways – even with violence. When agricultural officers arrived at Boomplaats to value the properties there, they were confronted by residents armed with stones and metal implements, and were forced to leave.

But resistance was sometimes spiritual as well. Members of the community sang a song, adapted from Psalm 137, to express their suffering and sorrow.

Zion we remember you
Seated by the rivers
Of this country of sorrows
As we cry, we think of you.
The enemies make fun of us,
They ask us to sing
Hymns that would make us happy.

Remove your harps
And hang them on the willow trees,
For them to be destroyed,
For there is no one playing them.
How can we sing your hymns
Lord, in exile (slavery)?
Be very quick to save us.
When shall we reach our home?
Jerusalem, you are my happiness.
If I can forget to look for you
I will be cursed.
I long for that village and
I always think of you.
There is no happiness on earth.
Jehovah, wake up and protect us
From all those who hate us!
Fight for Jerusalem
When they say: Come, destroy
Have mercy on the criminals
Saviour, forgive them for the evil they are doing.
Let the children of the teasers also come
Embrace them, kiss them!
Blessed is the one who will persuade them.

Saul Mkhize (front left) at a gathering in Driefontein.

But the government officials who wanted to remove the community were not persuaded. On 26 January 1961 policemen, BAD officials, bulldozers and trucks moved onto the farm, and began to remove the residents and destroy their houses. The community broke up completely. After spending a few months in a relocation camp at Rietfontein, members moved to Mashishing, a township outside Lydenburg; Jane Furse, a village in Bopedi; and the Witwatersrand. They remained in exile for the next four decades. Boomplaats was returned to its rightful owners in 2001.

Driefontein

Not all battles with the apartheid government ended in failure. One of the success stories of black resistance during apartheid comes from Driefontein, where an ethnically mixed community had been established since the farm was first bought with the help of Pixley Seme and the Native Farmers' Association of Africa. In the 1980s powerful leaders and strong community resistance from Driefontein secured the right to remain on community-owned land.

The dreaded proclamation – that Driefontein was a 'black spot' and that its residents would be removed – came in 1965. The community was informed of this only in 1975, and only heard of the actual plans for removal in 1981. Swazi-speaking residents would be moved to the Lochiel area of KaNgwane, Zulu-speaking residents to Babanango in KwaZulu, and Sotho-speakers to QwaQwa. The community was bewildered. If the plan went through, extended families would be broken up and friends would be lost. Government officials informed residents that if they did not move voluntarily, they would not be compensated. Residents, who held title deed to their land, found this hard to swallow. But they were law-abiding, and believed in the protection of the law. Some community members felt it was in their best interests to go. A hundred tenants and 80 land owners signed forms agreeing to their removal. On 3 November 1982 some 30 Swazi-speakers were taken to Lochiel, and six days later 21 Zulu-speakers were moved to Babanango.

The resettlement areas were very poor, and the locals were hostile to the newcomers. Many Driefontein residents decided to move back home. Once there, they underwent a change of heart. They sent representatives to give a message to the BAD, now called the Department of Co-operation and Development. It stated that the community had lived in the area for more than 70 years, had legal title to the land, and had no intention of moving.

Meanwhile, the community was unhappy with its leader, Steve Msibi. He had accepted the removal plan, and only wanted to make this process as easy as possible for the community. In December 1982 3 000 residents held

a meeting at which they elected Saul Mkhize as their leader. Mkhize had experienced the removals at Sophiatown in Johannesburg, and did not want his community to undergo the same ordeal. He was an assertive leader, and expressed the community's determined opposition to removals.

The state increased the pressure by arresting more and more community members on pass offences, and subjecting women to humiliating body searches. The government also delayed the processing of applications for pensions, and also rejected them. In February 1983 police abducted Saul Mkhize's 17-year-old son, Paris, tortured him, and asked him again and again why his father opposed the relocation. The assault on his son affected Saul Mkhize greatly. He never lost his determination, but realised that the forces ranged against the community were far more powerful than he had believed.

At a meeting held on 19 March 1983, attended by 800 people, Mkhize expressed the community's opposition to removal as follows:

> This message we are getting today, we apologise we cannot accept it, because there is no discussion, and we will not in future like to see any development or the government entering Driefontein to do any procedure, to do any interviewing with the people of Driefontein. We have long points to raise with the department … the community is not accepting anything.

Community members present responded with cheers and cries of 'hear hear!' Another meeting was scheduled. But a few days later a police constable,

The funeral of Saul Mkhize, Driefontein, 18 April 1983.

A tense meeting between government officials and members of the Driefontein community. The person in the centre taking notes is Pickston Mkhize, brother of Saul Mkhize.

one Nienaber, shot and killed Mkhize. On 16 April 1983, more than 2 000 people attended his funeral. Shortly thereafter Nienaber was acquitted of any liability for Mkhize's death on the grounds that the latter had been arrogant and impolite, and had a 'strong personality'.

A few months later Saul's brother, Pickson Mkhize, attended a meeting with the minister of Co-operation and Development, Dr Piet Koornhof. Also present was Steve Msibi. They were told to form a 'planning committee' to help the government plan the removal. Following the meeting, Pickson Mkhize declared:

> Who is our Moses to save us today here in South Africa … I think it is better if God can kill us; we black people, because we can feel we are the cursed people of this world. He [Koornhof] said, you are all squatters, you black people. You don't have a right. And he even mentioned to us that there was no man in South Africa in the beginning. You are all coming from Africa, from the East … the first man, Vasco da Gama, only came in 1497.

Government officials and community members continued to meet to discuss the removals. The deadlock continued. In October 1985 the battle ended. Resistance had paid off – the government announced that the community would not be moved.

Members of the Driefontein community celebrate the government's decision to abandon their removal, 1987.

Botšhabelo

Not all removals were accompanied with protracted resistance. The community at Botšhabelo did not formally own the land, but had lived for many generations on a mission station that their forebears had helped to establish. While they had historical claims to the land, they faced removals with an entrenched respect of authority and a stoic resolve to bring Christianity to the 'wilderness' of the township to which they would be moved.

Botšhabelo's fortunes had fluctuated since its heyday in the 19th century, but by the 1960s it was a renowned educational institution, and home to a large African Christian community. They lived there under the authority of the Berlin Missionary Society, along with white missionaries and teachers and their families.

One Sunday morning in 1971, during a church service, the church bell cracked. Residents saw this as a sign that their time at Botšhabelo had ended. But while plans for their removal had begun in the 1960s, residents still did not know where they were meant to go. The government was trying to find a new location for them. Moving them to a township was not ideal, because many residents owned livestock. BAD officials asked Chief Mokhomo Matlala, near Marble Hall, if he would accommodate the residents from Botšhabelo, but this idea was scrapped when the minister disapproved. Accommodation was finally found in the new township of Motetema, outside Groblersdal.

At a meeting held on 28 May 1971, Botšhabelo residents officially agreed to move. On 10 June 1971 this decision was confirmed, and residents began to sell their livestock and say their goodbyes. On 10 January 1972 government

Government trucks parked in front of the Botšhabelo school during the removals in January 1972.

A bulldozer flattens a stone house in the village at Botšhabelo. These photographs were taken by Peter Gastrow, later a member of parliament, who grew up at Botšhabelo.

A woman overcome with emotion during a homecoming service, Doornkop, December 1994.

trucks arrived and removed 167 families. The departing residents watched as their homes were bulldozed. But the removal was peaceful. The Botšhabelo residents had a tradition of respecting authority, whether the missionaries, elders, or the government. Louisa Ranthla, an elderly resident of Botšhabelo who watched generations of schoolchildren grow up under her care and instruction, described life on the mission station as follows:

> It was a mission station. We did not have chiefs there. Life was sweet, although the missionaries were very strict. People respected authority, unlike today, and youths were not roaming the streets at night. People respected authority. Nobody was idle … The place was fertile … we had schools and training colleges, and the people were decent.

While Ranthla accepted the authority of the apartheid government, she also recognised the unfairness of the move. Following the transition to democracy in 1994, she led a land claim by Botšhabelo residents in terms of the new government's land restitution scheme. The application succeeded, and the community won back the land.

Political consciousness

As is evident from this chapter, land struggles in the eastern Transvaal were closely tied to political issues, and played an important role in nurturing political consciousness among Africans and inculcating the idea that the apartheid state could be resisted, however overwhelming its power might have seemed at the time. But, Africans in the eastern Transvaal also played central roles in the overt political struggle against white domination that gradually mounted in intensity until, in the mid-1980s, South Africa was engulfed in a low-intensity civil war. Indeed, as we shall see in the next chapter, some key incidents in that war took place in the eastern Transvaal.