

Much-needed political context sorely missing in 'Andringa Street battle' report

Steven Robins

THE Cape Times front-page report on the violent 1940 "Battle of Andringa Street" obscures more than it reveals ("Residents demand historical justice", July 28).

The article reports how on July 27, 1940 students from the University of Stellenbosch's (SU) Protea and Dagbreek residences attacked an area in Stellenbosch known as Die Vlakke and damaged the properties of coloured residents.

SU historian Professor Albert Grundlingh, who is quoted in the article, attributes these actions to a conflict between "coloured and white residents (who) had crowded together in front of a café (Senitzky's) to buy the late edition of the Cape Argus". According to Grundlingh, "mutual accusations of queue-jumping and misbehaviour resulted in some people coming to blows". The students' attack on coloured shops in Andringa Street is reported as being the consequence of this conflict. The article then proceeds to describe how SU's 2015 commemoration of the 75th anniversary of this event is a sequel to the 2012 apology issued by SU students

at Dagbreek residence on behalf of those white students who attacked coloured residents in July 1940.

If one reads the August 6, 1940 supplement to the Cape Standard, one gets a completely different angle on this event. Issued by the Non-European United Front of SA, it describes the students' actions as "a mass attack on the non-European quarters, beating up and terrorising the whole community".

It describes how "street lights were broken, hundreds of windows smashed, doors burst in, homes raided and furniture destroyed, while (residents) were forced to seek safety in hiding and flight".

The article then goes on to ask: "What gave rise to this brutal attack on the defenceless non-Europeans?"

The answer provided is that the coloured residents because they were still "smarting" after their defeat at a non-day skirmish with soldiers in Addeley Street, where they had been protesting against South Africa's entry into World War II. They were looking for a scapegoat after having lost the battle for South African neutrality in the war.

The stakes of this battle were

Residents demand historical justice



clearly much more than mere frustration about queue-jumping.

The 1940 Cape Standard account provides much-needed political context that is sorely missing in the Cape Times report 75 years later.

For instance, the Cape Standard refers to the students as "fascist hoologians" and mentions that "the Stellenbosch race riot" was one of numerous similar events occurring in South Africa in the early 1940s. The article also notes that "railway

lines have been dynamited, buildings blown up on the Rand, and people tarred and feathered; while swastikas are being posted up in towns and Nazi posters distributed far and wide".

It also claims that "in Germany the Nazis practised out their tactics and exercised their brutality on the Jews. In South Africa the non-Europeans are being made the sacrifices". The article ends with the charge that "because the government refuses to

free the non-European, they dare not take steps to stifle the Nazi menace in our midst. Violence and terrorism are practiced freely and the police look on. We are drifting towards a Nazi dictatorship under a puppet government".

Although historians may quibble with one or other aspect of this 1940 report by the Non-European United Front of SA, what this account does is reveal the wider political backdrop of the "Battle of Andringa Street". It highlights the mounting support for Germany's war effort among a section of Afrikaner nationalists, including Stellenbosch students aligned with the Ossewa Brandwag, the Grey Shirts, Die Nuwe Orde and other right-wing political formations. In an article on the Battle of Andringa Street, the historian Professor Hermann Giliomee notes that "the riot occurred in the context of the National Party's attempt to disenfranchise the coloured voters. Parliament's decision of 1939 to declare war and a regulation compelling citizens to hand in arms". He concludes that "the violence of the Andringa Street events foreshadowed the structural violence of

apartheid, introduced a decade later. Afrikaner nationalist support for Germany's war effort has been well documented. Mr Justice Millin, in a judgment delivered in the Transvaal Supreme Court on July 13, 1943, found that Verwoerd had supported German war propaganda and, as editor of the Transvaler, had made his newspaper "a tool of the Nazis in South Africa". Verwoerd had taken the Johannesburg Star to court for publishing an article titled "Speaking Up for Hitler" in which the Transvaler was accused of falsifying news in support of German propaganda and thereby acting as an instrument of the enemy.

Verwoerd lost the case, and was accused of causing alarm and despondency among the population through his pro-Nazi reporting, and thereby causing damage to "the war effort of the Union".

Once he became prime minister in 1958, Verwoerd, a former professor of applied psychology sociology and social work at SU, turned to his former university for his chief architect of apartheid, Werner Eiselein. In 1928, Eiselein had founded Stellenbosch's Department of Volkekunde, the style of anthropol-

ogy that came to be taught at Afrikaans-speaking universities.

University of the Western Cape historian Professor Andrew Bank has written that volkekunde and proto-apartheid thinking were strongly influenced by German imperial and missionary racial ideas. During his doctoral studies training at Hamburg and Berlin universities in the 1920s, Eiselein became a disciple of Carl Meinhof, a scholar of African language and religion who was steeped in German eugenics and who, in 1933, became a card-carrying Nazi.

The exact nature of these links between German racial science and ideology volkekunde and Afrikaner nationalism in the early decades of the last century are far from conclusive and require further research.

But what we do know for certain is that the Battle of Andringa Street was much more than simply a story of fistfuls over queue-jumping.

As the late Professor Russel Botman insisted, SU's past has to be confronted in order to begin to chart a path forward.

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