

Researching in the Beloved County: Archives and Adventure in South Africa

by Eric J. Morgan¹

It is no coincidence that the demise of apartheid in South Africa and the end of the Cold War occurred at nearly the same time. By the end of the 1980s, the government of South Africa faced insurmountable pressure for change from both internal and external forces. As the threat of global communism faded and the march toward democratic self-rule progressed across Eastern Europe, the South African government found itself with few friends and even fewer options for self-preservation other than to join the great wave of democracy and end apartheid's codified, racist system of segregation. The road to majority rule in South Africa would not be easy, but without the collapse of communism and the rise of a global anti-apartheid movement, it might have been prolonged even further.

The little-studied archival collections of South Africa can give scholars a fascinating glimpse into the histories of the Cold War and global race relations in the twentieth century. The study of U.S. relations with South Africa during the apartheid era serves as a unique window onto the Cold War and race relations, and the collections are literal treasure troves for students of American foreign relations who would like to explore these subjects through the prism of South African history. The starting point for research is the archives of the Department of Foreign Affairs, located in the basement of the stunning Union Buildings in Pretoria. Situated atop a massive hill overlooking all of

¹ Eric J. Morgan is a Ph.D. candidate in history at the University of Colorado.

South Africa's executive capital, the Union Buildings were constructed between 1910 and 1913 and are surrounded by luxurious terraced gardens and a sprawling public park. They house both the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Office of the Presidency, with the Department of Foreign Affairs archives holding records from 1965 onward.² Older materials are housed at the National Archives, also located in Pretoria, where cabinet minutes as well as the papers of the Office of the Prime Minister prior to the administration of P.W. Botha in 1984 can also be found. The Department of Foreign Affairs collections are arranged chronologically by country or subject, with detailed finding aids available for all collections.

Of particular interest is the collection on South African relations with the United States. This massive collection—numbering hundreds of oversized folders packed to the brim—chronicles the ambivalence of the U.S. government towards South Africa and the issue of apartheid. Correspondence between the American and South African governments was abundant, and there were numerous communications between American citizens and the South African government. The Department of Foreign Affairs also kept a close watch on the development of the anti-apartheid movement in the United States, at times comparing it in scope and potential to the anti-war movement of the 1960s and early 1970s.

Exploring the archives of the Department of Foreign Affairs is a tremendously efficient way to examine various relationships between the government and peoples of

² For an in-depth analysis of the structure of the Department of Foreign Affairs records, see Sue Onslow, "Research Report: Republic of South Africa Archives," *Cold War History* 5:3 (August 2005): 369-375.

United States and South Africa during the apartheid era, since the complete chronological collection is available in one location. It is interesting to observe in countless memoranda and position papers the importance that the South African government accorded moral and economic support from the United States and the emphasis it placed on the communist threat in southern Africa. By the 1970s the United States was South Africa's most important trading partner, and the government was always concerned that the United States would at some point move away from supporting South Africa. The records of the Department of Foreign Affairs also provide a glimpse into the larger picture of decolonization in southern Africa, with numerous files including interesting perspectives, debates, and policy decisions on the contentious liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s in such places as Southern Rhodesia, South West Africa, Angola, and Mozambique.

Beyond the official policies and foreign relations of the South African government, the records of various South African liberation organizations provide a unique insight into not only the liberation movement, but also black African perceptions of the United States (which were rarely positive), the Cold War, and global race relations. For this perspective, the collections of the University of Fort Hare, located in Alice, are indispensable to researchers. The University of Fort Hare, a veritable proving ground for black African liberation leaders (notable students included Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo, Robert Sobukwe, Steve Biko, Robert Mugabe, and Charles Njonjo), houses the collected papers of the African National Congress (ANC) as well as the Pan Africanist Congress and several other liberation movements. The papers of the ANC are located in

the basement of the Howard Pym Library, though plans are in development to eventually relocate the collection to the National Heritage and Cultural Studies Centre (NAHECS), also located on the Fort Hare campus. The ANC materials illustrate the complicated role of liberation organizations in lobbying the United States government and show the importance of solidarity between the American anti-apartheid movement and the exiled ANC and other liberation groups.

Other archival collections worth exploring include the UWC-Robben Island Mayibuye Archives at the University of the Western Cape outside of Cape Town, the collections of the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, the Jack Simons papers at the University of Cape Town, and the South African Broadcasting Corporation collection in Johannesburg. The Mayibuye Archives house an impressive collection of newspaper clippings, videos, photographs, posters, and other visual materials, as well as a large collection of oral histories.

Researchers contemplating a visit to South Africa are urged to contact archives well in advance of their proposed visit. Communications in South Africa can be slow, and it is not uncommon for an e-mail message to go unanswered for several months. Some archives do have collections or finding aids listed on-line, but it is best to contact the archives by e-mail or telephone to see if the collections pertinent to one's research are available. South African archives are, in general, fairly efficient, though they do not have the same kind of structure as American or Western European facilities. The hours for research varied at each archive, though they generally fell between 9 A.M. and 4 P.M. None of the archives I visited had scheduled pull times, and they were all very informal

(one even included tea with the archivist at 10 A.M. every day). That informality allowed much more personal interaction with archivists. However, several archives have only one archivist, meaning research can be delayed by vacations or sick days. Thus it is imperative to contact archives well before a visit. Scholars should also be aware of numerous South African holidays, which will keep most offices closed for a day or more.

Language barriers are rarely a problem during archival research in South Africa, but it must be noted that while English served as the main diplomatic language between the government of South Africa and other countries as well as within liberation organizations such as the African National Congress, Afrikaans—a mix of Dutch, German, French, and English—was used quite often within the government itself prior to the end of apartheid. Approximately fifty percent of the files I looked at in the Department of Foreign Affairs’ “Countries: U.S.A.” collection were written exclusively in English, with another twenty-five percent in Afrikaans but with English translations. The remaining twenty-five percent were exclusively in Afrikaans. Mastery of Afrikaans is not necessary for archival research, but some documents will be useless without a rudimentary understanding of the language, or at least a good pocket Afrikaans dictionary at one’s side. Those with some facility in German or Dutch will be able to get by.

South Africa has eleven official languages, including English, Afrikaans, Zulu, and Xhosa, along with dozens of unofficial varieties, but nearly everyone has a basic comprehension of English. However, be prepared to speak slowly, as English is not the first language for much of the black population. (And if you are fair-haired and blue-eyed like me, don’t be surprised if you are greeted in Afrikaans by white South Africans

in Pretoria.) Even within the service industry, English is not always spoken or understood perfectly. Most people will be more than willing to speak with you in English, though, as long as you are patient and good-humored.

Some advice on getting to and around the country may be helpful. A citizen of the United States or a Commonwealth nation does not need a visa to enter South Africa for less than ninety days, though a valid passport is required. For trips longer than three months, a visa, costing around \$70, must be purchased from a South African embassy or consulate before entering the country. In the United States these offices are located in Washington, D.C., Chicago, New York City, and Los Angeles.

Getting to South Africa from the United States is neither a swift nor a cheap venture. South African Airways flies directly from the United States to South Africa from either Washington, D.C., or New York City, with roundtrip tickets starting at approximately \$1500. Other airlines that make the long journey to South Africa include Delta and British Airways, and most have at least one layover in either London or West Africa. The initial cost of getting to South Africa is high, but the cost of living there is remarkably low compared to the United States, Canada, or Western Europe. While I was in South Africa, the rand—the official currency—hovered just above 7 ZAR to 1 U.S. dollar, and between lodging, meals, and daily transportation costs, my spending averaged around \$40 per day.

Depending on one's standards of luxury and interest in being immersed in local culture, lodging can be very affordable. South Africa does not have the same kind of hotel and motel culture that the United States does. Instead it offers a wide array of

guesthouses and backpackers—South African terms for bed and breakfasts and hostels, respectively—which can be found nearly everywhere, from the largest cities to the smallest villages. Dorm beds in backpackers run as low as \$7 per night. Private en suite rooms in backpackers, the option I chose for most evenings, average \$25 per night. Backpackers are interesting places where one will meet travelers from all over the world, and most of the proprietors I encountered were tremendously warm, helpful in arranging activities, and always willing to discuss South African history and politics with me. Guesthouses, a nice lodging option for someone with a budget larger than a graduate student's, will run at least \$50 per night, with many upscale options moving towards \$100 per night, depending on the location and season. Well-known hotels such as the Holiday Inn are also available in the largest cities, but offer little in terms of local flavor. It is advisable to avoid visiting South Africa during the summer holidays in December and January, as lodging options book quickly and prices can as much as double in such vacation destinations as Port Elizabeth or Plettenberg Bay.

Traveling through South Africa is fairly straightforward, with numerous options available depending on one's monetary allowances and, most important, patience. Rental cars provide the most freedom and allow a researcher to get to some of the more remote locations in the country, but they cost around \$50 per day (less for standard transmission models). The bus system in South Africa is very good, with options such as Greyhound, Translux, and Intercap offering consistent service and competitive prices. Expect to pay \$35 for a one-way ticket from Johannesburg to Cape Town, an eighteen-hour trek. Flying within South Africa is the fastest option of all, of course, but it is expensive. Recently,

however, several small airline companies, including Mango and Kahlula, have emerged as competitors to the larger airlines and offer relatively inexpensive flights between major cities. Other options include minibus taxis, which offer a taste of the local and bizarre for more adventurous travelers, and trains, which are without any doubt the slowest—though certainly the most romantic—way to get around the country. I preferred to travel long distances by bus so that I could read and rest. I used taxicabs within cities and also walked quite a bit. South Africa is a large country and does not have a nationwide light-rail system, so traveling from city to city does take patience and planning. I do have one caveat: while South Africa can feel surprisingly like the United States or Western Europe within its large urban centers and cozy suburbs, this impression can be deceptive. Crime remains a serious problem, and the locals adjust their lives accordingly. Nearly all properties in South Africa are surrounded by huge walls topped with barbed or electric wire, and crime—from muggings to break-ins to car jackings—are legitimate concerns. It is important for visitors to South Africa to be aware of their surroundings and to remain vigilante, but not to ruin their experience by giving in to paranoia.

A visit to South Africa will give researchers a unique opportunity to see one of the world's most beautiful countries, and it is advisable to spend as much time as possible outside the archives to explore all the wonders of nature and culture that South Africa offers. No trip to South Africa—or to the African continent in general—would be complete without at least one safari. The wildlife of South Africa is truly extraordinary, and visitors will be able to observe lions, rhinos, elephants, leopards, hippopotami, crocodiles, buffalos, zebras, ostriches, and numerous antlered beasts at a number of

national parks or private game reserves. Kruger National Park, located an hour east of Pretoria, is the largest and most popular park and well worth a visit. Other excellent facilities include Addo Elephant National Park outside of Port Elizabeth and Hluhluwe-Umfolozi Park in KwaZulu Natal.

South Africa is a paradise for lovers of the outdoors, and adventure tourism is a compelling attraction for many visitors. Beyond overland safaris, other noteworthy outdoor diversions include whale and dolphin watching, deep sea fishing, whitewater rafting, canoeing and kayaking, camping, hiking, horseback riding, and, my personal favorite, the world's highest bungee jump, at the Bloukrans Bridge near Storms River.

South Africa is also home to numerous museums, among the best being the Apartheid Museum in Gold Reef City, the Hector Pieterse Museum in Soweto, the Johannesburg Art Gallery, and the Maritime Museum in Cape Town. A trip through wine country, located in the beautiful area surrounding the college town of Stellenbosch outside of Cape Town, makes for a fun Saturday afternoon. The quality of South Africa's wines has improved exponentially over the past decade, with hundreds of wineries producing top-quality reds, whites, and dessert wines.

South African cuisine is extremely variable. Travelers will find everything, from traditional food like pap (a filling porridge dish made from maize) and grilled meat from the occasional braai (which is the equivalent of a barbeque, and a staple of South African social life) to the more standard fare served at seafood, Italian, Greek, and American steakhouse-style restaurants. Excluding the omnipresent McDonald's, few American fast food restaurants have made their way to South Africa, though the country has its share of

domestic fast food choices, including Steer's and Nando's. Unique fishes and meats are readily available, including delicious kudu and ostrich steaks. Visitors to South Africa will have little difficulty finding their favorite cuisine in the larger cities, though options in the countryside and townships can be limited.

It is crucial for scholars interested in the history of U.S. relations with South Africa or the liberation struggle to spend at least some of their time in the country interacting with local people. No matter what their race, most South Africans over the age of thirty-five felt the influence of apartheid, for good or ill, and the scars of the system remain in many areas and aspects of the country. I found that nearly all South Africans, black and white, were more than willing to talk with me about their experiences during apartheid, as well as the consequences of it today. As a result of the country's contentious history, South Africans are very political, and it was not uncommon to become involved in a political debate while at a pub or braai (in between arguments over South Africa's showing in this past summer's cricket World Cup and worries over the upcoming soccer World Cup in 2010, hosted by South Africa). A visit to a township is also essential. Millions of South Africans continue to live in poverty in townships, and contributing some money to the local economy by purchasing crafts or dining at local restaurants is important and will introduce a visitor to some of the world's warmest people.

South Africa offers scholars of American foreign relations a wonderful opportunity to explore the histories of the Cold War and global race relations from a

unique point of view. It is worth at least one trip in a lifetime to experience the history, culture, and natural wonders of a truly beloved country.