

BOOK REVIEW

Harris Dousemetzis. *The Man Who Killed Apartheid: The Life of Dimitri Tsafendas*. Auckland Park: Jacana Media, 2018. vii +484 pp. Illustrations. Preface. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$16.95. Paper. ISBN-13: 978-1431427543.

The Man Who Killed Apartheid by Harris Dousemetzis is a gripping tale within a tale that charts the personal, political, and private life of Dimitri Tsafendas, the Mozambican who assassinated the highly popular National Party (NP) leader Hendrik Verwoerd, the proclaimed architect of apartheid. Dousemetzis devotes fifteen chapters to setting the public record straight. For years, Tsafendas has been vilified as a lunatic. This perception permeated the media for several reasons. Tsafendas' position as a parliamentary messenger defied the notion of the state as an untouchable monolith. Officials wanted at all costs to prevent his act from serving as a rallying call for others. Tsafendas' own defense team used this depiction to their advantage to enable their client to avoid execution and instead complete a jail sentence. Oral testimonies, documentaries, and archival documents help Dousemetzis prove that Tsafendas acted as a sane person, that he understood the implications of the assassination, and that he employed different strategies of resistance to avoid exile and to gain access to places to sleep and eat. He saw Verwoerd's death as part of a moral obligation and as a social contract between and among all oppressed peoples around the world. Dousemetzis opens his narrative with "The Deed." He charts Tsafendas' activities on September 6, 1966, the day he stabbed Verwoerd to death. The author concludes by discussing the unmarked grave where Tsafendas rests.

In this episodic narrative, Dousemetzis paints a complex and intriguing picture of Tsafendas as a political thinker, activist, music enthusiast, family man, convicted felon, and a weathered old man. Tsafendas spent time in Europe (Portugal, Spain, Greece, and the United Kingdom), the Middle East (Jerusalem and Beirut), South Africa, and the United States. The political activist did all of this while being denied visas in some countries and feigning lunacy and serving exile in others. Bouts of poverty framed his life. He often checked himself into mental institutions when he was broke, for access to food and accommodations.

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Tsafendas always wanted to return to South Africa, but intelligence gleaned from various countries had flagged him as a communist. To enter into the country yet again, Tsafendas played his last card, and convinced family members of his change of heart, and most importantly his loss of interest in politics. This, of course, was far from the truth. Murders in Sharpeville, Langa, and Nyanga townships proved to Tsafendas that he had to kill Verwoerd, the head of apartheid's venomous snake. He wanted to right a couple of wrongs. Tsafendas never forgave himself for not coming to the defense of black seamen whom White colleagues had abused aboard a Greek ship (82). Tsafendas' interpretation of South African society as well as others equally oppressed exhibited a prescient understanding of the contemporary world.

While Tsafendas wanted the races to mix, he also sought the end of colonialism in Mozambique. By 1966, the year that Tsafendas killed Verwoerd, over thirty African nations had won independence. This growing list included Algeria, Nigeria, Ghana, Zambia, Morocco, and Mauritania, among other newly freed countries. By allowing Tsafendas to speak, Dousemetzis shows how thoroughly his subject understood institutional racism and the economic and structural boundaries which impeded the majority population.

Tsafendas shocked a packed gallery when he approached Verwoerd and plunged a knife into his chest, his lung, his heart, and then his neck. Verwoerd made no sounds, instead he "... slumped forward with blood spurting from his neck and quickly forming a pool on the green carpet" (7). Two men died that day: Verwoerd (physically) and Tsafendas (spiritually). While the former received a state funeral and had his life celebrated, the latter suffered extensive physical abuse and alienation from family and friends. With the dispensation of a new democratic government, Tsafendas remained locked up even near the end of his life in 1994. Fearing that his release might provoke staunch Afrikaners to protest his release, post-liberation officials "compromised." They removed him from prison but relocated him to an asylum. The "tape worm" story that he borrowed from another hospital patient who used this narrative as an excuse for his made-up mental illness continued to "grow" throughout his imprisonment, each time he needed or wanted to feign insanity. Dousemetzis skillfully puts the lunatic narrative to rest, and instead, exhumes Tsafendas the man rather than the myth or the characterization that appeared in court records, archival documents, newspapers, and the court of public opinion. Through this work, Tsafendas is finally granted his dignity and his freedom as Dousemetzis sets the record straight for *The Man Who Killed Apartheid*.

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