

# Review

## Niël Barnard (2015) as told to Tobie Wiese. *Secret Revolution: memoirs of a spy boss*. Cape Town: Tafelberg

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In 1979, Niël Barnard, a 30 year old lecturer with a newly-minted doctoral thesis, was plucked from his job in Bloemfontein to become the head of National Intelligence by PW Botha. Botha, a skilful administrator, needed someone smart, discreet and loyal to be the national spymaster and probably hadn't many choices. The National Party was reeling from the Muldergate scandal which brought corruption, incompetence and internal backfighting all too clearly into the open. Barnard was Botha's man; he stayed through the Botha years and only resigned in 1992. Barnard was a more convinced reformer than Botha but in fact he liked and trusted the Old Crocodile more, even if he may have become impatient with him, than he did FW de Klerk and he was happy to leave the De Klerk team. The photographs of a seemingly delighted Mandela and Botha together when they finally met and of Botha relaxing at a party are almost worth the price of the book by themselves.

Some readers will enjoy tales, or glimpses of full tales, of the intelligence world in the early chapters but from the point of view of *Transformation*, this review is really intended to point out two or three issues that seem politically important. It seems very plausible that Barnard, as he says, lost his belief in the durability of the established apartheid system in his first years of the job. He and others were convinced at the latest by the failure of the Tricameral Parliament idea and the township resistance starting with the Vaal Uprising of 1984 that a reform plan solely designed by the National Party would not work. One had to cross the Rubicon into the unknown world of negotiations. This was actually a very wide river if one remembers for instance that JC Smuts had refused to have any personal contact with the ANC before 1948

long before it was banned under a supposedly more liberal regime.

PW Botha after some years became convinced of this need. Barnard's view is that for him there were two key sticking points. The first was the link the armed struggle provided to the Soviet Union. South African politicians may have held a naïve and crude idea about Communism but they were right that the Soviet Union was a world power and in a different military league than South Africa. However, the predilection to order and a total commitment to negotiations via at least a formal armistice was also critical in Botha's view. On the first point, the declining interest of the Soviet Union in South Africa and the ANC in the 1980s was very important, cemented in the deal over peace in Angola and Namibian independence at last.

Even FW de Klerk was unable to get the ANC to lay down its arms where the cadres were clearly astonished and dismayed by what Tambo and Mandela had agreed to accept. So as to the second point, De Klerk had to accept both the legalisation of the SACP and negotiations without an armistice. In fact, Mandela and those around him effectively put an end to anti-government violence and let Operation Vula die after a few months into the negotiations process. Still this stubborn insistence on the part of PW Botha certainly prolonged the agony by several years.

In 1988, Barnard was deputed as the man to start talking confidentially to Nelson Mandela. These talks went on for a year at the comfortable house to where Mandela would be moved on the grounds of Victor Verster Prison, involved many hours and no doubt confirmed the view that Mandela had ceased to be a Communist and was uninterested in pressing for a social revolution on white South Africa, as well as a potentially trustworthy negotiator. Barnard also was right that however tumultuous the comrades, they would accept a deal agreed to by Mandela and the ANC leadership.

This reasonableness of the famous prisoner was the result not so much of a change in conviction as a growing pragmatism that affected Mandela over the years in prison. On some points, notably the freeing of fellow-prisoners, he was adamant and the record suggests that he was never going to compromise on universal suffrage and the right of the ANC to form a government based on elections. However, in terms of major social and economic changes going beyond deracialisation, he certainly did not hold out for the ANC in power being able to put forward radical solutions as a prerequisite.

This reinforces the key point, about which I have written elsewhere, that

the cards, as Barnard well knew, were hardly all in ANC hands. The view of Barnard and no doubt others was that the Nats had better negotiate before any shift in the balance of forces. They had more or less eliminated Umkhonto we Sizwe as a factor and if they offered what would seem internationally as a reasonable deal, it would be a serious challenge for the ANC to continue getting the support it had from a wide range of foreign sources. It is important to be reminded about this balance of forces. The idea, lazily thrown out by Julius Malema but believed now by so many, that popular forces could have forced a revolution at this time on the state is far-fetched. Mandela's view may have offered those hungry for change as much as was possible to get at this point. Here Barnard is a very good corrective read.

The one area of disquiet for me was Barnard's expressed position that he and the NIS had nothing whatsoever to do with the worst kind of dirty tricks although clearly he did not personally spend his weekends on tortures and assassinations or even was directly involved. If one reads Eugene de Kock's *A Long Night's Damage*, or, for example, Jacob Dlamini's recent book, *Askari*, it is clear that ANC operatives were systematically kidnapped, tortured and basically given the choice of becoming informers, so-called askaris, or death. Many did indeed consequently get caught up in the intelligence network, if only to survive. Barnard's TRC hearing testimony proposed that he did know this if perhaps not in detail but while opposing this behaviour, it never became a matter for him of public exposure or resignation. For the higher good?