

Adriaan Vlok and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Name: Adriaan Vlok

Born: 11 December 1937, Sutherland, Northern Cape, South Africa

In Summary: Minister of Law and Order under apartheid, National Party Member, Apartheid activist, born-again Christian, first high-ranking official to apply for amnesty

The end of apartheid South Africa brought many new pains and truths that needed to be reconciled before the nation could move towards functioning as a democratic one. The [Truth and Reconciliation Commission \(TRC\)](#) was introduced to South Africa in order to restore dignity to the victims of human rights abuses, find out the truth about the atrocities committed during apartheid, and encourage perpetrators to admit their crimes and reveal the truth with the promise of conditional amnesty. One of the prominent figures of apartheid, the Minister of Law and Order Adriaan Vlok was the highest member of the National Party (NP) to apply for amnesty. His statement and later apology to a victim of his almost successful attempted murder raises the question of whether the TRC was effective and what the consequences were for re-opening and examining the past TRC findings and taking Vlok's new case to court. Though it has been strongly debated how effective the TRC was in rebuilding the country, Vlok's confessions allowed apartheid police to also confess and seek amnesty, helping the TRC to move forward. Adriaan Vlok's application for amnesty from the TRC and his later confession of plotted murder show the true nature of the apartheid-era police force and his role in the atrocities committed against hundreds of anti-apartheid activists while opening a new chapter for reconciliation in South Africa.

Adriaan Vlok was born in 1937 in Sutherland, Cape Province, South Africa. After brief military training, he began to work for the Department of Justice and by 1986 became Minister

of Law and Order for apartheid South Africa. He was a member of the National Party and an apartheid activist who believed in fighting communism under President [P. W. Botha](#). The political climate that Vlok was working in was a troubled and desperate one. By the 1980s apartheid South Africa was at its most dangerous. The South African Communist Party and the African National Congress gained more power in South Africa just as the National Party started to lose their control over apartheid. President P.W. Botha was faced with a declining party because of inner turmoil and split and the fear of a communist onslaught. In the early 80s he recognized the need to take back power and decided on a policy of ‘total strategy’, using the power of anti-communism ideology as his platform. “When announcing the policy of ‘total strategy’ and ‘total onslaught’ and introducing his ‘reforms’, Botha was as much attempting to thwart the intensifying movement for international sanctions as he was seeking to defuse the local insurrection... (Bernard, 2010: 4). Following his new ‘reforms’ Botha made the fatal mistake of implementing a new constitution in 1984, which created two new racially segregated bodies for the already white parliament: the Asians and Coloureds, but none for the African majority. By doing this, Botha and his followers hoped that they could gain the support of Asians and Coloureds and have a numerical advantage (Worger and Byrnes, 2012). This had the opposite effect that the NP hoped for and pushed the isolated majority black population even further into action as well as anti-apartheid Asians and Coloureds. Protests and new legalized black trade unions were on the forefront of opposition by leading strikes that were politically and economically crippling. 1984 was the turning point for the National Party internally as well. Rightwing Afrikaners saw the new constitution as a reversal of traditional apartheid and many split into the new Conservative Party (Bernard, 2010: 21). This was just one more power in opposition to the NP and President Botha as he tried to hang on to power over the stability of

apartheid South Africa. By 1986 when Vlok became minister of Law and Order, Botha was struggling to keep his white-dominated government afloat and had resorted to questionable tactics to create fear and subdue the black population. Vlok was a member of the State Security Council (SSC) headed by Botha to advise the government on national security policy. Members of the SSC propagated, “the necessity of a total national strategy to combat a total onslaught aimed at South Africa” (Dugard, 2003: 10). The SSC operated in a grey area, with little accountability during the 1980s and early 1990s and became the focal point for national decision-making with a fixed group of government officials in charge of the departments like the department of law and order (Dugard, 2003: 11). This is where Vlok fit in to the repressive, highly militarized government of late apartheid.

After the fall of apartheid and the introduction of democracy in 1994, the people of South Africa wanted answers for their losses and atrocities committed against them. The Truth and Reconciliation Committee was established for this, and in 1996 Vlok was the first cabinet minister to submit his application for amnesty, joining the last minute rush to submit applications on 13 December (Gilmore, 1996: 1). Vlok applied for amnesty just for his involvement in the Khotso House and Cosatu House bombings in 1988 and his involvement in the bomb scares at cinema theatres that were screening the film “Cry Freedom” about Steve Biko’s death. The Khotso House was the headquarters of the South African Council of Churches (SACC) where Frank Chikane was the leader. This meeting place was a threat in the eyes of the apartheid activists and in the 1988 amnesty hearing for the Khotso House it was revealed that Botha ordered Vlok to look into the matter of the Khotso House and make it “unusable.” These orders went down the ranks of the apartheid police until the order reached the Security Police who planted bombs in the Khotso basement (Khotso House Bombing, 1988:1). Though no one was

killed, the bombing which badly destroyed the house represented the violence that apartheid activists would go to. The bombing of the Cosatu House was a similar circumstance because the Congress of South Africa Trade Unions occupied it. Vlok testified that he was under the impression that the house was being used to house refugees of strikes and others who were being held against their will. Vlok testified that the intent was not to endanger people, but to render the building unusable (Cosatu House Decision, 1988: 1). At his TRC hearings in Pretoria, Vlok accepted full “political and moral responsibility” for the police conduct but maintained that he had orders from P.W. Botha to attack these houses (Vlok Accepts Responsibility, 1998: 1). Vlok also stated that he and other government officials used reckless language and admitted that police were given “explicit or implicit orders to kill people deemed to be enemies of the state” (Vlok Accepts Responsibility, 1998:1). This was a huge success for the TRC to be able to prove that orders were actually given to eliminate and destroy the enemy, whilst NP and SSC members still denied responsibility, arguing that their language was only reckless and that the police misinterpreted what they were saying. Though Vlok admitted to his involvement in the bombings, he stood by his opinion that apartheid crimes were ‘one giant misunderstanding.’ Vlok reiterated in his amnesty hearing that at the time of apartheid, the language being used was normal and that he, and other officials, did not know of the illegal acts the police and people below them were committing (One Giant Misunderstanding, 1998: 19). With this attitude, Vlok only revealed the bare minimum of his amnesty confession and remained an apartheid believer during his hearings.

In 1997 Vlok attended the TRC Special Hearing for the State Security Council. Because the SSC played such a large role in the implementation of hit squads and vigilante groups, the TRC had a special hearing to understand the inner workings of the SSC and to establish the lines

of accountability and responsibility. In this hearing, Vlok testified that the security fraternity had an impossible task of protecting the citizens of South Africa and tried to promote stability through the declarations of states of emergency. Vlok claimed that because of the intense violence and revolutionary onslaught, the Security Police could not, by legal conduct, stop the violence happening in the country (State Security Hearings, 1997: Part 2). Aside from believing that the SSC and police were doing what they had to do protect the country, Vlok recognized that the police were focusing on protection of the minority white population. He acknowledged, “from the police side we did not do enough to protect the black civilians in our country” (State Security Hearings, 1997: Part 2). This is as close as Vlok would get to an apology during the 1990s and his time at the TRC hearings. Vlok received amnesty in 1999 along with other former junior and senior security police officers in respect to public violence, malicious damage to property, and unlawful possession of arms and explosives for the purpose of bombing the Khotso and Cosatu Houses and for the bomb scare at the theatres. (Amnesty Decision, 1999: 1).

Adriaan Vlok was a prime example of the faults that befell the TRC according to some skeptics. He was able to walk away with amnesty without apologizing, only recognizing that these bombings happened, but that he did not personally advocate them. Vlok became the first senior politician of apartheid government to be convicted of crimes he admitted to ten years after his TRC hearings (Slow Road, 2007:1). This curious confession from Vlok did not come about by legal matters, but rather by a personal meeting that Vlok wished to have with [Frank Chikane](#) in August 2006 and later his approach to the NPA for a plea bargain. His 2006 confession of apartheid-era crimes that he did not disclose for amnesty during the TRC hearings have had a large impact on the view of the TRC. Many feared that because of his 2006 confession, the re-opening of TRC documents published in 1998 would spark a witch-hunt for those who did not

seek or were not given political amnesty. Vlok admitted to attempting to assassinate Frank Chikane in 1989, information he did not remotely touch on during his amnesty hearings. When Vlok approached the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) to confess, they decided on a plea bargain in court for a suspended sentence of 10 years (Ex-Officials Charged, 2006). This outcome angered many who thought he deserved a harsher punishment considering he did not follow the rules of amnesty while others thought that this could possibly bring more of the apartheid masterminds to account (Apartheid-era Minister, 2007:1). Vlok was claiming to be a born-again Christian and wished to wash the feet of Chikane in an act of asking for forgiveness. Apartheid leaders targeted Frank Chikane in the late 1980s because of his influential role in the South African Council of Churches. Chikane embodied everything Vlok was fighting against: people of color who used their religious faith to expose moral corruption and mobilize resistance (Day, 2009: 2). Not only was the SACC targeted through their headquarters at Khotso House, Chikane was personally targeted with poison laced in his clothing. Because Vlok had been one of the most prominent believers in apartheid, it was hard for the public of South Africa to believe he was sincere. Chikane asked the foot-washing ritual to be public after he decided he would relieve Vlok of his moral torture and allow him to perform the act. Chikane, as well as others, hoped this confession would prompt others to do the same and help the rebuilding of South Africa (Day, 2009: 2). This incident sparked great debate in South Africa, who was still healing from apartheid. For many this was the start for a new chapter of the reconciliation process.

The significance of Adriaan Vlok's journey from unapologetic amnesty hearings to religiously symbolic foot-washings suggests that the fragile state of South Africa is still coming to terms with apartheid. The confession of Vlok questions the effectiveness of the TRC, highlighting that many others could have been holding back information while applying for

amnesty. While the conversion from apartheid to democracy in South Africa was viewed as one of the most successful transformations in the world largely because of the TRC, many do not think the commission fulfilled what it needed to in order to rebuild the country. The problem with South Africa's truth process being publicized is that "its achievements are widely overrated outside of South Africa, while largely dismissed inside" (Gibson, 2005:342). The dissatisfaction that South Africans feel towards the TRC deals largely with the actual truth, and who is receiving the blame. The granting of amnesty to human rights violators is seen as unsettling to many, while it is an essential process of a truth commission in order to move forward. South Africans see the blame going towards individuals, instead of large organizations involved in apartheid crimes. Lastly, the TRC has been criticized for producing little truth and no reconciliation. (Gibson, 2005:342). This mindset was secured with Vlok's reconciliation with Chikane on his own, rather than participating in reconciliation during the TRC. Others, though, see this as just the delayed process of the TRC that will continue as violators come to terms with what they have done. The research of TRC success according to the South African population by Gibson found that the majority of black South Africans were relatively happy with the TRC; 79.5% evaluated the TRC favorably. Only in the white population did Gibson find that 50.4% view the TRC negatively (Gibson, 2005:345). This interesting study done to show how South African's judge the TRC process is important since the South African example is being replicated around the world. The study showed that the majority of the South African population thought the TRC did a decent job of giving families the truth of what happened to their loved ones during apartheid while they were least pleased with the compensation granted by the TRC. The black population who was most pleased with the TRC also acknowledged the need for amnesty in order to have a peaceful transition into democracy, though they thought of amnesty,

especially for human rights violators, as largely unfair (Gibson, 2005:350). Gibson concluded that the split between whites and blacks on the issue of the TRC is insignificant because both recognized that their “side” of the struggle committed horrible acts during apartheid (Gibson 2005:355). In this context, the TRC can be criticized and condemned, but the larger goal of creating an environment to move forward was established because of the truth the TRC unveiled. By having a commission where both apartheid activists and anti-apartheid activists participated, the TRC was successful in allowing all people of the country to begin to move forward.

Adriaan Vlok exemplifies this progress of South Africa because of the TRC and the move to democracy. His cooperation with amnesty opened the doors for many other police and perpetrators to apply for amnesty and help the TRC and people of South Africa to assign blame where it was needed. Though his later confession showed the holes in the truth process, it was still a step in the right direction concerning the healing of South Africa. Vlok was an active apartheid believer and conspirator turned to recognize the crimes he and the SSC committed under President P.W. Botha and the apartheid government. Vlok’s confession, though ten years late, symbolizes the hope for South Africa and the ability for the country to forgive. Many hope that a new chapter of reconciliation for South Africa could entail learning more about what happened to their loved ones while others do not want to revisit the painful experience of apartheid or the TRC hearings. After such a horrible experience that was apartheid for many South Africans, no program could satisfy the needs of everyone but the TRC comes close, and shows how forgiving South Africa as a whole has been towards apartheid. Adriaan Vlok and Frank Chikane are great examples of this, as they both were on opposite sides of the struggle and in the end came to terms with the past and recognized the need to move forward. Only in a country that has been so torn apart from the inside can the majority agree that to move forward is

more important than getting justice. Adriaan Vlok's testimonies let the TRC access the SSC involvement while allowing the country to move forward into a new chapter of reconciliation.

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IPMG0065, South Africa, Pretoria, 1993. Photograph by Greg Marinovich. Permission: [Africa Media Online](#). Rear centre is Adriaan Vlok during the last portrait sessions of the last all white

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