

Xenophobia and Afrophobia in South Africa

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27 years after the end of apartheid and the transition to democracy in South Africa, the past still shapes to a large extent the country's present and future where racism, hate speech, prejudice and abuse of power still effect society.

Many countries draw on the memory of the Holocaust and genocide to promote human rights and there is a debate whether memory of past atrocities can have a preventative power.

The Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre (JHGC), which was officially opened in March 2019, explores the history of genocides in the 20th century including the Herero and Nama Genocide in today's Namibia in 1904 as well as the Genocide in Armenia in 1915. There is a focus on the case studies of the Holocaust and the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda as well as connections between genocide and crimes against humanity in South Africa as well as contemporary human rights violations such as xenophobia in the country¹.

The JHGC adopts a human rights approach to the exhibition and education programmes, promoting social justice, cultural diversity, and inclusive society and facilitating opportunities for visitors to develop critical citizenship skills. The Centre is a place of memory, education, dialogue and lessons for humanity that goes beyond telling what happened, using histories of genocide, to developing critical thinking skills and encouraging making connections between memories of the past and challenges of society today. History and lessons of genocides are used as an 'entry point' to reflect on painful histories of colonialism, apartheid, racism and 'othering'.

The connections we make between the past and the present look at current Xenophobia or Afrophobia, racism, violence against women and children, and the targeting of people with disabilities as the Life Esidimeni inquest held in 2021 is highlighting and more.

This paper will look at the state of hate in South Africa specifically the rise of xenophobia and Afrophobia. In March 2021, the JHGC partnered with the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Southern Africa and Jacana Media to publish [BR]OTHER, a book of essays and photographs by photojournalists James

¹ <https://www.jhbholocaust.co.za/about/>

Oatway and Alon Skuy². Professor Achille Mbembe, one of the many contributors to the book, reflected:

“‘Afrophobia’? ‘Xenophobia’? ‘Black-on-black racism’? A ‘darker’ as you can get is hacking a ‘foreigner’ under the pretext that the latter is ‘too dark’ – self-hate par excellence? Of course, all of that at once and much more! Yesterday I asked a taxi driver: ‘Why do they need to kill “blacks from elsewhere” in this manner? Why do they need to set them on fire?’ His response: ‘Because under apartheid, fire was the only weapon we blacks had ... With fire we could make petrol bombs and throw them at the enemy from a safe distance. ‘Today there is no need for a safe distance between self and the new enemy. To kill “these foreigners”, we [the killers] need to be as close as possible to their body. We can then set-in flames or dissect it, each blow opening a huge wound that can never be healed. Or if it is healed ... it must leave ... the kinds of scars that can never be erased.’³”

South Africa has experienced vicious cycles of xenophobic violence since 2008. These have led to horrific murders, and to displacement of thousands of migrants, including refugees and asylum seekers, from across Africa. The situation deteriorated further during the COVID-19 pandemic since March 2020.

In 2021, African migrants in South Africa continued to experience institutionalised xenophobia and are forced to live in constant fear of periodic resurgence of victimisation and violence. Poverty, unemployment and hunger worsened during the pandemic. South Africa is not only one of the most unequal societies in the world, it is also one of the most violently xenophobic. The country has a history of institutionalised xenophobia that prevents refugees and asylum seekers from accessing state resources and securing the right to live and work in the country.

Before the pandemic, the last round of violent attacks took place in September 2019. The date is significant as it was just before South Africa was to take the Chair of the AU for 2020. The backlash from many African leaders was immediate as they became increasingly frustrated with the ongoing attacks on their citizens as well as the South African government’s inadequate response to it. The government’s response is perhaps not surprising as many South African officials still refuse to admit that the problem is actually xenophobia, and rather blame it on criminal elements instead.

² <https://www.brotherbook.co.za>

³ Oatway & Skuy, BR[OTHER], Jacana, 2021. P 31.

Xenophobic sentiments and targeting of migrants were clearly present during the pandemic. The government, shortly after declaring a National State of Disaster due to the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, erected a 40-kilometre-long fence along its border with Zimbabwe. The official stance was that the fence was erected to stop the border crossing of Zimbabweans into South Africa. The fence, which is reported to have cost almost R40 million, was erected in April 2020 and is patrolled by South African National Defence Forces.

In the COVID-19 era, a worrying ‘South Africans first’ discourse was emerging among politicians and members of the public. For example, restrictive regulations on foreign employment were being adopted. An amendment to the law is aimed at restricting refugees’ ability to visit their home countries; to take part in political action; and to interact with their home governments’ institutions or representatives. The government’s justification for this amendment is ‘national security’ – a threat that it has not clearly defined. This alarming development is just one of many examples of how ‘law and order’ is increasingly being invoked to drive a xenophobic agenda. These actions declare that in order to protect ‘us’ South Africans, law and order needs to be restored by criminalising ‘them’. The ‘them’ are always African migrants, refugees or asylum seekers, never other immigrants for example. This is the mobilisation of xenophobic violence by building widespread support to criminalise and dehumanise migrants according to civil-activist Koketso Moeti, one of the contributors to the book, BR[OTHER]⁴.

Foreigners have been excluded from the South African government’s recovery measures which were implemented to assist communities from starvation during the State of Disaster situation. In 2020, President Ramaphosa offered a special COVID-19 grant of R350 for those in need. Refugees and asylum seekers were prohibited from qualifying for these grants until human rights activists took the matter to court. On 18 June 2020, the Pretoria High Court declared that the exclusion of refugees and asylum seekers from this grant was unconstitutional, forcing government to overturn their policy.

In the July 2021 riots, linked to the arrest of former President Jacob Zuma, Anne Michaels from the African Diaspora Forum, an NGO representing African migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, said in an interview to the

⁴ Oatway & Skuy, BR[OTHER], Jacana, 2021. Pp 105-107.

Daily Maverick newspaper: ...” over the past couple of days there has been a lot of violence and looting, particularly in the inner city, Hillbrow and Malvern. She said migrants are being targeted by protesters even though they are not part ... of the issues.”⁵

Justice Edwin Cameron, in his opening to the book BR[OTHER] tries to explain the motivation behind the xenophobic violence in the country: “Why? Fear. Fear of the Other, the intruder. Fear that African migrants will eventually take control, take our country. Yet, allegations that migrants are disproportionately responsible for crime and that they drain public resources by claiming undue government support lack evidence. Still, the words lawlessness, human traffickers, drug dealers, thieves become metonyms for ‘migrant’; our words shift between vocabularies of migration and criminality as though there is no boundary between the two. The cross-border migrant is not a politically neutral figure. She bears the marks of our country’s colonial and apartheid past. Yet, xenophobic violence seems reserved for poor black immigrants from Africa... Dismissing xenophobic violence as mere criminality obscures the hard fact that we have failed adequately to address our country’s structural legacies of Othering and, with this, the socio-economic conditions that provide the seedbed for violence. Migrants are blamed for the daily hardships experienced by poor South Africans. By refusing to articulate what they experience as xenophobic, we are left without the reflective means to question the colonial histories and political failure that reinforce anti-immigrant attitudes, and that continue to structure our engagement with the Other within our country.”⁶

⁵ <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-07-14-gauteng-looters-stoke-xenophobia-fires-as-shopkeepers-are-targeted/>

⁶ Oatway & Skuy, BR[OTHER], Jacana, 2021. Pp 11-13.