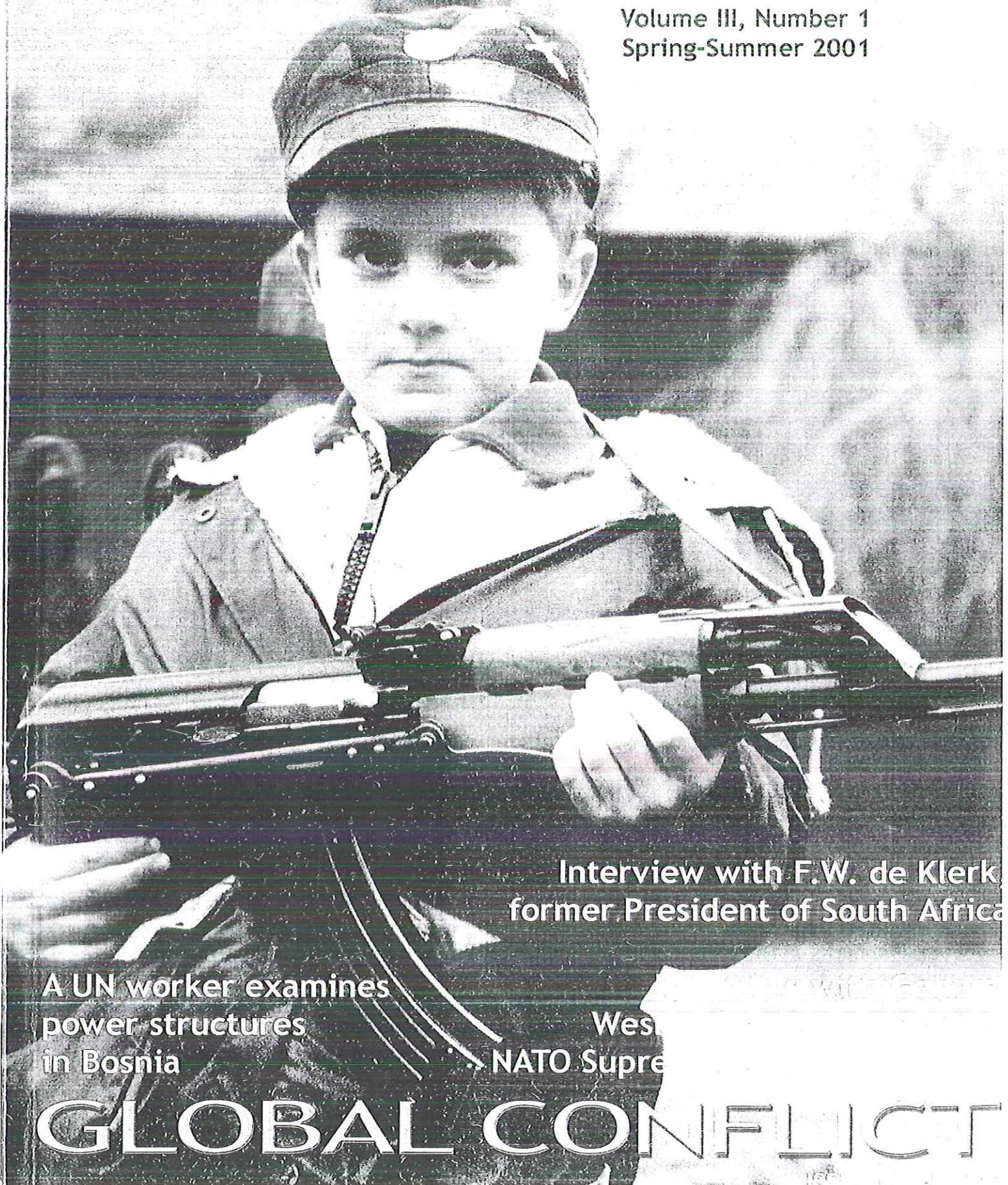


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Interview with F.W. de Klerk
former President of South Africa

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GLOBAL CONFLICT

Reformer or Pragmatist?

A Response to the SJIR Interview with F.W. de Klerk

by Ebrahim Moosa

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Will Mr. F. W. de Klerk, one of the architects of South Africa's transition to democracy, be remembered as a hero or just a footnote in history? Mr. de Klerk in a moment of self-effacing modesty prefers the judgment of history when asked to describe his role in South Africa's transition. But he quickly adds that he "hopes" to be remembered as someone who "prevented a catastrophe" and had helped save the lives of thousands of people. Mr. de Klerk's self-understanding of his role is indeed commendable and one does not wish to be unkind to a figure who played such an important role in what some have euphemistically referred to as the "miracle" of South Africa's transition. From his comments it becomes clear that Mr. de Klerk's strength is his extraordinary ability to deal with the future in an optimistic and hopeful manner. If optimism comes to him with ease, then encountering the past, especially South Africa's ugly past is one of his glaring weaknesses that has rendered Mr. de Klerk to be almost amnesic.

South Africans in their diversity, as well as foreign observers, agree that if anything Mr. de Klerk must be credited for opting for a negotiated settlement with South Africa's black majority in pursuit of democratic alternatives. In 1990 when he announced the National Party's resolve to completely abol-

ish apartheid and white minority rule, Mr. de Klerk personally earned the respect of millions of people around the world for his courageous stance and for effectively abdicating power in the interest of democracy and justice. Even his staunchest opponents in the African National Congress, who now govern the country, would readily admit that Mr. de Klerk played an important, if not monumental role, in averting what could potentially have been a devastating civil war. There was also a time when he momentarily appeared to be an Afrikaaner prophet in the late twentieth century. But prophecy, it turns out, requires something more, for the reasons discussed below. Specifically Mr. de Klerk's narrative and account of how he viewed the immoral system of apartheid and his part in ending that system raises the cloud of ambivalence over his achievements.

Collective guilt does not exist, the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas reminds us, but there is such a thing as collective responsibility. South Africans took this insight seriously and it became the basis for the negotiated settlement that emerged after decades of apartheid rule. In the end South Africans decided not to apportion guilt for the past, except for in limited and unambiguous instances of human rights violations. Rather, they sought to find out who was responsible for the horrors that

were inflicted on the millions of African people. Collective responsibility has a double sense in the South African context. On the one hand it means that the victims have the right to know who managed one of the twentieth century's most repressive political regimes, even though they are denied the expectation of retaliatory justice. This is what the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) attempted to realize. On the other hand, the process of reconciliation also intended to liberate the perpetrators and managers of apartheid by allowing them to accept their share of responsibility by means of disclosure without imputing any criminality or criminal guilt to their deeds. On the second point, Mr. de Klerk fared less well and has unfortunately shirked his responsibility.

There are broadly two kinds of explanations on the part of the Afrikaaner ruling-class for the philosophy of apartheid. Some saw it as an evil that was wrong from the very inception without any moral foundation. Several gallant Afrikaaner men and women broke away from community and ideology to show their disapproval of apartheid policies. Even ordinary Afrikaaners questioned their own complicity to wrong. In an anonymous letter, an Afrikaaner wrote to the chairperson of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Archbishop Desmond Tutu, when the horrors inflicted on citizens were disclosed in public hearings of the commission. Questioning his own complicity, the writer asks: "... how is it possible that no one knew, how it is possible that so few did something about it, how it is possible that often I just looked on. Then I wonder how it is possible to live with this inner guilt and shame ..."

Another group of Afrikaaners is also contrite, remorseful and repentant for what had happened,

but they fail to judge apartheid as a morally flawed system. For them apartheid, even its organized form of racism was the good and patronizing intentions of whites that had gone horribly wrong. They believed the fiction that apartheid was not meant to harm blacks. To the contrary, they would argue, it was intended to allow black people to advance in terms of their own cul-

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tural experience and history. Thus the only terrible part of this gruesome social experiment, and here lies the offensiveness of this position, was that it was no longer feasible and workable. The implication is clear, that if racism à la apartheid were to be economically and politically viable there would be nothing morally offensive about it. Even though Mr. de Klerk supervised the dismantling of the last vestiges of apartheid, he largely buys into the explanation that apartheid was meant to bring justice to blacks as well as whites, even though the math and record defies such skewed logic by any stretch of the imagination. One is struck by the fact that in the year 2001 Mr. de Klerk can still repeat the rhetoric that notwithstanding the "fundamental flaws in our policies" a "lot of good things were done" under apartheid and "all of it was not bad." He also simultaneously utters phrases of remorse and asks for forgiveness from fellow South Africans for the wrongs of apartheid. But a serious failing is his almost psychological

inability to deem apartheid to be a morally abhorrent system and this raises opprobrium. A moral judgment and acknowledgment of wrong normally precede repentance and remorse. In this case these are exclusive premises. Mr. de Klerk's own self-understanding of what four decades of apartheid meant to millions of fellow human beings limits his achievements and moral standing as a leader. In his autobiography titled *The Last Trek* and subsequent speeches he has repeatedly tried to explain the ravages of apartheid as a well intentioned experiment in Christian paternalism towards black people that had failed. For some unfathomable and inexplicable reason he has felt a deep need to find some kind of ontological justification for apartheid's past. A close reading of his speeches and writings gives one a distinct and uneasy feeling that he tries to justify the immorality of apartheid.

So his critics can justifiably ask: what is he apologizing for? I guess that his response would be for the inadvertent and unintentional hurt apartheid had caused millions of people! De Klerk's apology on behalf of the National Party notwithstanding, what is indeed disturbing is the ambivalence with which de Klerk depicts and explains the past. He continues to craft the narrative in terms of the new identity and evolutionary stage at which he believes Afrikaaners had arrived in post-apartheid South Africa. The parallels between Vichy France and South Africa are edifying. Historians of France remind us of the scandal that haunted those who tried manipulate memory from the perspective of national identity.

Listening to Mr. de Klerk, one gets the distinct sense of how he wishes to inscribe himself and rewrite South Africa's history by projecting back into the formation of apartheid philosophy what Régine

Robin in another context has called the "phantasms and anxiety of today." In other words, Mr. de Klerk represents that segment of Afrikaaner opinion that wish to enter the future without accounting for the past. There is almost a mis-conceived belief that in denying the past, the anxieties of the present will be sedated. Whereas the truth of the matter is that the anxieties of the present are in fact the result of the past. In fact, Mr. de Klerk's rationale has been one of 'forgive and forget' and 'both sides have committed wrongs' and therefore the scores have been settled. There is an undue haste on his part to normalize differences, memories and histories in a deeply fractured society such as South Africa. Steven Ungar reminds us that these phantasms and anxieties are tied to deep-seated prejudices that attitudes like ethnicity, race and religion had sustained over decades and cannot be unlearned in an instant. These evolving forms of prejudice are often overlooked especially when prejudice is reduced to a dehistoricized moment in the past.

What deprives de Klerk from the heroism that befalls Mandela, is the manner in which his account of past events challenges one's credibility. One is reminded by what Maurice Blanchot, the French cultural critic had to say when writing about Heidegger's complicity with National Socialism in Nazi Germany. Blanchot points out that the German philosopher discredited pure causes because of the uses to which he put it. "There, in my opinion," says Blanchot, "lies the most serious responsibility: there has occurred a corruption of writing, abuse, travesty, and a misuse of language. On [Heidegger] will henceforth weigh a suspicion." Despite Mr. de Klerk's extraordinary contribution to bringing about democracy in South Africa, the use

to which he has put his deeds will unfortunately bring a cloud of suspicion to hang over his actions. Mr. De Klerk tries to re-write history by insisting to view the legal and political order of apartheid as legitimate while discrediting the guerrilla activities of the liberation movement as illegitimate. During the negotiations he succeeded in extracting a compromise at the bargaining table. The outcome was that the deeds committed in the struggle for liberation were deemed to be equal to those political and military acts committed in the preservation of apartheid. Thus two kinds of activities of different moral and ethical salience were reduced to the register. However, one should bear in mind that the outcome of political

recognize is that the entire system of apartheid perpetuated 'social death' for millions of black South Africans. It is at this level, the analogy between genocide and social death, that the term Nazism is employed figuratively in the apartheid context. Furthermore, it is the prerogative of the victims to describe their suffering in the language they choose to employ.

It is also not a coincidence that Mr. de Klerk's National Party became anti-nuclear on the eve of the country's transition to majority rule. South Africa would have been the first black majority state to have nuclear weapon capacity and it would have been more credulous if the new government disarmed itself. It is hard to suppress the sus-

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pragmatism does not in any way derogate or change the moral tone of apartheid.

More specifically, Mr. de Klerk says that it is unfair to compare apartheid with Nazism, arguing that there was never genocide in South Africa. He is right in so far that we do not know of any systematic acts of genocide being committed against the black inhabitants of South Africa. However, there were spine-chilling disclosures during the hearings surrounding Dr. Wouter Basson, the apartheid regime's bio-warfare specialist known as "Dr. Death," indicating that some members of the security establishment were researching race-specific bacterial weapons and had planned projects to find ways to sterilize the country's black population. What Mr. de Klerk fails to

picion that nuclear disarmament only took place in order to deprive a black government from inheriting nuclear power. In his interview, Mr. de Klerk attributes the cause for social upheavals in post-apartheid South Africa to the rebelliousness nurtured during the days of resistance to apartheid. What he ignores is that tactics such as boycotting schools, refusing to pay rent and taxes and defying an oppressive government were some of the few effective non-violent weapons that the majority of South Africans had at their disposal. The alternatives to such tactics are too ghastly to contemplate. Of course one has to recognize that what today manifests itself as major social problems in South Africa such as rampant and violent crime had its roots in decades of apartheid mismanage-

ment and the dehumanization of large sectors of that society.

Finally, while both Mr. de Klerk and Mr. Nelson Mandela have been honored as Nobel peace laureates by the world community for ending the conflict in South Africa, we will be well advised not to think that apartheid ended because of the foresight and wisdom

and motives will remain the subject of controversy and subject to rigorous scrutiny for a long time.

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of these two gentlemen. It took decades of resistance at the cost of thousands of lives; the imprisonment of many thousands, including Mr. Mandela; the displacement of millions through exile and forced removals; and the suffering of millions of people as well as the global solidarity against apartheid, to make that system unworkable and finally ensured its downfall. These unnamed men and women are the real and unsung heroes of this monumental struggle and the end it was their labors that effectively ended apartheid. At the same time, to be fair, we remain indebted to the excellent leadership displayed by the role players such as Mr. de Klerk and Mr. Mandela at a timely moment in history. But when Mr. de Klerk triumphantly declares "I ended apartheid," one should recall the full history of struggle in South Africa and he should not be oblivious to the fact that he had the honor to end a discredited system that his forbears had invented. So while one should salute de Klerk's courage, his rationales, explanations