

By Peter B. Orlik

## Under Damocles' Sword -- the South African Press

*While the Nationalist government lately exhibits greater tolerance toward the opposition papers, such tolerance is neither demanded nor insured by law. No guarantees exist that the press will not be further circumscribed.*

► Since the Nationalist Party and its *apartheid* policy came to power in 1948, South Africa has been subjected to ever more unequivocal censure in the European and North American press. Though the charges made are often ill-informed and sometimes completely fabricated, they echo those printed within the Republic by South Africa's own English-language publications.

These papers, like their overseas sympathizers, have fought a 20-year running battle with the Afrikaner Nationalists and, as early as 1961, were forced to zigzag past no less than ten punitive national statutes. The situation has hardly improved though the government has stopped short of total censorship. Instead it "prefers to keep the press in suspended fear of control

and to intimidate rather than actually control it."<sup>1</sup>

The press, like the ruling white populace, is divided according to race and origin with the Afrikaans-language papers supporting the government and the English-language papers opposing it. Almost every metropolitan area has an Afrikaans and an English morning paper as well as two evening papers and, though there may be none among them with the quality of *The Times* of London or the *Christian Science Monitor*, neither do the major South African papers sink to the level of the British or American tabloid press.<sup>2</sup> All of the papers in the Republic share the same access to SAPA (South Africa Press Association) dispatches, and this agency collects and distributes domestic news as well as providing foreign news to local papers and to the state-owned South African Broadcasting Corporation; much of this is in conjunction with foreign news agencies.

Currently, there are 21 daily newspapers in South Africa, 16 of which are published in English and five in Afrikaans. There are also six Sunday papers published in Johannesburg and one in Durban which enjoy nationwide distribution. Of these, three are in Afrikaans and four are in English (one of which caters largely to non-whites).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Patrick Van Rensburg, *Guilty Land; The History of Apartheid* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1962), p. 137.

<sup>2</sup> Harm J. de Blij, *Africa South* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1962), pp. 230-1.

<sup>3</sup> *State of South Africa: Economic; Financial; Statistical Year-Book, 1967* (Johannesburg: Da Gama Publications Ltd., 1968), p. 345.

► Dr. Orlik is an assistant professor of speech at Central Michigan University. This article was derived from his doctoral dissertation on the South African Broadcasting Corporation completed recently at Wayne State University.

As might be expected from the above figures, the English-language press out-circulates the Afrikaans papers by almost a 4-1 margin. In 1967, for example, Afrikaans dailies had a total circulation of 320,000 while the English press could boast of 1,100,000.<sup>4</sup>

That these statistics clash sharply not only with displayed political preferences but also with the language-group population ratio (3-2 in favor of the Afrikaners) presents a two-pronged paradox but one which, at least partially, can be accounted for. One part of the answer lies in the fact that nearly half of all adult Afrikaners do not read a daily Afrikaans newspaper but prefer weeklies instead, while all but one-seventh of English-speaking adults read an English daily.<sup>5</sup>

Then too, the more powerful financial support (notably from mining interests) which the English press receives enables it to provide more polished features and better news coverage, for Briton and Boer alike, than that found in the Afrikaans press. This is illustrated by a 1968 survey which revealed that 28% of the Afrikaners read an English daily while only 5% of the English read a daily published in Afrikaans.<sup>6</sup> As the organizing secretary of an Afrikaner cultural organization admitted, "for every hundred Afrikaners, nine Afrikaans newspapers are sold; but for every hundred English in South Africa, 61 English newspapers are sold."<sup>7</sup>

Lastly, English has become the language of the so-called "Bantu Press" which in itself is owned by English interests. The Bantu Press has accustomed the black not only to reading a newspaper but also to reading it in English and has thus provided a whole new market for the conventional English press.<sup>8</sup>

► Politically, the English press is frequently critical of both the government and the largely English-stock United Party which ostensibly opposes it. This vigorous criticism by the English press has sometimes taken the form of slant-

ed exposés which have not been researched thoroughly and are later proven false by vigilant Afrikaans papers.<sup>9</sup>

In the main, however, the English press takes pride in the accuracy and objectivity of its reporting. Even the *Rand Daily Mail* (which is considered to be a spokesman for the government's only real opposition, the tiny Progressive Party) applauds the government whenever it believes such praise to be deserved. The most articulate and critical of South Africa's major papers, the *Rand Daily Mail* has been subjected to frequent governmental legal action due to its highly vocal opposition to the recent arrest and detention laws and its unauthorized probes into adverse conditions in schools, transport, housing and penal institutions.

More conservative, though just as vigilant, is Johannesburg's *Sunday Times* (operated by South African Associated Newspapers Limited; the same corporation that runs the *Daily Mail*), and the large Argus Group of newspapers which includes among others, the Johannesburg *Star*, Cape Town's *Cape Argus*, Pretoria's *News* and Durban's *Daily News* and *Sunday Tribune*. Generally, these papers all support the United Party.<sup>10</sup>

On the other side of the political and language-group fence are the far fewer Afrikaans newspapers. Much narrower in appeal,

the Afrikaans press is produced by and for Afrikaners. It stands for Afrikaner nationalism, church and language and knows little moderation. An average is-

<sup>4</sup> "The Image Game Called Politics," *News/Check* (Johannesburg), June 21, 1968, p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> Louis C. Harris, "In South Africa It's 'A State of Affairs,'" *Editor & Publisher*, April 23, 1966, p. 108.

<sup>6</sup> "The Image Game Called Politics," p. 18.

<sup>7</sup> William H. Vatcher, *White Laager: The Rise of Afrikaner Nationalism* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1965), p. 98.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Karis, "South Africa," *Five African States; Responses to Diversity*, ed. Gwendolen M. Carter (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1963), p. 513.

<sup>9</sup> de Blij, pp. 231-2.

<sup>10</sup> H. C. Kelly, "South Africa Sabotage Bill Threatens Press," *Editor & Publisher*, June 9, 1962, p. 94.

sue contains mostly political news, profiles of leaders of the Party, attacks on the Opposition, and local material; foreign news is much neglected. Reports of attacks by Africans on whites are played up, as are such disturbances as the liquor riots in Durban. Church news has a prominent place.<sup>11</sup>

Such content serves and sustains a well-delineated and increasingly isolated readership, unexposed to the more moderating influences of other print media. It has been estimated, in fact, that at least 60% of the Afrikaners read only the Afrikaans press.<sup>12</sup> Thus, it becomes a potent apparatus for:

enhancing the cohesiveness of the Afrikaner community and largely insulating its readers from the liberal, cosmopolitan and anti-governmental attitudes to be found in the English press. To a degree hardly equaled by the press in any other Western country, all five Afrikaans daily newspapers . . . are closely allied to political party leadership.<sup>13</sup>

Even the editor of *Die Transvaler*, Dr. G. D. Scholtz, has in fact described his paper as the "unofficial" organ of the Nationalist Party in Johannesburg and states that *Die Burger* serves this function in Cape Town as does *Die Volksblad* in Bloemfontein and *Die Nataler* in Durban. Their "unofficial" status accrues, asserts Scholtz, from the fact that they derive their support from the Nationalists, have directors who are well-known Nationalists but are not owned by the Party as such.<sup>14</sup>

Thus controlling their own language press, the Nationalists have also taken steps to reduce the overwhelming dominance of the English language and English capital in the publication of non-white newspapers and periodicals. The government's policy of educating Africans in the vernacular may, in the future, reduce black demand for the

products of the English press. More immediately, Afrikaans capital has established a number of pro-government tribal-language magazines designed to compete with those in English. Their use in the Bantu schools is encouraged if not mandated with the resultant expense being subsidized by the government. Through such manipulation, the Afrikaner-financed *Bona* had achieved a monthly circulation of 91,000 by 1959, surpassing that of the prestigious English-language *Drum* by some 9,000 copies.<sup>15</sup>

For the present, however, the Nationalists have no choice but to rely on political rather than economic measures to keep the English press in check and, since the release of the first portion of the special Press Commission's report, such measures have become more overt and wide-ranging. Established in 1950, the Press Commission was instructed to probe and analyze press monopolies, triviality and the alleged lack of accuracy in news reporting, especially in the English-language press.

After some 12 years of labor, the first section of the Commission's long-heralded report was finally released in 1962. Containing little that was startling, the 810-page document re-emphasized that the Afrikaans press supports the government while the English papers support the opposition, and added that "no comprehensive picture of the South African scene can be obtained from any one newspaper or from either set of newspapers."<sup>16</sup>

In conjunction with this statement. Reuters, the Associated Press, United Press International and Agence France Presse were criticized for drawing news only from the English-language papers, and it was recommended that the penny-per-word press cable rate which then applied to Commonwealth nations be broadened to other states to prevent Great Britain from being "the clearing house for South African news."<sup>17</sup> Since South Africa had only recently left the Commonwealth, this suggestion was to

<sup>11</sup> de Blij, p. 512.

<sup>12</sup> Karis, p. 512.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 512-3.

<sup>14</sup> Vatcher, pp. 99-100.

<sup>15</sup> Karis, pp. 514-5.

<sup>16</sup> "South African Press Board Asks Change," *Editor & Publisher*, March 3, 1962, p. 54.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

be expected as was the demand that the South African Press Association should amend its constitution to give the Afrikaans-language press a greater voice in its operation. If SAPA failed to follow this recommendation, the Commission advised revocation of its license as a non-profit organization.<sup>18</sup>

By the time the full report was released in 1964, the Commission had arrived at an even more substantial list of requests. Among other things, the 4,262-page document recommended that all foreign correspondents and local newsmen reporting for foreign publications be required to register.<sup>19</sup> Also advocated was a statutory press council which would oversee all local newspapers in order to promote self-control and discipline. Thus it was that,

after a period of gestation that lasted 14 years, the government-appointed Press Commission ended its labours in the ponderous shape of nine volumes standing over three-feet high and weighing more than 40 pounds. Life is too short to read all this verbiage and it is unlikely that the sponsors expected anyone to do so. It is enough for them that a threat, stopping short of censorship in the most blatant sense of the word, has been left hanging over the free press of South Africa like the sword of Damocles.<sup>20</sup>

► As one means of warding off governmental control, the Newspaper Press Union, which represents all major newspaper firms in the Republic, had agreed to adopt a voluntary code of conduct in 1962. By so doing, the N.P.U. members won exemption from the Publications and Entertainments Act which is administered by a Publications Control Board not noted for liberalism. Yet, the N.P.U.'s Board of Reference has proved almost as debilitating because, while the decisions of the Publications Board are appealable to the courts, those of the government-leaning Board of Reference are not.<sup>21</sup>

Additional ways to police the press have also been provided and Nationalist leaders have never been reticent in

expressing their approval of them. In a 1961 attack on the press, Prime Minister Verwoerd stated in Parliament:

I am not referring to political comment that is reasonable, or criticism from any side, but to untruthful, libelous comment and distortions of what my policies are. I object to untruths being sent overseas through the channels of the South African press.<sup>22</sup>

Echoing the statements of his chief, Foreign Minister Eric Louw added in a Senate speech:

We cannot afford to have that type of correspondent in South Africa—a man who is slandering our country and causing extensive damage by the type of report which is being sent overseas.<sup>23</sup>

It was hardly coincidental therefore that one month after Mr. Louw's remarks, the editor of the Port Elizabeth *Evening Post* was fined for publishing a statement by two touring Canadian social scientists which a magistrate ruled was "likely to stir up feelings of hostility between certain sections of the South African people." Driving the point home, the magistrate also maintained that in the Republic, "the intent of the editor is irrelevant, the Court being only concerned with the effect of the report."<sup>24</sup> That same month, the press had been handed another setback when Benjamin Pogrunder, a reporter for the *Rand Daily Mail*, was given an eight-day jail term for refusing to divulge the name of the informant who had supplied him with a detailed plan for the disruption of the official Republic Day celebration. In finding Pogrunder guilty, the Court accepted the prosecution's contention that a reasonable person would follow the

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> "South African Report Stirs Press Debate," *Editor & Publisher*, May 16, 1964, p. 75.

<sup>20</sup> *The Times* (London), June 24, 1964, p. 13.

<sup>21</sup> Brian Bunting, *The Rise of the South African Reich* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1964), pp. 244-6.

<sup>22</sup> *The Times* (London), April 15, 1961, p. 7.

<sup>23</sup> *The Times* (London), June 8, 1961, p. 12.

<sup>24</sup> "Editor Fined for Interview with Tourists in South Africa," *Editor & Publisher*, July 15, 1961, p. 44.

code of law rather than his profession's code of ethics.<sup>25</sup>

Further restraints on the press were imposed the next year with the passage of the so-called "Sabotage Act." Under it, newspapers are required to deposit the sum of R20,000 (\$28,000) with the government. If a paper is subsequently convicted of printing anything "seeking to further or encourage any political aim, including bringing about social or economic change," the deposit is automatically forfeit.<sup>26</sup> Also included in the Act was a prohibition against the publication of any statement by, or news of, a person who has been banned.<sup>27</sup> By 1962, the government had also firmly established its power to ban whole publications as well as individuals and used it to suspend *The New Age*, the Communist-leaning and phoenix-like periodical which, at this latest demise, claimed a circulation of 20,000, about 90% of which was non-white.<sup>28</sup>

With the release of the Press Commission's turgid indictment, 1964 too found the press under fire. As if the report weren't enough, Prime Minister Verwoerd threatened further measures when he stated:

One right which a newspaper does not have is to commit treason against its country and place its country in a vulnerable position to be attacked from the outside world.<sup>29</sup>

Rushing to his leader's banner, Nationalist M. P. Blaar Coetzee, a United Party defector and sometime journalist, charged in Parliament that the English-

language press of the country was "approaching treason" in its coverage of racial and political matters and asked of local editors, "What are they going to do about this bunch of traitors who work for them and whom they pay day-to-day?"<sup>30</sup>

In 1965, the answer came in many forms. Little more than a month after the president of the South African Society of Journalists, Mr. George Oliver, had warned that the government was "slowly but surely trying to regulate the activities of our newspapers and newspapermen,"<sup>31</sup> a new amendment was added to the all-embracing Suppression of Communism Act. Through it, the state president was empowered to ban any publication he believes to be a "continuation or substitution" of a banned publication and the minister of justice acquired the authority to ban the quoting of any and every speech, statement or utterance he believes is "furthering the aims of communism." Any paper printing such material was made liable to court-ordered confiscation of its presses.<sup>32</sup>

All this did not transpire without press reaction, though the government's most vocal critic, *Rand Daily Mail* editor Laurence Gandar, was forced to admit that "White public opinion is moving steadily in support of the government despite the press criticism. It might be that I will not be able to continue much longer."<sup>33</sup>

Mr. Gandar's predictions proved more accurate than he would have wished and in July, 1965, the offices of his paper were twice subjected to thorough searches in surprise raids conducted by the security police. At issue were articles printed by the *Daily Mail* which described alleged brutality within the Republic's prisons. Gandar was ordered by the government to prove his charges and the then-minister of justice, Mr. Vorster, threatened court action against the paper.<sup>34</sup> (Under the 1959 Prisons Act, it is an offense to publish any information about prisons which is known by the publisher to be false or

<sup>25</sup> "South African Reporter Pleads Ethics; Jailed," *Editor & Publisher*, July 15, 1961, p. 44.

<sup>26</sup> Kelly, p. 94.

<sup>27</sup> Wes Gallagher, "Odds Against Press Freedom in Africa," *Editor & Publisher*, August 4, 1962, p. 50.

<sup>28</sup> Karis, p. 514.

<sup>29</sup> *The Times* (London), April 28, 1964, p. 28.

<sup>30</sup> "South African Report Stirs Press Debate," p. 75.

<sup>31</sup> *The Times* (London), April 13, 1965, p. 10.

<sup>32</sup> *The Times* (London), June 7, 1965, p. 8.

<sup>33</sup> "South Africa's Voice of Opposition," *Time*, Jan. 8, 1965, p. 38.

<sup>34</sup> "Press Told to Prove 'Brutality' Charges," *Editor & Publisher*, Aug. 7, 1965, p. 56.

which has not been carefully verified.)<sup>35</sup>

For its courageous stand, the *Rand Daily Mail* was awarded the 1966 World Press Achievement Award by the American Newspaper Publisher's Association. The paper accepted the honor but editor Gandar could not leave the country to attend the ceremony as his passport and that of reporter Pogrud had been revoked.<sup>36</sup> In Gandar's place, Managing Editor Leicester H. Walton was dispatched to retrieve the award. In his New York remarks, Walton acknowledged that some legislation restricting the right of publication had been passed but insisted that, despite his paper's unstinting criticism of government policies, the *Daily Mail* still received co-operation from official sources:

Although for many years newsprint was imported under license during currency stringency, we never had difficulty in getting our fair allocation, even when we used to say that the prime minister must go. Import licences for machinery have been readily available. Cabinet ministers still talk to our reporters; we still get state advertising; and police protection has been given us in times of upset and riot.<sup>37</sup>

Two months before Walton's surprising pro-government statement, the normally anti-Nationalist *Sunday Times* had also assumed a more conciliatory posture when it stated:

The Nationalist government, in spite of tremendous pressure from some of its supporters, has not curbed the freedom of the press. It will properly be said that this is no more than what one would expect of a government; but it should be remembered that political conflicts run deeper in South Africa than elsewhere. The South African press, in consequence, is probably more outspoken than newspapers elsewhere. Nonetheless, the South African government has not budged from its duty to maintain this fundamental freedom; and in light of all that has happened in S.A. it is to be warmly congratulated for upholding the right of its opponents to say what they please . . . The press is

stronger than ever before; and the government is stronger than ever before. What a wonderful country this is for editors—and cabinet ministers.<sup>38</sup>

On October 16, Mr. Gandar's passport was returned and indications seemed to point to an armistice between the Afrikaner government and the English-language press.

Subsequent events proved this armistice to be merely an armed truce. In early June, 1967, one journalist from the *Sunday Express* and another from the *Sunday Times* were given six-week jail terms for refusing to divulge the sources of articles which dealt with alleged neo-Nazi activity within the Republic.<sup>39</sup> Two weeks later, Gandar, Pogrud and even Walton were, along with two other senior members of the South African Associated Newspapers Limited staff, served with summonses for their parts in the 1965 prison brutality stories.<sup>40</sup> In July, Gandar and *Sunday Times* editor Joel Mervis were formally charged with having published false statements about prisons.

Though the legal actions resulting from these new indictments are proving more harassing than punitive, they have served to dash the hopes of those journalists who had believed that a rapprochement was possible between the Nationalist government and the English-language press. And, though the press has emerged from its latest trial more or less free, there are no guarantees that it will not be further circumscribed in the future. Recently, the Vorster regime has exhibited a greater degree of tolerance toward the opposition papers but it is a tolerance neither demanded nor insured by law. Former Justice Minister Vorster is well aware of this and so, more importantly, is the English-language press.

<sup>35</sup> *The Times* (London), June 26, 1967, p. 9.

<sup>36</sup> "The 1966 World Press Achievement Award," *Editor & Publisher*, April 23, 1966, p. 17.

<sup>37</sup> "Officials Help Mail Despite Its Criticism," *Editor & Publisher*, April 30, 1966, p. 16.

<sup>38</sup> *Sunday Times* (Johannesburg), Feb. 27, 1966, quoted by Harris, p. 110.

<sup>39</sup> *The Times* (London), June 17, 1967, p. 4.

<sup>40</sup> *The Times* (London), June 26, 1967, p. 3.