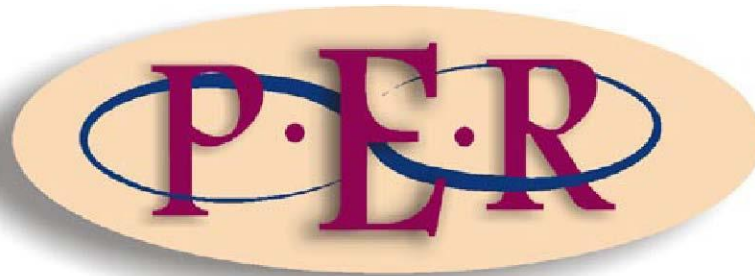


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**APARTHEID'S ALCATRAZ: THE BARBERTON PRISON  
COMPLEX DURING THE EARLY 1980S - PART TWO**

ISSN 1727-3781



**2015 VOLUME 18 No 2**

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/pelj.v18i2.08>

## **APARTHEID'S ALCATRAZ: THE BARBERTON PRISON COMPLEX DURING THE EARLY 1980S - PART TWO**

**SA Peté\***

### **1 Introduction**

This article is focused on the Barberton Prison Complex, as it existed in the early 1980s at the height of the apartheid era. The first major cracks began to appear in the edifice of apartheid during the early 1980s, and Barberton was the place to which the most dangerous and violent prisoners in South Africa were sent to serve their sentences. For the most part, the inmates at Barberton were "normal" offenders, as opposed to the high-profile political offenders detained in prisons like the infamous Robben Island. The importance of Barberton lies in the fact that it was a "normal" as opposed to a "political" prison, and that it may be said to represent the worst of what the South African penal system had to offer the general prison population at a crucial time in the country's history. This article examines the Barberton Prison Complex in the early 1980s through the lens of public discourse at the time – specifically as expressed in a wide range of South African newspapers. The prison complex was subject to extensive publicity in the press over a number of years, as a series of violent incidents rocked the nation and threatened to overwhelm the prison authorities and destabilise the South African penal system. The wide-scale publicity surrounding events at Barberton in the early 1980s must certainly have dented the confidence of many middle class South Africans in the penal system, and, perhaps, in the policy of apartheid as a whole.

Part One of this article focused on the orgy of violence which occurred at the Barberton prison farm on 29 December 1982 – leading to the deaths of three prisoners and serious injuries to others. The criminal trial which followed – which came to be known as the Barberton "heat exhaustion trial" – was examined, as well as the direct ramifications of that infamous trial.

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Part Two begins with an examination of several violent incidents which occurred within the Barberton Prison Complex during the course of 1983 – which led to a further nine inmate deaths. The response of the authorities to the orgy of violence at Barberton is then discussed, including the setting up of a committee of enquiry. The findings of this committee are then extensively analysed through the lens of public discourse, as reflected in a wide range of newspaper articles published at this time. The wider relevance of the events at Barberton in the early to mid-1980s, as well as the state of public discourse surrounding these events, is then assessed.

## **2 Further violence keeps Barberton in the headlines and the authorities respond**

Apart from the "heat exhaustion trial" and the events which "snowballed" out of it – such as the criminal trial of Lieutenant Niemand and the launching of civil claims by prisoners – there was another factor which kept Barberton at the forefront of public discourse throughout the mid-1980s. While the heat exhaustion trial was still under way, a number of violent incidents occurred within the prisons around Barberton, leading to injuries and deaths. These incidents kept the notorious prison complex very much in the public eye throughout 1983 and 1984.

For example, on 19 April 1983 a violent brawl between prisoners took place at the Barberton Maximum Security Prison, which was said to have been caused by friction between rival gangs. Eight inmates were reported to have been injured, as well as certain members of the prison staff when they intervened. One of the staff members injured was Major CDH Visser, the head of the prison. He was assaulted with hammers and had to be admitted to the intensive care unit at a hospital in Nelspruit, where he regained consciousness only 11 days later.<sup>1</sup> Although four prisoners were put on trial for the attack on Visser, they were eventually acquitted as there was insufficient evidence to link them to the assault.<sup>2</sup> According to City Press, the trial was not without

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<sup>1</sup> Mail Reporter *Rand Daily Mail* (21 April 1983) 3; Sapa *Rand Daily Mail* (14 April 1984) 3. See, also, Anon *Daily Dispatch* (19 April 1984) page number unknown.

<sup>2</sup> They were acquitted on 13 April 1984. See Sapa *Rand Daily Mail* (14 April 1984) 3.

drama. In a page-one report under the dramatic headline "Another Barberton bombshell! 'Warders staged' convict battle", the newspaper informed its readers that:

Startling allegations that Barberton warders armed two enemy prison gangs with four-pound hammers and put them together in a locked enclosure to "solve their problems" were made in the Nelspruit Regional Court this week. While warders stood outside the fenced-in "camp" where the fighting took place, injured members of the 26 Gang clawed their way under or over a three-metre high fence to escape being beaten to death by members of the 28 Gang, the court heard.<sup>3</sup>

These allegations were denied by Major Visser, who told the court that the group of prisoners who began fighting had been a normal working party who had been given hammers to crush stones. He also told the court that members of different gangs always worked together.

During June and July 1983 further incidents occurred at the Barberton Maximum Security Prison which, although not resulting in deaths, nevertheless indicated serious levels of violence within the prison complex at the time. On 20 June 1983 an attempted escape by four "very dangerous" prisoners was prevented only by the firing of shots, and on 1 July 1983 night-duty staff at the prison were overpowered during an escape by 10 prisoners.<sup>4</sup>

On 22 August 1983 another violent brawl took place between prisoners in the Barberton Maximum Security prison. This incident resulted in the deaths of three prisoners.<sup>5</sup> Just over a week later on 31 August 1983 – responding to a question posed in parliament by Mrs Helen Suzman – the Minister of Justice and Prisons, Mr Kobie Coetsee, confirmed the deaths. He told parliament that "the most dangerous and worst possible elements" of South Africa's prison population were confined in the Barberton Prison Complex. These prisoners had "little to lose" – so making them extremely difficult to control. Coetsee also spoke of the role played by gangs in

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<sup>3</sup> Blow *City Press* (15 April 1984) 1. See, also, Anon *Daily Dispatch* (19 April 1984) page number unknown.

<sup>4</sup> These incidents were revealed by the Minister of Justice and Prisons, Mr Kobie Coetsee, in answer to a question put to him in Parliament by Mrs Helen Suzman. Political Staff *Cape Times* (1 September 1983) 4. See, also, Political Correspondent *Natal Mercury* (1 September 1983) page number unknown.

<sup>5</sup> Political Staff *Cape Times* (1 September 1983) 4.

instigating violence, and admitted that it was impossible to stamp out gang activity completely.<sup>6</sup>

September 1983 was to prove even more violent and deadly. The month started with the death of prisoner Jackson Khumalo. Khumalo, who had escaped from prison in Barberton some weeks before, died in hospital on 5 September 1983 as a result of injuries suffered while he was being recaptured by prison warders two weeks before his death.<sup>7</sup> On 20 September 1983 a further four prisoners died after being shot during an attempted mass escape.<sup>8</sup> The incident occurred within the maximum security section of the prison complex – situated in the town of Barberton itself. Apart from the four deaths, three prisoners and two warders were hospitalised due to injuries sustained during the escape attempt.<sup>9</sup> According to the Rand Daily Mail:

A warder was allegedly stabbed several times with sharpened spoons, another was hit in the face with a plate of food, smashing his nose, while three prisoners were wounded – including one whose arm had to be amputated after he was blasted with a shotgun.<sup>10</sup>

Following the deadly riot of 20 September, one may have expected the rest of the month to pass without incident. Unfortunately yet more death and violence was to occur on the last day of this tragic month. On 30 September 1983 the newly-arrived acting head of the Barberton Maximum Security Prison, Lieutenant-Colonel J Grundling – who had been transferred to Barberton from the Zonderwater Maximum Security Prison a few days before in order to strengthen the management at Barberton following the violence of 20 September – was attacked by two prisoners as he walked through a mess hall. He was stabbed in the back and stomach with a sharpened copper pipe. A warder who went to the aid of Lieutenant-Colonel Grundling, N Gukeya, was stabbed in the head. One of the two prisoners who had carried out the attack was then shot and killed by another warder. The violence on 30 September 1983 brought the total number of violent deaths at Barberton since the "heat exhaustion" incident

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<sup>6</sup> Political Staff *Cape Times* (1 September 1983) 4. See, also, Political Correspondent *Natal Mercury* (1 September 1983) page number unknown.

<sup>7</sup> Pretoria Bureau *The Star* (13 September 1983) page number unknown. See, also, Olckers *Rand Daily Mail* (13 September 1983) 1.

<sup>8</sup> Editor *The Citizen* (23 September 1983) 6.

<sup>9</sup> Vanvolsem *Rand Daily Mail* (21 September 1983) 1.

<sup>10</sup> Pretoria Bureau *The Star* (23 September 1983) page number unknown.

on 29 December 1982 to 12.<sup>11</sup> Ironically, the violence of 30 September 1983 occurred only a few days after a visit to Barberton aimed at addressing the causes of the violence – by the Minister of Justice and Prisons, Kobie Coetzee, and the acting Commissioner of Prisons, Lieutenant-General WH Willemse.<sup>12</sup>

Clearly, the orgy of violence within the Barberton Prison Complex over a short period of time – resulting in an escalating number of deaths and cases of serious injury, coupled with the fact that details of each incident were splashed across a wide range of South African newspapers – caused alarm in the minds of the authorities. Apart from steps to strengthen the management within the Barberton Prison Complex, the prison authorities were forced to rethink their previous decision to confine all the most violent prisoners in the country in one place. In October 1983 it was reported that a decision had been taken to reclassify the Barberton Maximum Security Prison to a medium-security prison and to transfer the "bad apples" to other prisons. In the future, Barberton would cater for prisoners with better prospects of rehabilitation.<sup>13</sup> The other major response of the authorities to the violence at Barberton was to initiate a high-level investigation into conditions within the prison complex – as well as the causes of the violence. In September 1983 a three-man committee of enquiry was set up by the Minister of Justice and Prisons. The chairman was Mr JA van Dam, the President of the Johannesburg Regional Magistrates' Courts. The other two members of the committee were Dr Herman Venter, a criminologist and former mayor of Pretoria, and Brigadier EA Venter, a member of the Prisons Service.<sup>14</sup> The committee took around seven months to complete its investigation, and on 23 April 1984 the

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<sup>11</sup> Staff Reporter *Sunday Express* (5 February 1984) 11. See, also, Anon *Die Burger* (17 May 1984)b 7.

<sup>12</sup> Argus Correspondent *The Argus* (30 September 1983) page number unknown. See, also, Pretoria Correspondent *The Star* (30 September 1983) page number unknown; Own Correspondent *Cape Times* (1 October 1983) page number unknown; Weekend Argus Correspondent *Weekend Argus* (1 October 1983) page number unknown; Jones *The Star* (1 October 1983) page number unknown; Vanvolsem *Rand Daily Mail* (1 October 1983) page number unknown.

<sup>13</sup> Polisieverslaggewer *Beeld* (3 October 1983) 3. Of course, transferring the "bad apples" from one prison to another could also serve to transfer the problem of violence from one prison to another. For example, the same newspaper report which gave details of the transfers from Barberton also pointed out that, over the preceding weekend, two prisoners had been killed by fellow inmates at the Modder-Bee prison outside Springs.

<sup>14</sup> Staff Reporter *Pretoria News* (12 October 1983) 9. See, also, Anon *Die Transvaler* (14 October 1983) 3.

Rand Daily Mail reported that the findings of the committee had been handed to the Minister of Justice and Prisons.<sup>15</sup>

### **3 The furore in the press following the release of the Van Dam committee report**

The press was to have a field day publishing details of the Van Dam committee's report. For example, summarising the various incidents of violence which had taken place within the Barberton Prison Complex, as well as the lengthy criminal trials which had arisen out of these incidents, the Rand Daily Mail spoke of "a sickening picture of abuse and mismanagement" and an "ugly catalogue of violence" which needed to be addressed.<sup>16</sup> It is not possible in this short article to summarise completely the extensive publicity given to the Van Dam committee report in the press, or to cover all the details in the report. It is possible, however, to provide an overview of the publicity surrounding certain of the committee's major findings – in order to assess the state of penal discourse at this time.

One of the major findings of the Van Dam committee was that the activities of prison gangs – which it described as "horrifying" – had played a major role in much of the violence which had occurred at Barberton.<sup>17</sup> This was seized upon by the press, since it played into an ongoing fascination on the part of the South African public with the brutal activities of prison gangs. The intense focus on prison gangs is reflected in the many references to gangs in newspaper headlines at this time:

- Prison gangs must be curbed (Bendes in tronke moet vasgevat word)<sup>18</sup>
- Report details brutal prison gangs<sup>19</sup>
- Prison gangs were behind the violence (Tronkbendes was agter geweld)<sup>20</sup>
- Gangs' role in prison riots "horrifying"<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Editor *Rand Daily Mail* (23 April 1984) 8.

<sup>16</sup> Editor *Rand Daily Mail* (23 April 1984) 8.

<sup>17</sup> Wentzel *The Argus* (17 May 1984) 4.

<sup>18</sup> Parlementêre Redaksie *Die Vaderland* (17 May 1984) 2.

<sup>19</sup> Freimond, Streek and Sapa *Rand Daily Mail* (17 May 1984) 11.

<sup>20</sup> Anon *Die Burger* (17 May 1984)b 7.

<sup>21</sup> Wentzel *The Argus* (17 May 1984) 4.

- New strategy on prison gangs "vital"<sup>22</sup>
- Horror gangs a key factor in prison riots<sup>23</sup>
- Prison gangs: the grim truth<sup>24</sup>

An editorial in the Eastern Province Herald summed up the Van Dam committee's findings in respect of the role played by prison gangs at Barberton, inter alia, as follows:

The Van Dam committee which looked into a variety of events at Barberton last year – 12 deaths in all – has come up with the unsurprising discovery that prison gangs are responsible for murder, assault and sexual abuse in our overcrowded cells. But this has been known for several years. What we must hope for is that, because the Van Dam inquiry has won the stamp of Government approval, some concerted effort will be made now to tackle this hideous phenomenon.<sup>25</sup>

Many of the articles published at this time did not hesitate to provide gruesome details of gang activity – as outlined in the report of the Van Dam committee. In blunt terms which must have horrified many ordinary South Africans, the Rand Daily Mail stated, inter alia, as follows:

Alarming evidence of the existence of violent gangs in South African prisons has been uncovered by the Van Dam Inquiry into the Barberton prisons. It said the gangs, which were "very strong", were mainly found in maximum security prisons. The committee found evidence of violence, assaults, murders, homosexuality and gangs specialising in escapes ... The committee described as "frightening" the "merciless cruelty" of the gangs and their members who could, in exceptional circumstances, take action against prison personnel. Often gangs sentenced members to death for the flimsiest of reasons and the death penalty was carried out with a variety of brutal methods.<sup>26</sup>

Another good example of the manner in which the "shock findings" of the Van Dam committee, particularly in relation to gang activities, were reported in the press, is to be found in *The Star*. This newspaper summed up certain of the committee's findings in respect of the nature and extent of gang activities in Barberton prisons, in the following disturbing terms:

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<sup>22</sup> Leeman *The Star* (17 May 1984) 1.

<sup>23</sup> Political Staff *The Star* (17 May 1984) b 5.

<sup>24</sup> Chester *The Star* (19 May 1984) 11.

<sup>25</sup> Editor *Eastern Province Herald* (18 May 1984) 8.

<sup>26</sup> Freimond, Streek and Sapa *Rand Daily Mail* (17 May 1984) 11. See, also, Parlementêre Redaksie *Die Vaderland* (17 May 1984) 2.



The report refers to a merciless brutality with which gang members acted against each other and, in exceptional cases, against prison staff. Cold-blooded murders were committed for rumours or transgressions of the gang codes. Innocent people were often assaulted simply as a show of force or to take revenge for a misdemeanour. Many weapons, including knives, were made in prison to use against prisoners. A favourite weapon was the heavy metal mugs in which prisoners received coffee or tea. Tied to a half-metre belt of towel, they formed a dangerous weapon. Six gangs were identified in the prison. In some of them, sodomy was prevalent and younger members were known as 'wyfies'. Members of such a gang did not hesitate to murder if members of their own or of other gangs interfered with their 'wyfies'... The committee said authorities had to be wary of explosive gang situations.<sup>27</sup>

Two days later, *The Star* once again highlighted the problem posed by prison gangs in terms which were bound to shock ordinary members of the South African public. In the introduction to its analysis of the Van Dam committee report, the newspaper stated as follows:

Even the most hardened veterans of the criminal underworld have been shocked by the extent and power of the vast network of secret prison gangs that have been uncovered in government probes into the causes of the 1983 riots inside the maximum security jail at Barberton. A full dossier on the "merciless barbarity" of the cell warlords has been handed over to the Minister of Justice by Lieutenant-General WH Willemse, Commissioner of Prisons, and the Prisons Service has been ordered to give top priority to finding a remedy.<sup>28</sup>

The following day, an article in the *Sunday Express* dramatically entitled "Tales of mayhem in our prisons", once again summarised the findings of the Van Dam committee in relation to the activity of prison gangs at Barberton. The article emphasised the conclusion of the Van Dam committee that gangs exercised a measure of control over the day-to-day lives of inmates, and stated that: "The report disclosed the vicious domination of prisoners by gangs in the Barberton maximum security jails".<sup>29</sup> The article also contained the admission by the Commissioner of Prisons, Lieutenant-General WH Willemse, that gangs had been rife in South African prisons for several decades.<sup>30</sup>

There was an interesting political twist to certain stories published at this time concerning prison gang activity at Barberton. These stories concerned the apparent

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<sup>27</sup> Political Staff *The Star* (17 May 1984) b 5.

<sup>28</sup> Chester *The Star* (19 May 1984) 11.

<sup>29</sup> Le May *Sunday Express* (20 May 1984) 19.

<sup>30</sup> Le May *Sunday Express* (20 May 1984) 19.

existence of a mysterious prison gang by the name of "Kilimanjaro", which had been mentioned by the Van Dam committee. This gang was said to incite prisoners to become involved in political-type activities, and was alleged to have links to the banned African National Congress.<sup>31</sup> In a page-one report entitled "ANC 'got to prison gang" – a headline which must have sent shivers through many in the ruling elite – the City Press detailed certain of the Van Dam committee's findings relating to "Kilimanjaro", including the fact that this gang had "discussed ANC policies" and that:

Black power salutes had ... been given and letters smuggled out to certain political figures and people who are opposed to the existing order.<sup>32</sup>

As interesting as the activities of the "Kilimanjaro" gang might have been, however, from the perspective of ordinary prisoners it is clear that they were nowhere near as important or influential as the activities of traditional "numbers" gangs.

Another major focus area of the press during this time – which was connected to the activities of Barberton's prison gangs – was on the findings of the Van Dam committee in relation to the revolt which took place at Barberton Maximum Security Prison on 20 September 1983. Much publicity was given to the revelation by the committee that this incident, which led to the shooting to death of four prisoners by warders, "was not spontaneous but in fact a carefully thought-out and planned attempt at mass escape".<sup>33</sup> The fact that – according to the Van Dam committee – the planned mass escape had been foiled only just before it was due to take place and purely by chance, provided the press with sensational copy for a series of chilling reports on the incident. For example, in an article dramatically entitled "Mass prison escape was foiled by chance", the Rand Daily Mail informed its readers that:

A carefully planned mass escape from one of Barberton's maximum security prisons by nearly 400 of the country's most hardened criminals was inadvertently thwarted by prison officials only hours before it was due to take place on September 20 last year ...<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Freimond *Rand Daily Mail* (17 May 1984) 1.

<sup>32</sup> CP Correspondent *City Press* (20 May 1984) 1.

<sup>33</sup> Sapa *The Citizen* (17 May 1984)b 12.

<sup>34</sup> Anon *Rand Daily Mail* (17 May 1984)b 11.

The newspaper went on to describe the Van Dam committee's finding that leaders of four of the main gangs in Barberton's Maximum Security Prison had planned the mass escape for more than a month. It also described how prisoners had made keys for various doors in the prison using plastic material from polish containers, as well as knives to be used as weapons – using any material that could be fashioned into a sharp instrument. The brutal nature of the plan was described in chilling detail as follows:

On the pre-planned day, a number of prisoners were to attack their warders with knives after being released from their cells for breakfast. It was decided to kill all warders encountered during the operation. When the warders had been neutralised, the prisoners would put on their uniforms and release all other prisoners. The prisoners wearing warder's uniforms would then gain access to the outer areas of the prison on the pretext of seeking help to counter the unrest. Warders in the reception area would have been overpowered and the armoury would have been plundered. Warders on the catwalks around the prison walls would then be shot. All members of the 'Big Five Gang', who were known as informers, would be killed.<sup>35</sup>

The Rand Daily Mail then went on to explain that it was only by chance that the escape plan was foiled, when the authorities decided not to open the cell doors on the morning of 20 September (when the plan was to have been put into effect) – due to unrest which had taken place the previous evening. A group of prisoners decided to make a bid to escape later in the day, but:

... instead of a well organised breakout the incident developed into a situation of disorganised violence in which four prisoners were killed and four warders and three prisoners injured.<sup>36</sup>

When reading this report, ordinary members of the South African public must surely have been greatly disturbed at the idea of how narrowly a disaster had been averted. Had the mass escape been successful, many innocent lives would surely have been lost trying to track a large number of dangerous and desperate men through the mountainous and densely wooded countryside surrounding Barberton.

Apart from the activities of Barberton's prison gangs and the attempted mass escape on 20 September 1983, another set of findings by the Van Dam committee to receive

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<sup>35</sup> Anon *Rand Daily Mail* (17 May 1984)b 11.

<sup>36</sup> Anon *Rand Daily Mail* (17 May 1984)b 11.

coverage in the press at this time, concerned initiation ceremonies which were traditionally carried out within the prison complex. For many years, according to the committee, it had been a tradition for new arrivals at Barberton to be stripped naked and beaten with batons or rubber hoses by warders.<sup>37</sup> The practice was known as "greeting" or "warming up" new arrivals.<sup>38</sup> What made this finding particularly shocking was that senior officers appeared to be aware of the practice, but ignored it since it was regarded as "tradition".<sup>39</sup> A good example of the adverse publicity generated by this finding is to be found in an article dramatically entitled "Initiation shocks Willemse", in which the Afrikaans language newspaper *Die Burger* reported on the horrified reaction of the Commissioner of Prisons, Lieutenant-General WH Willemse to the finding.<sup>40</sup> In a written memorandum attached to the Van Dam report, the Commissioner gave the assurance that the matter had been taken up with the police at the highest level, which could lead to yet further charges being preferred against Barberton prison warders.<sup>41</sup> Clearly, the sordid details of the Barberton prison initiation ritual must have been deeply shocking to the South African public – indicating a culture of entrenched brutality which had been in place over many years.

#### **4 Differences in emphasis between "conservative" and "liberal" newspapers**

Having examined certain of the main themes which emerged in the press around the findings of the Van Dam committee, the subtle differences in emphasis between newspapers which were either more or less politically conservative are discussed. A good example of such a difference in emphasis relates to reporting on the committee's findings on the conduct of Barberton prison warders. On the one hand, in an article entitled "Report clears prison staff of misconduct", the more conservatively inclined newspaper *The Citizen* summarised the violent events which had taken place at

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<sup>37</sup> Freimond *Rand Daily Mail* (17 May 1984) 1.

<sup>38</sup> In the words of one report: "die gebruik was ons nuwe aankomlinge te 'groet' of 'warm te maak'". See Anon *Die Burger* (17 May 1984)a 7.

<sup>39</sup> Freimond *Rand Daily Mail* (17 May 1984) 1.

<sup>40</sup> See Anon *Die Burger* (17 May 1984)a 7.

<sup>41</sup> Anon *Die Burger* (17 May 1984)a 7. See, also, Anon *Die Transvaler* (17 May 1984) 19; Anon *Rand Daily Mail* (17 May 1984)a 11.

Barborton on 20 and 30 September 1983, and quoted the committee's finding that: "The above events have no direct link to unlawful or irregular action on the part of members of the prisons service".<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, in an article entitled "Prison report tells of abuse by warders", the more politically liberal newspaper the Rand Daily Mail adopted a far more critical tone and summarised the findings of the Van Dam committee, inter alia, by stating that:

Serious allegations of the abuse of prisoners by warders at the Barborton maximum security prison and details of severe conflict between warders and inmates were disclosed yesterday in a report into incidents at the prison last September.<sup>43</sup>

While The Citizen reported on the committee's findings in respect of the infamous "heat exhaustion" incident by emphasising the conclusion that it "was an isolated case, and that the current regulations and laws were sufficient to prevent a repetition", the Rand Daily Mail reported simply that a number of warders had "since been convicted and sentenced to jail terms for their parts in the incident".<sup>44</sup> Whereas The Citizen failed to mention the committee's disclosure that warders at Barborton had been involved in brutal initiation ceremonies involving new prisoners, the Rand Daily Mail listed among the committee's "disclosures, findings and recommendations" that:

It had been "tradition" [at Barborton] for many years that new arrivals at the maximum security prison be stripped naked and beaten with batons or rubber hoses by warders to initiate them.<sup>45</sup>

Another example of the way in which reports in various newspapers about the findings of the Van Dam committee were politically slanted in different ways concerns the issue of overcrowding. The Van Dam committee found that overcrowding was not a direct but an indirect cause of the trouble which had occurred at Barborton. Some newspapers chose to focus on the fact that the much publicised problem of prison overcrowding had been fingered as a cause of the trouble at Barborton, and played

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<sup>42</sup> Sapa *The Citizen* (17 May 1984)a 12.

<sup>43</sup> Freimond *Rand Daily Mail* (17 May 1984) 1.

<sup>44</sup> See Freimond *Rand Daily Mail* (17 May 1984) 1; Sapa *The Citizen* (17 May 1984)a 12.

<sup>45</sup> Freimond *Rand Daily Mail* (17 May 1984) 1. The Rand Daily Mail further listed as one of the findings of the Van Dam committee that: "The actions of certain warders during an identity parade on May 5 last year connected to the December 29 incident [i.e. the incident which led to the infamous 'heat exhaustion' trial] were 'undisciplined' and bordered on an attempt to defeat the ends of justice."

down the finding that it was identified as only an indirect cause. Other newspapers played up the finding that overcrowding was identified as only an indirect cause, and made much of the fact that the committee had not pointed to prison overcrowding as a direct cause of the violence. Liberally inclined newspapers seemed to follow the former approach, whereas conservatively oriented newspapers tended to follow the latter route. A good example of the former approach is to be found in the *Sowetan*, which stated, inter alia, that:

Overcrowding in South African prisons has once again been identified as a flashpoint for trouble in jail... . According to the report, overcrowding was an indirect cause of riots at the Barberton Prison, a view which strengthened Opposition calls for action in this regard.<sup>46</sup>

Another example of the "liberal" approach is to be found in *The Star*. In a report entitled "Crowded cells affected inmates", the newspaper focused on the dangers of overcrowding as highlighted in the Van Dam report, stating inter alia as follows:

Overcrowding could indirectly have led to prison riots at the Barberton maximum security prison in September, a committee of inquiry [the Van Dam committee] has found ... The overcrowding was 33 percent on average... . Overcrowding had probably contributed to the desire to escape. Over-full cells brought about irritation, unpleasantness and sometimes physical violence. Supervision of overcrowded cells was difficult and dangerous.<sup>47</sup>

In contrast, an example of the more politically conservative approach to the question of overcrowding is to be found in *The Citizen* which, in a report entitled "Overpopulation was not to blame", stated inter alia that:

The Barberton maximum security prison (town) was overpopulated by an average of 33 percent when violence broke out there last September, according to a report [the Van Dam report] released in Cape Town yesterday... . It pointed out, however, that there was no evidence overpopulation had played a direct role in the attempted mass revolt and escape on September 20, or the violence that broke out 10 days later. Indirectly, overpopulation probably contributed to and increased the desire to escape.<sup>48</sup>

Another example of this more conservative approach is to be found in a report in *Die Vaderland*. Under the heading "Overcrowding not the reason for unrest", the report

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<sup>46</sup> Editor *Sowetan* (18 May 1984) 4.

<sup>47</sup> Political Staff *The Star* (17 May 1984)a 5.

<sup>48</sup> Anon *The Citizen* (17 May 1984) 12.

pointed to the committee's finding that there was no evidence that overcrowding of around 33 percent at Barberton had played a direct role in the violent incidents which had occurred there.<sup>49</sup> According to *Die Vaderland*, all the prisons visited by the committee were overcrowded, but in spite of this, these prisons were characterised by orderliness and calm.<sup>50</sup> Having painted this optimistic picture, the report then went on to explain the dangers of overcrowding.<sup>51</sup>

A difference in emphasis can also be seen in various editorials which appeared in different newspapers at this time. More conservatively inclined newspapers such as *Die Volksblad* tended to adopt a more forgiving attitude towards the prison authorities than the more politically liberal newspapers. This is not to say that the former newspapers deliberately hid the facts. For example, *Die Volksblad* told its readers in an editorial that the glimpse provided by the Van Dam committee into the robust life behind prison walls at Barberton would be a revelation and a shock to many. Cruel treatment by warders, as well as cruelty among prisoners themselves, and reckless gangs which time and again committed murder at the slightest provocation had been revealed. There was even talk, said the editorial, of an extremely secretive gang with probable political motives. According to *Die Volksblad*, the sensational story of a planned mass escape which would have set almost 400 hardened criminals free in the lush Eastern Transvaal read like the script of a Hollywood movie. However, while condemning the actions of warders which had led to the various criminal trials and convictions involving incidents at Barberton, *Die Volksblad* adopted a more conciliatory tone than was, perhaps, warranted. The newspaper stated in its editorial that – although it did not excuse such repugnant actions – the background provided by the committee at least shed light on the almost superhuman task performed by warders in keeping violent offenders with little regard for human life out of one another's hair and under control. The newspaper welcomed the fact that one of the committee's recommendations was that the training of warders should include more practical content, which would encourage discipline and help reduce panic under pressure. The

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<sup>49</sup> See Anon *Die Vaderland* (17 May 1984) 2.

<sup>50</sup> The words used were: "word hulle deur ordelikheid en rustigheid gekenmerk". See Anon *Die Vaderland* (17 May 1984) 2.

<sup>51</sup> See Anon *Die Vaderland* (17 May 1984) 2.

newspaper also welcomed the fact that the prison authorities had reacted decisively and positively to the report, and had made it clear that malpractices, such as the barbaric "greeting" of new prisoners by assaulting them with truncheons and pieces of hose-pipe, would not be tolerated. The newspaper postulated that the lifting of the veil of secrecy might have resulted in a degree of discomfort for the prison authorities, but that the result would be positive in the long run. An informed public and media were better able to judge matters in a balanced way.<sup>52</sup>

Editorials in the more liberally inclined newspapers were far less favourably disposed towards the prison authorities. A good example is a scathing editorial which appeared in the Pretoria News under the heading "Prison shocker" which stated, inter alia, as follows:

What the Van Dam committee uncovered at Barberton Prison is enough to make the hair stand on end ... homicidal gangs of prisoners, warders so brutalised by the environment that they rely mainly on baton and boot, idleness and overcrowding among the convicts leading to the most horrendous excesses, plans for a mass escape by some 400 of South Africa's toughest outlaws... It is as well that the Commissioner of Prisons in a memorandum attached to the Van Dam report says he is shocked by the findings. To be anything less would be a travesty. It has long been suspected that conditions at some of South Africa's prisons are not all that they might be but confirmation of that has mostly been stifled by the tough secrecy provisions of the Prisons Act which, hitherto, have been rigorously applied. Now that the matter has been dragged into the light (and praise to the authorities for permitting that at least) it is the time for the authorities to set about the problem once and for all: less crowded prisons, more, better trained, higher paid warders – the list of important reforms which may be undertaken is clearly a long one. And it is important that these reforms be tackled. Otherwise, it is virtually certain, what happened at Barberton will happen again.<sup>53</sup>

Another example of the shock and outrage felt by "liberal" commentators at the revelations of the Van Dam committee is to be found in an editorial published in The Cape Times entitled "Prison horrors". The Times expressed its shock at the findings of the Van Dam committee inter alia as follows:

The Van Dam Committee which investigated conditions in Barberton prison has brought to light the existence of barbarous malpractices, including a degrading initiation ceremony at the prison in which new prisoners were stripped naked and assaulted by warders with truncheons or pieces of rubber pipe, sometimes receiving

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<sup>52</sup> Redakteur *Die Volksblad* (17 May 1984) 10.

<sup>53</sup> Editor *Pretoria News* (17 May 1984) 20.



as many as 30 blows. This was an established practice, it appears, and it was condoned by senior officers... If the moral fibre of a society is to be judged by its prisons, what a reflection on South Africa!<sup>54</sup>

To end the discussion on the subtle differences between "conservative" and "liberal" newspapers in their reporting on the findings of the Van Dam committee, it is useful to examine the responses of various newspapers to the issue of censorship. In particular, it is instructive to examine their responses to a "charm offensive" by the Minister of Justice and Prisons, Kobie Coetsee, which he launched at the same time as the findings of the Van Dam committee were made known. This charm offensive - clearly an effort to reverse the negative pounding the apartheid authorities had suffered in the press over Barberton - consisted of an announcement that the media would, in future, be allowed to publish allegations and reports dealing with prisons, provided commentary on those allegations and reports by the Prisons Service received the same treatment.<sup>55</sup> The Afrikaans language newspaper *Beeld* welcomed the

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<sup>54</sup> Editor *Cape Times* (18 May 1984) 12.

<sup>55</sup> In the words of the newspaper report: "mits die diens se kommentaar daarop dieselfde behandeling kry". See Redakteur *Beeld* (18 May 1984) 10. It must be noted that the English and Afrikaans press had long been united in opposition to s 44(1)(f) of the *Prisons Act* 8 of 1959, which curtailed reporting about conditions in South African prisons. When the violence at Barberton was at its height in September 1983, the *Rand Daily Mail* stated as follows: "Let us put it like this: jails ... in their nature, have to be closed institutions, with differences only in degree. That demands extra, not less, vigilance to ensure that as little as possible goes wrong. To leave the vigilance to the people who administer the jails is both absurd and cynical. They cannot possibly do the job. Instead, the maximum amount of attention from outside must not only be allowed but actively fostered. Section 44(1)(f) does not allow this. It must be scrapped." (See Editor *Rand Daily Mail* (22 September 1983) 10.) The *Citizen* supported the *Rand Daily Mail* in its call. The newspaper stated that there was clearly "cause for the gravest concern" about the violent events which had taken place at the Barberton Prison Complex, and bemoaned the fact that newspapers were unable to reveal to the public what was going on in South Africa's prisons. It called on the authorities to take "another look at the Prisons Act which, in its effect on the Press, is so inhibiting as virtually to prevent reporting on what goes on". (See Editor *The Citizen* (23 September 1983) 6.) The *Citizen* pointed out in its report that: "After the *Rand Daily Mail* lost the *Prisons Act* case against it in 1970, at a cost to it exceeding R275 000, no newspaper has dared report on prisons, their administration or the experience of prisoners or ex-prisoners, the exception being reports that place the Prisons Department in a favourable light." (See Editor *The Citizen* (23 September 1983) 6.) The Afrikaans press joined in the calls for a relaxation of the legislative measures restricting open reporting on prison conditions. *Rapport*, for example, stated that this would serve to improve the credibility of the whole Prisons Department. (See *Sidego Rapport* (25 September 1983) 3.) Even *Die Volksblad*, which tended to adopt a pro-government stance, pointed out that restrictions on reporting could be taken as licence by certain irresponsible members of the prisons service to do as they pleased. (See Redakteur *Die Volksblad* (29 September 1983) 18. The relevant sentence reads: "... beskermende wetgewing wat normale bespieding deur die pers in baie opsigte belemmer, deur sommige minder verantwoordelike elemente in die gevangenisdiens as lisensie gesien kan word om te maak en te breek".) The newspaper proposed that a formula be found to bring greater balance to the opposing needs for the restriction of information on the one hand and

minister's announcement, calling it a particularly important development. In a somewhat gushing tone, the newspaper claimed that the announcement indicated a constructive and honest attempt to establish better relations between the media and the Prisons Service – with obvious benefits for both parties.<sup>56</sup> While generally approving, the liberal English-language newspapers were more cautious. The *Natal Mercury*, for example, also welcomed "the Government's more conciliatory attitude towards the Press concerning the reporting of prison affairs" and called the minister's announcement "particularly timely".<sup>57</sup> The *Mercury* pointed out, however, that the picture of Barberton prison life which had emerged from the report of the Van Dam committee was "frightening to say the least", and went on to state that: "What happened at Barberton may never have taken root if the Press had been able to fulfil properly its duty as society's eyes and ears".<sup>58</sup> The *Mercury* was by no means as positive as *Beeld* in its assessment of the "'informal' arrangement whereby newspapers obtain comment from prison authorities on any allegations...".<sup>59</sup> According to The *Mercury*, this was "no more than standard newspaper practice" and what was really needed was "access to facts – especially if they are unpalatable".<sup>60</sup> The *Mercury* did, however, "commend the minister for taking his first cautious step towards raising the shutters".<sup>61</sup> Similarly, the *Eastern Province Herald* expressed guarded approval of the minister's announcement. After condemning the fact that the Prisons Act had "closed off jails from critical public scrutiny for the past 25 years", the *Herald* stated, in an editorial, that it remained to be seen if the "arrangement with the Press" proposed by the minister would sufficiently ease the restrictions imposed by the Act. The *Herald* ended its editorial on the following cautiously optimistic note:

Still, the Government's attitude plus its willingness to take the Barberton events seriously promise a little light in this long dark tunnel of prison abuse.<sup>62</sup>

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openness to the public on the other. (See Redakteur *Die Volksblad* (29 September 1983) 18. The relevant sentence reads: "Dit lyk of 'n formule gevind moet word wat groter ewewig sal bring tussen geslotenheid en openheid.")

<sup>56</sup> Redakteur *Beeld* (18 May 1984) 10.

<sup>57</sup> Editor *Natal Mercury* (18 May 1984) 10.

<sup>58</sup> Editor *Natal Mercury* (18 May 1984) 10.

<sup>59</sup> Editor *Natal Mercury* (18 May 1984) 10.

<sup>60</sup> Editor *Natal Mercury* (18 May 1984) 10.

<sup>61</sup> Editor *Natal Mercury* (18 May 1984) 10.

<sup>62</sup> Editor *Eastern Province Herald* (18 May 1984) 8.

The Star, in an editorial entitled "Bringing light into the prisons", condemned the "blanket of secrecy" which it said had been "imposed by the Prisons Act", but welcomed the minister's announcement as "a start" in eventually ending the "unneeded Prisons Act".<sup>63</sup> The editorial concluded by stating that: "Light on the dark recesses of the prisons is one valuable step towards remedying their ills".<sup>64</sup> Somewhat less charitably, the Sunday Express commented that the proposed relaxation of the censorship regime was "fair enough", but that this would simply mean that:

Section 44(1)(f) of the Prisons Act becomes another of those pieces of Nationalist legislation which are so rotten that they can't be enforced, but which the government does not have the courage to repeal.<sup>65</sup>

Finally, in a well-balanced editorial comment entitled "Prisoners of silence", which left no doubt as to the evils of censorship when it came to reporting on prison conditions, The Argus stated as follows:

For almost 20 years South African prisons have operated behind an almost impenetrable wall of legislative restrictions. So all-embracing is Section 44(f) of the Prisons Act that the Press has effectively been shut out of matters concerning prisons. The effect was so prohibitive and inhibiting that virtually all that emerged was what authorities permitted the public to know or was so dramatic that nothing could suppress it. The atrocities at Barberton prisons constituted such an event. Deaths, injuries, sadistic beatings, gang battles – they were all there. In the wake of court cases, the Van Dam Inquiry's disclosures, and sensible discussions on means of improving communications, the Minister of Prisons has decided for a trial period to waive the clause that vitally affects the media. We hope the arrangement becomes permanent. The Prisons Department has also fallen prey to its own law. Its image has been tainted by the likes of Barberton, perhaps unjustly, perhaps not. Who was really to know? Prisons require reasonable public scrutiny like any other State department. A free flow of information to the public is one of its own strongest safeguards against internal abuses and the distortions of an uninformed public, at home and abroad.<sup>66</sup>

## 5 Conclusion

As has been pointed out in both parts one and two of this article, the Barberton prison complex in the early 1980s represented the worst of what the South African penal

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<sup>63</sup> Editor *The Star* (18 May 1984) 6.

<sup>64</sup> Editor *The Star* (18 May 1984) 6.

<sup>65</sup> Tantalus *Sunday Express* (20 May 1984) 18. The newspaper also commented perceptively that: "South African experience suggests that every secrecy clause creates a presumption of hidden evil."

<sup>66</sup> Editor *The Argus* (18 May 1984) 16.

system had to offer at the height of the apartheid era. Barberton was, in effect, "Apartheid's Alcatraz". Despite the measures which were in place at the time to restrict reporting on conditions in South African prisons, events at Barberton were simply too serious and too widespread to enable the prison authorities to "keep a lid on" the bad news which kept emerging from the prison complex. Although there were clear differences in emphasis in the coverage of politically conservative and politically liberal newspapers, the South African press was able, by and large, to provide the public with a clear picture of the cruelty, violence and racism which lay at the heart of the Barberton Prison Complex.

At a time when cracks were beginning to appear in the edifice of the apartheid system itself, it would be surprising if the tremors caused by the ongoing violence at Barberton did not contribute to a widening of those cracks.

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## **APARTHEID'S ALCATRAZ: THE BARBERTON PRISON COMPLEX DURING THE EARLY 1980S - PART TWO**

**SA Peté\***

### **SUMMARY**

The purpose of this two-part article is to examine in detail the public discourse surrounding the Barberton Prison Complex during the early 1980s, at the height of the apartheid era. The prisons within the Barberton Prison Complex were notorious as being among the most punitive of the many prisons within apartheid South Africa. Barberton was the place to which the most dangerous and intractable prisoners were sent to serve their sentences, making it apartheid's "Alcatraz". The focus of this article is on the treatment of "normal" as opposed to "political" prisoners during the period in question, allowing the "voices" of ordinary prisoners – often sidelined and silenced – to be brought to the fore. The Barberton Prison Complex is examined through the lens of public discourse, as reflected in a wide range of South African newspapers published at the time. By analysing a large number of reports dealing with events at Barberton during the period in question, in both English and Afrikaans language newspapers, as well as in both politically conservative and politically liberal newspapers, this article attempts to capture both the "smell" and the "feel" of what it was like to be imprisoned in one of apartheid's toughest prison complexes. Furthermore, this article seeks to show that – despite legislative measures restricting the publication of information on conditions inside apartheid prisons – the press was able to provide a steady stream of information to the South African public on the shocking events which occurred at Barberton during the period in question. Part Two of the article examines a string of violent incidents which occurred within the Barberton Prison Complex during the course of 1983, leading to nine inmate deaths. The response of the authorities to this orgy of violence at Barberton is discussed, including the findings of a committee of enquiry. It is concluded that the events at Barberton

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during the early 1980s were symptomatic of what was happening to the apartheid system as a whole. The South African penal system - in particular at its harshest extremity - acted as a kind of barometer, revealing both the cruelty of the system, as well as the considerable constraints and pressures under which it was operating.

**KEYWORDS:** Barberton Prison Complex; Barberton Prison Farm; prison violence; apartheid prisons; prison deaths; prison torture; prisoner heat exhaustion; heat exhaustion trial.