

life

HISTORY

A LONG, TOXIC RELATIONSHIP

Alcohol bans might be very of the moment, but they're not new to SA, write Matthew Blackman and Nick Dall. This article is based on the writers' research for their book Rogues' Gallery: An Irreverent History of Corruption in SA, from the VOC to the ANC

● It's coming up to a year since alcohol sales were first prohibited as part of SA's Covid lockdown strategy. Right now, though many people in the country are weeping tears of joy into their single malt because booze sales are back on again, it seems clear that the success of the on-again, off-again bans in reducing pressure on our hospitals has got the government interested in developing more long-term curbs to alcohol sales and consumption.

Alcohol restrictions have a long history in SA — though this is the first time that the bans have affected citizens of all races.

The Cape of Good Dop

When Jan van Riebeeck set up shop at the Cape in 1652, he dished out booze to the locals as "an incentive to work, attend church and learn Dutch", Leila Ann Falletisch says in her MSc thesis on wine farm workers in the Western Cape. The same tactic was employed with imported slave labour, and the "dop system" was soon formalised, with slaves receiving several 200ml nips of wine through the day.

While one might have hoped that the abolition of slavery in 1834 would

put an end to the system, farmers simply "competed with each other by offering more liquor than their rivals", writes Wilfried Schärf in his MSc thesis on the impact of liquor on the working class. "The customary practice was [to give] labourers five 'dops' a day, and then a bottle each at night ... The practice usually carried over to weekends, when ... only one bottle a day was given to each labourer."

The system was eventually abolished in 1961, but, as Schärf notes, the new law "contained an artful avoidance of the issue of paying labour with wine. On the face of it, the dop system was outlawed ... but there was no prohibition on the free dispensation of liquor."

Besides, by that stage the problem had become a generational one. A 1998 study conducted by the Dopstop NGO found that as many as 87% of farm workers could be classified as problem drinkers. To this day the Western Cape has one of the highest occurrences of foetal alcohol syndrome in the world and, according to 2020 research the dop system is still in play on 9% of Stellenbosch farms.

Falling in and out of love with 'native liquor' in Kruger's ZAR

Chief Albert Luthuli, who was an abstainer himself, saw the beer hall practices as 'legal robbery by whites'

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Getty Image/AFP/Rodger Bosch

Alcohol was linked to the fortunes and failures of the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR) from day one.

The ZAR's first factory — the imaginatively named Eerste Fabrieken — was an alcohol distillery that, much to teetotal President "Oom Paul" Kruger's chagrin, turned farmers' excess grain into cheap and nasty hard tack from 1881 onwards.

Sammy Marks, the distillery's owner, said: "The stuff was not worth drinking," reports Richard Mendelsohn in his biography of the industrialist.

While the quality of the grog would gradually improve, initial sales were disappointing. However, this changed with the discovery of gold in 1886. In his book *New Nineveh, New Babylon* historian Charles van Onselen writes that from then, "the number of licensed canteens on the Witwatersrand rose from 147 in 1888 to 552 in 1892".

In the beginning, the mine bosses were thrilled that alcohol was so freely available: workers who "spent their wages on liquor saved less of their earnings than their more abstemious colleagues, and thus tended to labour underground" for longer periods, writes Van Onselen.

That sentiment was not to last. By the 1890s the mine owners had made an about-turn when as much as 25% of the black labour force was "disabled by drink" each day. It was, according to Van Onselen, common to find workers "lying dead on the veld from exposure and the effects of the vile liquids sold them by unscrupulous dealers". After a great deal of lobbying, a total prohibition for "natives" was implemented in 1897.

The substantial losses that were suffered by the farmers and canteen owners — and Marks, who went from turning a £70,000 profit in 1896 to losing almost £47,000 the following year — were, in the government's estimation, a small price to pay for the increased profitability of the mines.

(Not) keeping the Cape in Suip

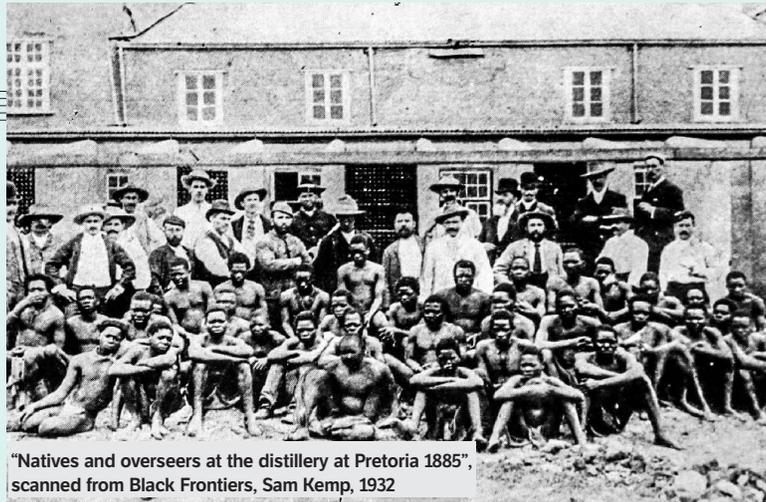
Banning alcohol in the Cape Colony also has a particularly strange and inconsistent history. In 1882 Cecil John Rhodes, as a member of parliament, pushed through the Diamond Trade Act. The act did many unwholesome things to stop illicit diamond buying, including forcing black workers to live in compounds under a curfew system. In these dehumanising compounds, alcohol bans were enforced to up workers' productivity.

A more sustained attack on alcohol sales to nonwhites in the Cape would be made in the 1890s — this time from a source that did not intend to gain "labour efficiency". The great, towering force of liberalism within the colony at the time was the lawyer, politician and later chief justice James Rose Innes. Rose Innes's greatest political ally was the editor of the Xhosa-language *Imvo Zabantsundu*, John Tengo Jabavu. One of many policies about which they spoke with one voice was the restriction of alcohol to certain sections of the black population.

Rose Innes, after many years of trying, managed to pass what would become known as the "Innes Liquor Act" through the Cape parliament in 1898. This restricted black people below a certain standard of education from being able to buy alcohol. The law was met with concerted attack by the various brandy and wine producers in the Western Cape, but was widely supported by the black elites of the time.

Interestingly, in Rhodes's libellous and fundamentally corrupt election campaign in 1898 he would use his support of the Innes Liquor Act to woo the black electorate. In a speech to a group of about 200 educated black voters near Kimberley, he stated that he had always advocated the "taking away of liquor from the pure barbarians [sic]". According to the Diamond Fields Advertiser this was met with loud cheers from the black population. Donald Trump-like, Rhodes would proudly tell the crowd that he "had taken away more liquor from the natives" than those "who talked so much".

One person who may have been there was Sol Plaatje, who would go



"Natives and overseers at the distillery at Pretoria 1885", scanned from *Black Frontiers*, Sam Kemp, 1932

on to help found the ANC. Plaatje may well have cheered for Rhodes's pronouncements on alcohol bans, even though his *Mafeking Diary* tells us he did not vote for Rhodes. Plaatje took part in a temperance movement that aimed at stopping the damage alcohol did to black communities. Throughout his political activism he always advocated that alcohol should not be sold to his people. Plaatje had not only seen its devastating effect on the mines in Kimberley but had also worked for successive Tswana chiefs in Mafeking who had succumbed to alcoholism.

The "white man's liquor" was seen by liberal whites and blacks alike to have caused untold damage in black communities. Olive Schreiner's sister, Ettie Stakesby Lewis, led campaigns against the selling of alcohol to black communities. In these she argued that alcohol was a stealth weapon employed by whites against black people to create debt and to expropriate land.

Restrictions, Race and Apartheid

In 1920, Modiri Molema, a graduate of Glasgow University's medical school and a family friend of

Plaatje's, wrote that alcohol had "devastating effects" on black people by "diminishing their wage-earning capacity, increasing crime among them, filling the prisons ... and degrading them".

Molema may have been left with a bittersweet taste in his mouth with the passing of the Liquor Act of 1928, which placed a Union-wide prohibition on the sale of "European liquor" to "non-Europeans".

Anne Mager reports in *The Journal of African History*, 1999: "It restricted ordinary Africans to sorghum beer and permitted only selected categories of Western-educated African men to be issued with permits for 'European' wine, spirits and malt beer."

While the racist prime minister JBM Hertzog claimed that the act was an attempt to preserve the dignity of black people, other white politicians lauded it as an attempt to increase economic productivity. But the act was in many ways simply a method of martial control. It allowed the police to inspect any premises in SA on the mere suspicion that it might house a supply of the good stuff. It also sanctioned the police to arrest any black person on the slightest suspicion of looking even a

tiny bit tipsy.

This would all change with the formalisation of apartheid and the Liquor Amendment Act of 1961, which permitted wine and spirits to be sold to black people — through government-owned bottle stores. While the National Party claimed it was created to eliminate the illicit sale of liquor in the townships, it doesn't take a genius to work out they were in it for the money. The act had resulted largely from pressure placed on Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd by wine farmers who wanted access to the black market. "Good neighbourly philanthropists" that they were, the apartheid government used the profits from these sales to build houses in the townships and erect new, for-profit beer halls, known by their patrons as "beer cages".

Chief Albert Luthuli, who was an abstainer himself, saw the beer hall practices as "legal robbery by whites".

In fact, the 1976 Soweto uprising was linked to alcohol. During the uprising the Soweto Students' Representative Council issued a statement saying: "We can no longer tolerate seeing our fathers' pay packets emptied on drink."

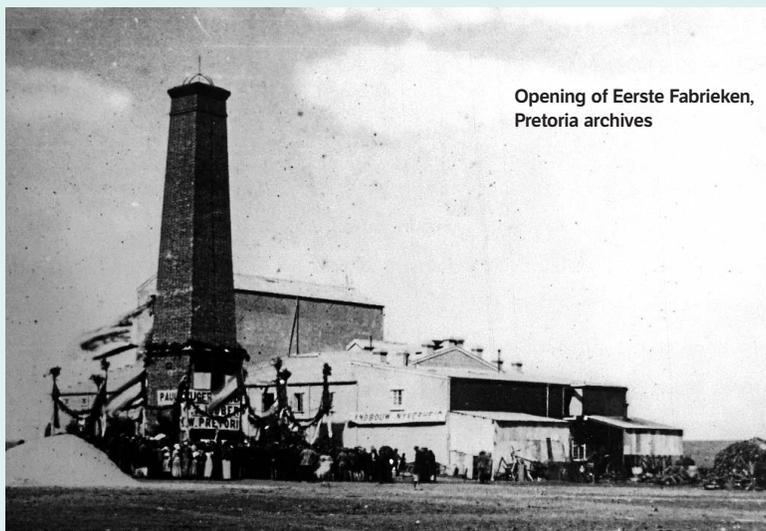
As part of the uprising, government-owned beer halls and bottle stores were attacked and razed. The uprising cost the government a whopping R3m (R130m today) loss in liquor sales on the West Rand.

Back to the future

This might help to put having to queue for your weekend lubricants on a Thursday into perspective. And spare a thought for poor President Cyril Ramaphosa, who is weighed down by the teetotal history of the ANC, the damage alcohol does to our society and the pressure it places on public services. Then he has to measure these against the civil liberties allowed by our constitution (which he helped to write), all while watching the devastating effect of job losses in the alcohol sector and the ever-growing hole in SA's tax revenues.

Ramaphosa is certainly caught between a rock shandy and the hard tack. ✕

The writers' book will be published by Penguin next month



Opening of Eerste Fabrieken, Pretoria archives