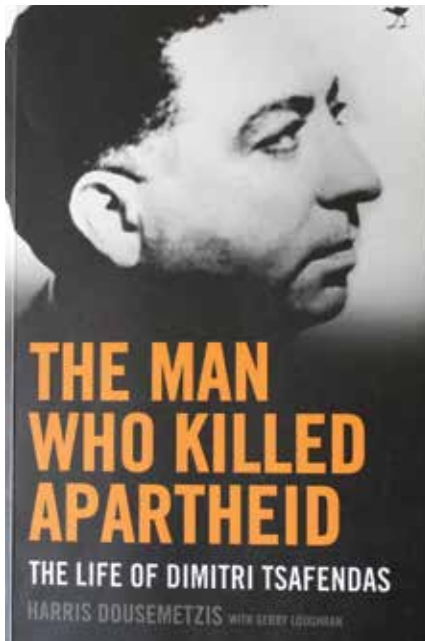


# The man who tried to kill apartheid

Harris Dousemetzis

Publisher: Jacana Books: Johannesburg. 2018. 483 pgs

## Review by Moira Levy



If there is anyone out there who still buys into the elaborately crafted apartheid lie about the alleged insanity of Dimitri Tsafendas, the man who assassinated Hendrik Verwoerd, this book will at last set the record straight.

Author Harris Dousemetzis read an obituary after the death of Tsafendas in 1999. Curious, he set out to find out more, with little success. He found only four books that refer to the man who spent a lifetime in jail for killing the 'architect of apartheid'.

Despite intense international attention, all that the South African public was told was that Verwoerd was stabbed to death in his parliamentary

seat by a messenger who, it was claimed, turned out to be a madman who believed he was possessed by a giant tapeworm that ordered him to commit the crime.

That's the story generations of South Africans have been brought up on. It was a time that the world was starting to turn against Apartheid South Africa. As a result, the myth of Verwoerd the All-Mighty, god of the white race who would protect South Africa against the *swart gevaar*, had to be defended. In this context, there was the need to justify how the assassin was a white man. Even more embarrassing was how he had come to be employed by parliament with unfettered access to the prime minister, even though he had always been an outspoken Communist, declared persona non-grata by the South African authorities, and had a police record in Mozambique, where he had been imprisoned and tortured for his opposition to Portuguese colonial rule.

The authorities who interrogated Tsafendas could not allow any of this to emerge in an open court. Yet the prisoner wouldn't co-operate. He declared his revulsion of apartheid and emphasised his hope that in killing the "father of apartheid" he could help bring the abhorrent system to an end. Naked, shackled and handcuffed, he was repeatedly electrocuted, beaten viciously, held upside down out of the window of a high-rise and subjected

to all of the now well-known gamut of psychotically violent apartheid security force tactics before finally deciding to avoid the gallows by resuscitating an old story of a tape worm.

The author is one of the few people to make public the fantastic tale of a tape worm, first thought up by a friend of Tsafendas who had successfully used it to avoid being drafted into the army. Tsafendas had tried out the pretence at insanity himself, and found it worked. While serving in the navy during World War Two he developed a deep fear of being torpedoed by U-boats. It was by claiming to be the bearer of a tape worm that he was able to spend the war years safely in a range of hospital and mental health facilities.

When he tried the story out on his interrogators, it turned out to be exactly what they had been looking for. Tsafendas continued to insist on one point though: he made it clear that he never attributed the decision to kill Verwoerd to the tape worm. To the end he insisted that the decision was his own.

At no time during the four-day trial was the court presented with the cogent, lucid police statements that he had repeatedly given to his interrogators, in which he confirmed, "I did set myself the task of destroying the prime minister...I did not care about the consequences...I was so disgusted by the racial policy that I went >>

through with my plans to kill the prime minister...I wanted to see a government representing all the South African people". These all-important documents languished in the state archives until uncovered by Lisa Key, a filmmaker who produced a documentary on Tsafendas in the 1990s.

At the end of the trial, Tsafendas was declared insane and a patient of the state president. Yet he was not admitted to an asylum and received no treatment. Instead he was first sent to Robben Island – the first and only white political prisoner to be held there – where he spent three months in solitary confinement. Thereafter, he was transferred to Pretoria Central Prison and held in a purpose-built cell near death row where he spent years listening to the final dirges of the men sentenced to death and regularly heard the gallows at work.

Herein lies the real value of this book. It confirms much of what has been rumoured, and releases into the public domain material never revealed before. But beyond that, we learn that Tsafendas's torture did not end with his sentencing. His jailers never forgot that it was he who killed Verwoerd, and brutal daily beatings continued for most of his imprisonment. Tsafendas was also apartheid's longest-held prisoner – he was incarcerated for a total of 28 years

in jail after which he spent many more years in a hospital in Pretoria and, later, in Sterkfontein asylum for the mentally challenged, where his health rapidly deteriorated until his death in 1999.

In this more than 400-pg volume, Dousemetzis finally tears apart the carefully crafted lies of Apartheid. It records 10 years of meticulous research in which he interviewed 137 people who knew Tsafendas, many who regarded him as a friend, and none of whom had ever thought of him as insane. The author also drew on 12,000 pages of documents that had never been comprehensively consulted before, including police statements, newspapers and interrogation records.

The indisputable conclusion Dousemetzis came to was that Dimitri Tsafendas was a committed life-long Communist and activist, a highly politicised person who was perfectly sane and highly intelligent. He had committed his life to the fight for justice. He mobilised for majority rule in Mozambique, joined the anti-apartheid movement in London and fought with the Communists in the Greek civil war and he had stabbed Vervoerd to death because he believed it was his political responsibility to do so.

In this work, the truth is exposed in full. And that includes his treatment by the post-apartheid government.

Instead of hailing him as one of democratic South Africa's heroes, the new government did not pardon him, free him, or even offer him amnesty (which he said he would have rejected on the grounds that it would have put him into the same category as apartheid murderers). This despite unrelenting efforts by figures like Judge Jody Kollapen, Krish Govender, the late journalist David Beresford, powerful individuals within the Greek Orthodox church, and even a submission to the TRC by Lisa Key. The latter simply elicited a letter from then Minister of Justice Dr Dlamini-Zuma. It was "her belief that Tsafendas was receiving the necessary care and attention at Sterkfontein, adding that a private facility 'could not offer the secure environment required as threats to his life are still a possibility'."

When asked during a visit by former political prisoner Alexander Moumbaris if there was anything he needed, Tsafendas simply replied that all he wanted was "his liberty". It was not to be. He died still a prisoner in Sterkfontein, a lonely, sick, deaf old man who now lies in an unmarked grave and, twenty years after his death, remains publicly unacknowledged for the role he played as a hero and a freedom fighter whose legacy belongs in the proud history of the fight that did finally kill apartheid. **NA**

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