Figure 5.1 These signs show the reality of everyday life under apartheid in South Africa. These two men enter a railway station under a sign that divides the staircase into two sections – one for whites only and one for non-whites. Photograph by Ernest Cole

5.1 What were the origins of racial discrimination in South Africa?

segregation: a system of laws to separate people, based on race.

migrant labour: workers from rural areas who signed contracts to work on the mines for a fixed period and then returned home again; they had to live in 'compounds' that provided basic accommodation and strict controls over labour.

Afrikaners: South Africans of Dutch and French Huguenot descent who speak Afrikaans.

Discrimination based on race did not start with apartheid in 1948. It had been present right from the early days of colonialism, when parts of Southern Africa were colonised, first by the Dutch and then by the British. The discovery of diamonds (in 1867) and then gold (in 1886) had a profound effect on the economy. It led to an industrial revolution and the potential for rapid economic growth. But it also laid the foundations for a formal system of **segregation**, by introducing strict systems of control over black mineworkers. Under the system of **migrant labour**, black workers from rural areas did the manual labour on the mines for low wages, living in strictly controlled 'compounds'. Their movement to the mines was controlled by a system of 'passes'. This system formed the basis for much of the segregation and apartheid legislation during the 20th century.

South Africa as a country was established in 1910, when four British colonies united to form the Union of South Africa. It was part of the British Empire but had the right to make its own laws. Right from the start, white South Africans (who at that stage made up about 20 per cent of the population) controlled the government and

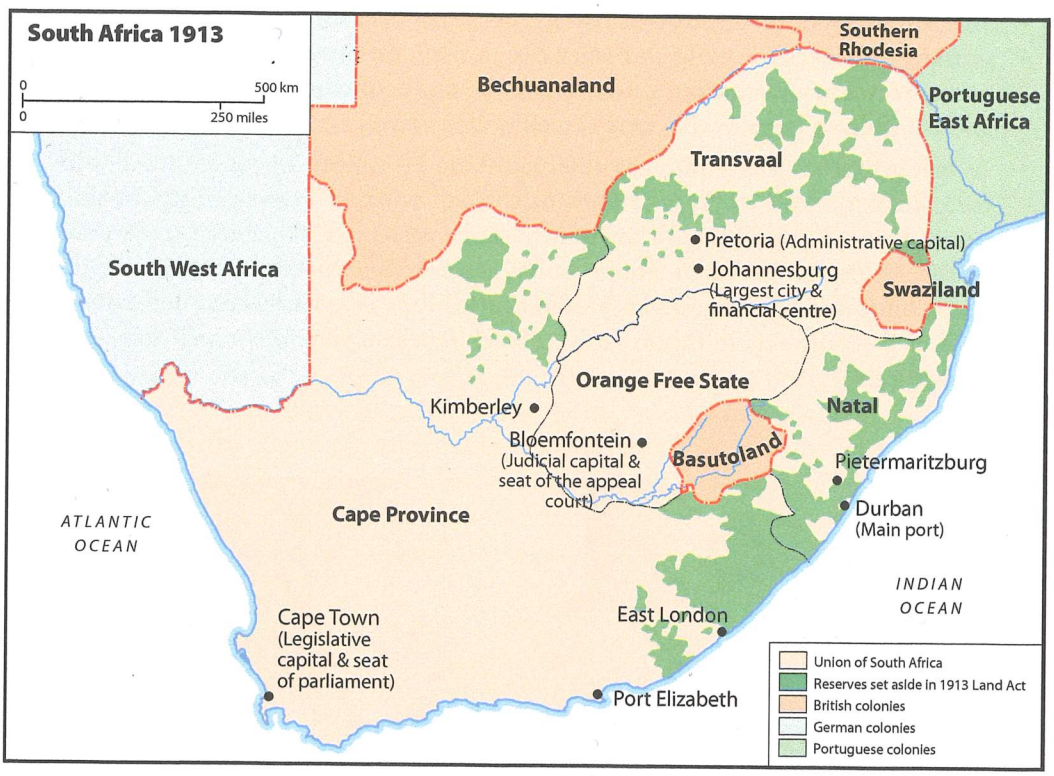

Figure 5.2 A map of South Africa in 1913

the economy. Most of them were immigrants from Britain or descendants of Dutch settlers (called **Afrikaners**) who had colonised the Cape in the 17th century. In three of the four provinces of the Union of South Africa, only white males had the right to vote. Only the Cape had a 'non-racial' franchise, which allowed some 'coloured' and African males to vote. This right was supposedly protected by a special clause in the constitution.

Between 1910 and 1948 a succession of governments introduced segregation laws that protected the privileged position of the white minority and discriminated against anyone who was not white. The people who were most negatively affected by these segregation laws were 'Africans' who made up about two-thirds of the total population. The lives of the 'coloured' and 'Indian' minorities were also affected, but not to the same extent.

The effects of segregation on people's lives

Segregation laws affected all aspects of people's lives, especially those of Africans:

- The **pass laws** controlled where they could live and work. The aim behind the pass laws was to limit and control the movement of people from rural areas to the towns and cities. Every African male had to carry a 'pass' (or reference book) that stated where he lived and where he worked. Any changes had to be officially recorded. A pass had to be carried at all times, and those caught without one could be arrested and jailed.

Theory of knowledge

History and language: In what ways can terminology be an extremely sensitive issue in history? Most people today would avoid using a term like 'coloured'. However, it is impossible to understand South African history without referring to race. In this chapter, we use the terms 'black', 'white', 'coloured' and 'Indian', which were the main racial divisions used by the apartheid system. The term 'black' had two uses: it was used to refer specifically to 'Africans', but was also used collectively for anyone who was not white. 'Coloured' was the official term used to label people of mixed descent. They formed about 9 per cent of the population. 'Indians' were the descendants of labourers brought from India in the 19th century to work on sugar plantations. In 1960, they formed about 3 per cent of the population.

Fact: When the Cape Colony was granted representative government by Britain in 1954, the vote was given to all males who qualified, regardless of race. The Cape refused to join the Union unless its non-racial franchise was retained. In the other three provinces blacks had no voting rights. In the British colony of Natal theoretically all males had been able to qualify for the vote but the criteria were so stringent that in reality fewer than ten Africans qualified. The constitutions of the former Boer Republics of the Transvaal and Orange Free State (which had been established by Afrikaners who moved into the interior after Britain took over the Cape) stated quite bluntly that only whites had political rights.

- Africans living in urban areas had to live in special 'locations' or townships on the outskirts of towns. Housing and amenities in the locations were inferior to those in other areas. They were often situated far from places of work, causing great expense and hardship to people who were forced to live there.
- A '**colour bar**' in the workplace reserved skilled positions in the mines and in factories for white workers. It prevented black workers from training for skilled positions, and denied them the right to strike or to join registered trade unions. In the 1920s, the 'civilised labour' policy gave white workers a protected place in the economy. They were given preference for jobs in government departments, such as the railways, and thousands of black workers were dismissed and replaced by whites.

Fact: Before the Second World War, racism and segregation were not unique to South Africa. In the European colonies in Africa and Asia, people had no political rights, such as the vote, except in very limited circumstances. Economic and social discrimination favoured white settlers above local people for jobs, education and housing. There was also widespread prejudice and discrimination against black people in many European countries, including Britain.

pass laws: these laws controlled the movement of Africans from the reserves to the cities; failure to carry a pass could mean imprisonment. Passes had been used as a form of control over slaves in the early Cape Colony; they were first used systematically on a large scale at the Kimberley diamond mines.

colour bar: segregation in the workplace; the reservation of certain categories of work for white workers.

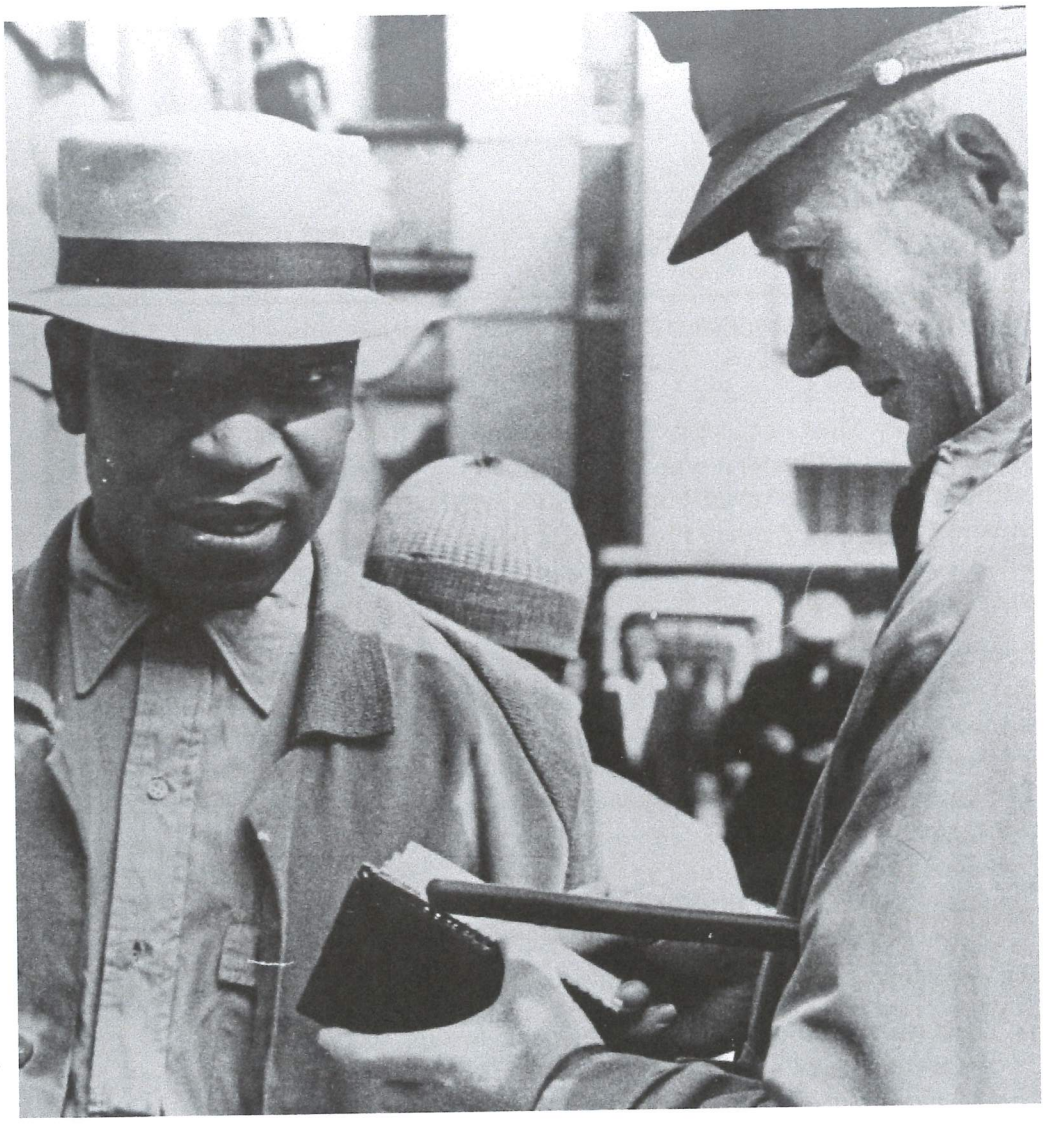

Figure 5.3 A policeman checking a pass book

- The 1913 Land Act set aside certain areas as '**reserves**', which were the only places where Africans could own land. They covered only 7 per cent of the country. The Land Act caused great hardship to many thousands of people who were forced off their land. It destroyed the independence of black peasant farmers and forced them onto the cheap labour market, as workers on white-owned farms or in the mines. The Land Act was extended in 1936, and many more people were forced off the land and removed to the overcrowded reserves. Separate tribal councils were set up to administer the reserves. Traditional chiefs were given limited powers, and a separate system of 'native law' was applied, ensuring that Africans had segregated legal and administrative systems.
- In the constitution of the Union of South Africa, only whites had the right to vote (except in the Cape Province, where men of other races could qualify to vote) and only whites were allowed in parliament or government. In 1936, Africans in the Cape lost the right to vote. After that they were represented in parliament by elected white representatives. The government set up a Natives' Representative Council (NRC) to represent Africans, but it had limited advisory powers only. This meant that from then on all Africans lost the opportunity to gain political rights.

reserves: the only areas where Africans could own land. By the 1950s the reserves formed 13 per cent of the land and became the basis of the homeland system under apartheid.

The impact of the Second World War

When the Second World War broke out in September 1939, the ruling United Party government was divided over the issue of whether to join in the war. About half of the cabinet wanted to remain neutral, while the rest favoured supporting Britain by declaring war on Germany. The issue caused a split in the governing United Party. With the support of a narrow majority in parliament, **Jan Smuts** formed a wartime **coalition** government that declared war on Germany. It was supported by most English-speaking voters, as well as many moderate Afrikaners. Many radical Afrikaners, who bitterly opposed South Africa's participation in the war on the British side, regarded Smuts as a traitor and tried to sabotage the war effort.

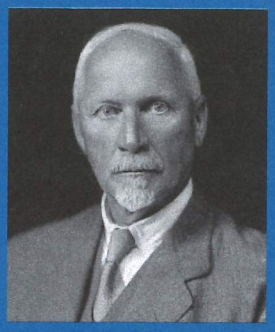

Figure 5.4 Jan Smuts (1870–1950)

A former Boer general, he served as prime minister from 1939 until 1948. He was highly regarded in Allied circles and was made a field marshal of the British Empire, but many Afrikaners regarded him as being too pro-British and he was defeated by the National Party in the 1948 election.

During the war, segregation began to break down. As industry grew rapidly to meet the wartime demand for weapons, vehicles and uniforms, there was a shortage of labour to fill positions in the factories. So the colour bar was relaxed and black workers took up skilled positions in the workplace. The pass laws too were temporarily relaxed and large numbers of people moved from the reserves to the towns, where there was an acute shortage of housing. Many of them built **informal settlements**, especially around Johannesburg. It seemed as though segregation was no longer working, and many people hoped that positive changes were imminent. Even members of the government hinted at the need for change after the war.

coalition: a government formed by two or more political parties.

informal settlements: also called squatter camps – are places on the outskirts of towns and cities where people build their own houses; they are a common feature of developing countries at times of rapid urbanisation.

The stronger position of black labour resulted in increasing demands and strikes by black workers after the war. The biggest of these was the 1946 Mineworkers' Strike, involving 75,000 workers on the gold mines of the Witwatersrand. They were demanding the official recognition of their union and their right to strike, a minimum wage, safer working conditions and improved living conditions. The government took forceful action to crush the strike, and 12 miners were killed and over 1,000 injured before it

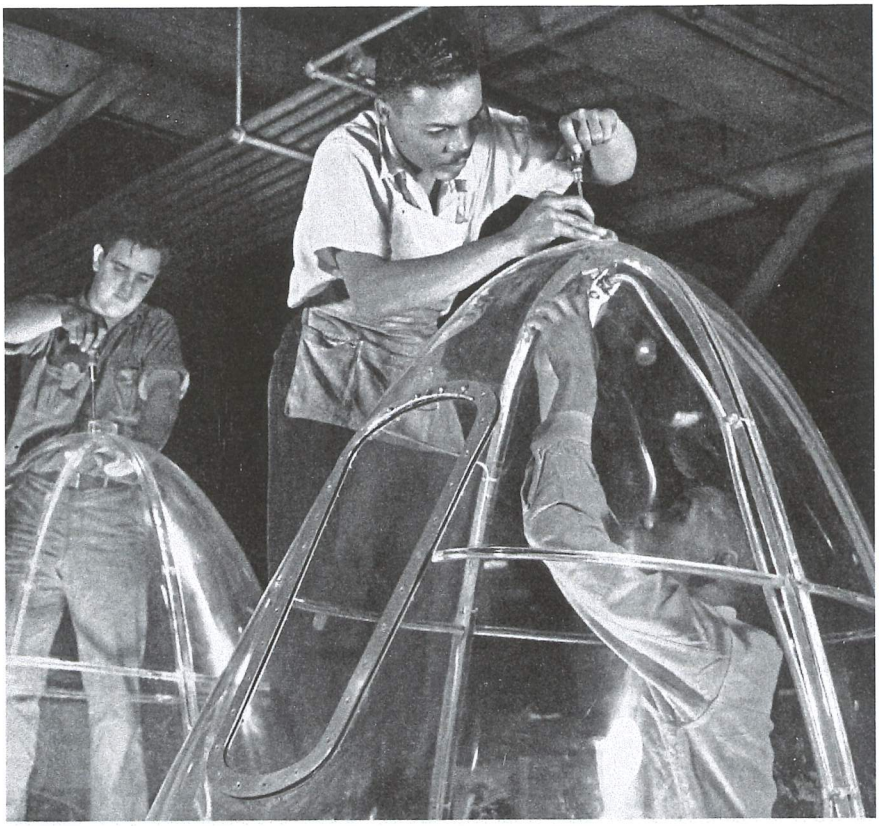

Figure 5.5 During the Second World War, segregation began to break down as black workers filled skilled positions in factories

was over. But the size of the strike and the temporary closure of the mines alarmed the mining companies and also white voters.

After the war, the Indian community launched a passive resistance campaign in protest against a new law preventing Indians from living and trading freely except in certain restricted areas. They were inspired by the success of the nationalist movement in India. The campaign brought Africans and Indians together in a more broadly based opposition movement.

The demands of the extra-parliamentary opposition, the breakdown of segregation laws, the growth of informal settlements and the actions of black workers worried white voters. They criticised the government too for postwar economic problems such as food and housing shortages. Many white ex-soldiers were angry too when they returned from the war to find that their jobs had been taken by black workers, and they blamed the government for neglecting their interests.

Fact: The Indian nationalist movement fought a non-violent struggle for independence from British rule. It used methods of civil disobedience (or passive resistance) devised by Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi had first developed this policy during a twenty-one-year stay in South Africa (1893–1914) where he organised protests about discrimination against Indians.

The 1948 election

After the war, as more white voters lost confidence in the United Party government, they began to think that a change of government was necessary to protect their interests. They turned increasingly to the National Party, which promised to do so with a policy of 'apartheid'. Apartheid meant the complete separation of all races in South Africa, under white domination.

The ideology of apartheid had been developed by Afrikaner intellectuals during the 1930s. It became the core of the National Party's appeal to the predominantly white electorate in its campaign for the 1948 election. It shamelessly played on white fears of being outnumbered by a militant black majority. Not for the first time in South African politics, it referred repeatedly to the 'Black Peril' (in Afrikaans the *Swart Gevaar*) in its election campaign. It presented apartheid as the solution to this perceived threat.

In the general election of 1948, the National Party won a majority of seats, although they received only 37 per cent of the total vote. This was because they had strong support in the rural, mainly Afrikaner areas, where fewer votes were needed to win a parliamentary seat. The National Party remained in power for the next 46 years and based its rule on the policy of apartheid.

Fact: Louis Botha (1910–19), Jan Smuts (1919–24 and 1939–48) and J.B.M. Hertzog (1924–39) were the first three prime ministers of the Union of South Africa. All three were Boer generals who had fought against the British in the South African War (1899–1902). This was the war between Britain and the Boer Republics for control of the gold mines. D.F. Malan was the leader of the National Party that came to power in 1948.

SOURCE A

The general election of 1948, which excluded as voters all South Africans of African or Indian origin, was won by the National Party (NP). It was supported primarily by white Afrikaans-speaking descendants of those defeated by the British in the bitter war of 1899–1902, and campaigned on a new concept of 'apartheid' or 'separateness'. For some, looking at the racism, segregation and control of black labour embedded in the South African political economy, apartheid was nothing new, simply a continuation – with one more turn of the capitalist screw, perhaps – with policies that had been relentlessly pursued by white colonists ever since they had landed on the shores of Table Bay three centuries previously. But for others the election results of 1948 were a disaster – a moment when white South Africa turned its back on the new world opening up after the Second World War to pursue instead a naked, legalised racism that drew its ideals from the Nazis. With hindsight, it is possible to see that both views contained elements of truth.

F. Wilson (2009) *Dinosaurs, Diamonds and Democracy: A Short, Short History of South Africa,* Cape Town: Umuzi, p. 81.

KEY CONCEPTS ACTIVITY

Change and Continuity: Compare and contrast the views expressed in **Sources A** and **B** about whether the result of the 1948 election represented change or continuity.

SOURCE B

The 1948 election has often been viewed as a watershed in South African history. It was certainly significant in as far as it brought about a change of government. Beyond that, its importance can easily be exaggerated. It has often been labelled as the apartheid election. Yet despite the National Party's black peril tactics, it did not have a fully formulated blueprint apartheid policy ready to implement. Much of it was ad hoc and had to be negotiated in the face of competing Afrikaner and other interests. It also has to be seen in the light of what went before. Apartheid was not so much a change in policy as a change in emphasis.

Certainly, for the majority of the voteless South Africans at the time, the election was not seen as particularly crucial. Admittedly, some feared an intensification of discriminatory measures, but they also realised that the issue was more deep-seated and wide-ranging than any white election could reveal.

A. Grundlingh (2004) 'Afrikaner Nationalism in the 1930s and 1940s' in B. Nasson (ed.), *Turning Points in History Book 4: Industrialisation, Rural Change and Nationalism,* Johannesburg: STE Publishers, p. 60.