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A Glimpse of Apartheid's Dying Sting

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In February 1991, a human rights lawyer named Bheki Mlangeni received a package containing a tape player and a cassette marked "Evidence of hit squads."


Curious, he put on the headphones and pushed the play button. Explosives hidden in the earpieces blew his head open.


This was not the heyday of apartheid. It was a full year after South Africa renounced white rule, legalized the political opposition and invited men like Mr. Mlangeni to collaborate on inventing a new country.


Yet, according to prosecutors, Mr. Mlangeni was the victim of an elite police unit created and maintained by the same state that was negotiating a new order.

In what is to be the new democracy's first hard look at its recent past, a Pretoria court on Monday is scheduled to begin the trial of Eugene Alexander de Kock, the colonel who presided over a notorious police unit commonly called Vlakplaas, after the grassy, 100-acre farm that was its base.

At Vlakplaas, the prosecutors argue, what began as the white man's war to preserve his status in Africa decayed into a monstrous rampage of murder, mayhem and sabotage, continuing long past the twilight of white rule, and is still haunting the conscience and the politics of South Africa.

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The 121 charges filed against Mr. de Kock so far include the 10 best-documented killings among many attributed to the Vlakplaas unit, some of them the masterpieces of the macabre like the assassination of Bheki Mlangeni.

One of the unit's trademarks, prosecutors say, was to fold a man over a wad of explosives, then bind him with ropes into a rotund package they called a "Buddha." The detonation demolished both victim and evidence.

Alongside the grand guignol are numerous seemingly mundane charges of theft and fraud. These accounts of ordinary greed, and the records of Mr. de Kock's ample Swiss bank account, are intended to deflate the right-wing fancy that Mr. de Kock was waging a holy war.

Coming at a time when South Africans are fiercely debating the mechanics of a "truth commission" that would confer forgiveness on those who disclose the evils of the past, the trial

promises to be a preview of unsettling and divisive disclosures yet to come. The ultimate suspense of the trial, of course, is whether the defendant, who has pleaded not guilty to all charges, will turn on his former masters, possibly implicating high officials in the new government of national unity.

"The ideal situation is if he tells us where he got his orders from," said one Government lawyer, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

"If de Kock admits these things and then he says, 'Let me show you the instructions I received. Let me play you some tape recordings. Let me tell you how these things were approved on the highest level.' Well, you have the potential to put the cat among the pigeons."

To the prosecutors, the trial is less about truth than about consequences: a reminder that while South Africa is bent on reconciliation, justice has not been abandoned.

The police unit called Vlakplaas -- pronounced FLOCK-plahss, Afrikaans for "flat farm" -- was based in a trim brick-and-stucco farmhouse on the outskirts of Pretoria.

Today the farm, surrounded by a wire-mesh fence and patrolled by a lone ostrich, is a training center for policemen who pursue wildlife poachers.

Many of the Vlakplaas operatives, including Mr. de Kock, trained as counterinsurgents in the fights to preserve white control of Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and South-West Africa (now Namibia). The war against Communist-backed liberation warriors at the borders, though, came home as a war against the civil rights campaigners and their sympathizers, growing in scope and lethal independence.