

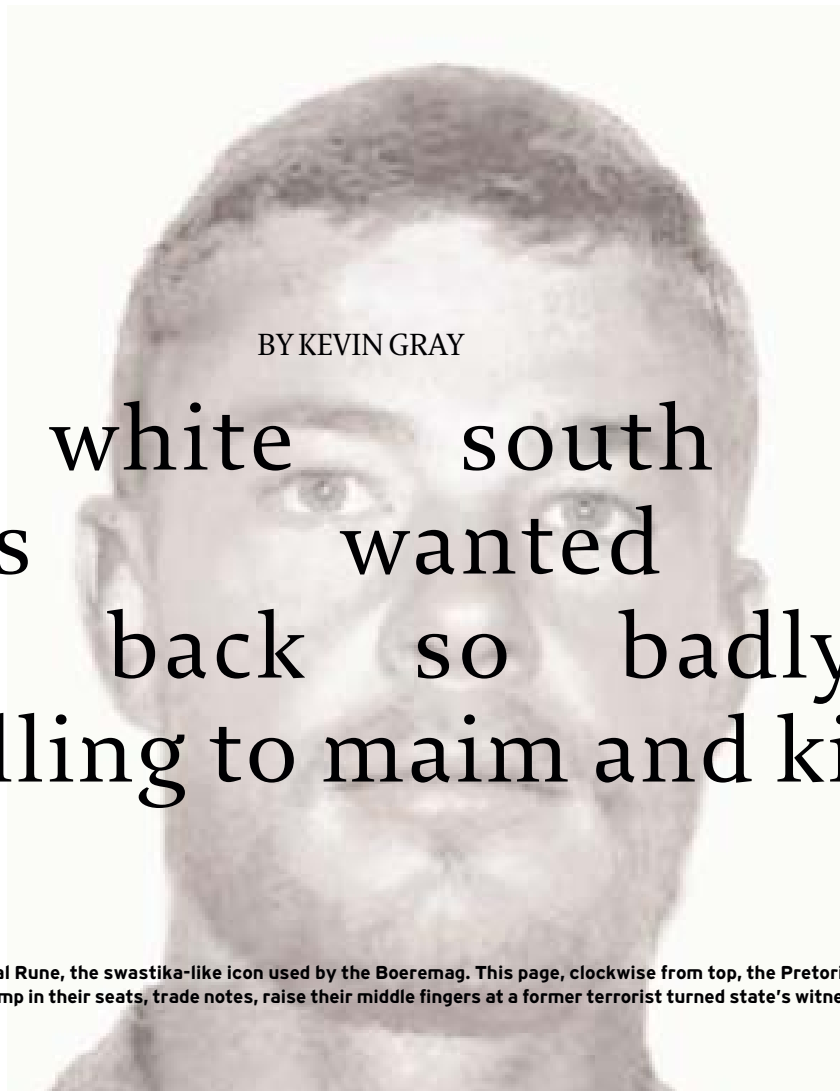


MINORITY REPORT

BY KEVIN GRAY

three white south african brothers wanted their country back so badly, they were willing to maim and kill for it.

SIGN OF THE TIMES: Opposite, the Odal Rune, the swastika-like icon used by the Boeremag. This page, clockwise from top, the Pretorius brothers: Kobus, 29, Johan, 31, and Wilhelm, 25. In the courtroom, they slump in their seats, trade notes, raise their middle fingers at a former terrorist turned state's witness, and snicker like schoolyard bullies.



AT SUNRISE, DR. LETS PRETORIUS, HIS THREE SONS, AND 17 OTHER MEN LEFT their homes in a 15-car caravan loaded with guns, bombs, and racist fury. Their goal was to lay waste to Nelson Mandela's government and drive all the blacks from South Africa.

The group called itself the Boeremag, or Boer Force, a white-supremacist gang made up of descendants of the Boers, the fierce Dutch and French settlers who trekked inland from Cape Town in the 1830s, slaughtering 3,000 Zulu warriors in a single battle. The Boers once dominated the northern half of South Africa and established apartheid as official doctrine. When that system fell, many Boers did not share the rest of the planet's joy. They believed that God, with whom their ancestors had made a covenant after defeating the Zulus, had never meant the races to mix. They were now determined to do His will.

The Boeremag members were convinced that they were fulfilling a century-old prophecy put forth by a man you might call the Afrikaner Nostradamus. He foretold the rise of black power but urged the faithful to remain strong. One day, a great black leader would die. When that day came, there would be a "night of the long knives," when "buckets of blood" would fall over Boer ancestral lands in the north. Blacks would rise up to slaughter whites. But the Afrikaners would emerge victorious, driving blacks like cattle from the nation and into the chaos of central Africa where they belonged.

So the Boeremag built bombs. They planned to leave 16 explosives in rental cars that they would park in Pretoria, South Africa's administrative capital, at government buildings, army bases, bus depots, and train stations packed with black commuters. Then they would assassinate Mandela, a crime so mon-

Fuses were fashioned from wind-up clocks and clothespin triggers.

On October 30, 2002, their alleged handiwork rocked the nation as nine bombs exploded in the black township of Soweto. One blast tore apart a railway line, sending a piece of metal a mile through the air before it crashed through a shack, killing a woman inside.

Other bombs followed. On November 22, a police outpost at a Johannesburg airport was hit. A week later, explosives nearly destroyed a bridge that police used to access a favorite casino near the eastern Cape. But the bombs did not have their desired effect. By December, police say, the frustrated Boeremag made a strategic decision. They would no longer strike hard targets like bridges and railroads. They would now focus on mass killings.

"They were getting desperate," says Tollie Vreugdenburg, a police superintendent who helped crack the case as its lead investigator. "The blacks were not rising up. There was no race war, just anger at them from all sides."

The brothers and their cohorts began each day with a prayer meeting. They had all grown ZZ Top beards to disguise themselves. Wilhelm, who resembles a fleshier Ethan Hawke, had dyed his hair red. They hid in a safe house in Pretoria, ducking down alleys when they spotted police, one former member says, and plotting targets on a handheld GPS device. In the weeks that had elapsed, Kobus and Johan had been living on a farm outside a northern suburb where, police say, they had found a target with the potential for terrible bloodshed: a squatters' camp where 5,000 blacks lived in squalor. Kobus had allegedly fashioned a 368-pound bomb, laying the explosive on top of a sack of nuts and bolts that would act as deadly shrapnel. But before they could plant the device at the

They planned to leave bombs in cars, buildings, bases, and train stations packed with black commuters. Then they would assassinate Mandela. In the ensuing race war, the Boeremag would seize power and proclaim a new republic. But the explosions did not have their desired effect, so they decided to focus on mass killings.

strous it was sure to turn blacks against whites, triggering the predicted race war. In the ensuing chaos, the Boeremag would launch a coup and proclaim a new Boer republic.

But as the Boeremag convoy headed south on September 13, 2002, their divine mission hit a speed bump. Word came via cell phone that hundreds of special forces, a team of black and white cops, lay in wait. The older men—doctors, professors, and army regulars who'd fought African National Congress guerrillas in the 1970s—began to have second thoughts. Were they truly ready for a return to those bloody days? Might they wind up outlaws instead of heroes and never see their families again?

Their doubt only fueled the resolve of one of the group's youngest members, Kobus Pretorius, Lets' middle son, a prosperous 29-year-old herb farmer. "We should go forward," he reportedly cried to the others as he knelt in the red dust. "We can do this." Henk van Zyl, a millionaire potato farmer who'd built the bombs packed into the convoy, stood over Kobus and tried to calm him. "It's over," he said. "We need to regroup."

The older men turned back, but Kobus and his brothers—Johan, 31, and Wilhelm, 25—retreated with their father to a game reserve to pray for guidance. Then, police say, they began to plot the next battle in their white-power revolution.

Within days, the Pretorius brothers, along with other young Boeremag members, had built a crude bomb-making lab in the woods of a nearby farm. They used plastic buckets to mix ammonium nitrate fertilizer and diesel fuel, the same lethal recipe used by Timothy McVeigh. (In fact, police believe they lifted the formula from a Web site devoted to the Oklahoma City bombing.)

squatters' camp, police caught Wilhelm in a park outside Pretoria and uncovered the bomb in the trunk of a nearby car. A day later, on December 11, police helicopters and special forces swooped in on the bomb lab, surprising Kobus and Johan. Police say the pair lunged for their guns and getaway car but were tackled by police who rappelled down ropes dangling from a helicopter.

Twenty members of the Boeremag are now on trial in the High Court of Pretoria. They face 43 counts of high treason, terrorism, and sabotage—the same charges for which Nelson Mandela was given a life sentence in 1964—as well as murder and attempted murder. In the end, the Boeremag's effort to provoke a race war ended with almost no bloodshed, save for the woman slain by a flying train rail. But that might have been mere luck. "From the outside, these guys look quite stupid," Vreugdenburg says, as he sits in a basement office packed with the gang's bomb casings, combat manuals, and bags of dissected clocks. "But they had 16 car bombs set to go off on a Friday afternoon. If they had succeeded, all of South Africa would have been bathed in blood."

AS SOUTH AFRICA MARKS THE 10TH ANNIVERSARY OF APARTHEID'S DEMISE, the country has embraced pluralism at the highest levels of its government. But to Afrikaners, it often seems as if society is disintegrating. The nation's murder rate is one of the highest in the world. One in eight people is infected with HIV, also one of the highest rates on earth. Crime is rampant. Over the past decade, black gangs have tortured, mutilated, and killed roughly 1,500 white farmers and their families, averaging about two murders a week. Afrikaners feel betrayed by President Thabo Mbeki's inability to stop the crimes; they fear their

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PHOTOGRAPH BY RICK GILES.



country is following the downward spiral of bloodshed and upheaval that grips so much of the continent. Less than 150 miles north of Pretoria, Zimbabwean blacks are driving whites from their homes in a state-backed land redistribution. Further inland, angry Masai in Kenya are storming white ranches to claim them as their ancestral right. To the Boers, the unrest in much of central Africa, from Congo's bloody civil war to the massacres in Sudan, augurs their own fate.

The result has been a rapid diaspora of white South Africans, with more than 10,000 emigrating each year. Among the remaining Afrikaners, a minority on the far right feel increasingly marginalized. Their language is disappearing from schools. Their jobs are threatened by affirmative action. And with only 5.6 percent of the vote, they are virtually shut out from elective office or having any voice in government. "The white right, which is characterized by its extreme nationalism and belief that God created their nation, is fighting for its ethnic survival," says Henri Boshoff, co-author of *"Volk," Faith and Fatherland*, a study of South Africa's racist radicals. "The fear of becoming second-class citizens has only fueled their paranoia."

The white minority maintains a powerful hold on the country's economy through its vast landholdings, industries, and most of all, diamond, platinum, and gold mines. Most whites have fled Pretoria and Johannesburg for suburban gated communities patrolled by black guards in ill-fitting uniforms. But

snecker to each other like schoolyard bullies at detention. Despite the presence of armed cops—the only blacks at the trial, since even in post-apartheid Pretoria most prosecutors and judges are white—the atmosphere is thick with arrogance, boredom, and uneasy humor.

Lets Pretorius, a small man with slicked-back hair and a grim mustache, sits in the front row flanked by his sons Johan and Kobus. Pretorius had for years been a member of the upper council of the Afrikan Resistance Movement (AWB), a militant group dedicated to preserving the white race in South Africa. He sent his sons to AWB training camps, where they honed their sniper skills, learned to jump from moving cars, and took classes in hatemongering. He taught his sons about Boer history, and about the primitive nature of the black man. "They were told they would be the saviors of the white race," Vreugdenburg says. Police say it was Kobus, the herb farmer and agricultural engineer, who built the bombs. Johan, they allege, provided strategic thinking. And Wilhelm, the youngest, a religious scholar who at the time of his arrest was just three weeks away from taking his vows in an all-white church started by his father, provided the moral and religious ballast.

Prosecutors say Pretorius invited the Boeremag members to his farmhouse to watch videos about the race-war prophecies. Together they read conspiracy theories explaining that a shadowy cabal of the financial elite had installed a

"There is a sentiment among whites that things have gone downhill since 1994," says a South African expert on right-wing groups, noting the rates of murder and the spread of HIV are among the highest on the planet. "But only the lunatic fringe resorts to violence. People who are well-off do not throw bombs. It disrupts their wealth."

outside those gates are townships and squatters' camps where millions of impoverished blacks live in a war zone of murder, rape, and carjacking. It's not unusual to hear whites trading horror stories, such as the carjacking in Pretoria last year in which two black men raped a white woman, then killed her along with her year-old daughter and the child's grandmother. One of the murderers blamed apartheid for his crimes and asked forgiveness just as he had forgiven whites for apartheid.

"There is a sentiment among whites that things have gone downhill since 1994," says Albert Venter, a professor of politics at Rand University and an expert on right-wing extremists. "But only the lunatic fringe resorts to violence. People who live well-off do not throw bombs. It disrupts their wealth." In this context, it is an ominous sign that several of the Boeremag gang were wealthy landowners. Among them are a university professor, an engineer, a former army colonel, and Lets Pretorius and his eldest son, Johan, both doctors.

ON A COOL AUGUST AFTERNOON, THE WINDOWLESS GROUND-FLOOR courtroom at the High Court in Pretoria is buzzing with laughter. Henk van Zyl, the bomb-building potato farmer who is now one of the state's key witnesses, is testifying with an empty explosives canister standing next to him. Van Zyl describes how the group's alleged leader, Tom Vorster (who police say has ties to America's Ku Klux Klan), once suggested turning a South African defense-forces office tower into an insemination chamber to breed a new race of Boer warriors. Tomorrow's news headlines will trumpet the ludicrous plan.

The 22 accused Boeremag members, several in matching beige windbreakers, are seated behind a double row of defense lawyers decked out in black robes with puffy shoulders. All the defendants bear an inbred resemblance to one another, with pug noses, heavy brows, and cowlicked black hair. They slump in their seats, type on laptops, trade notes, raise their middle fingers at van Zyl, and

surrogate black government in South Africa to destroy the Afrikaner nation as part of its long-range goal of establishing a one-world government under the banner of the U.N. and the World Bank. "They confuse cultural identity with state identity," says Venter, the expert on extremism. "Throw in religion and politics, and it's deadly."

Small as the Boeremag conspiracy was, their bombing spree was subsidized by a few hundred sympathetic Afrikaners who donated food, money, and hiding places. "These Boeremag people might be a lunatic fringe, but their sentiments are shared by many," Venter says. "Remember, at its height, the IRA had only a few hundred members. They were able to sustain their terror through a network of sympathizers."

TWO DAYS AFTER HENK VAN ZYL HUMILIATED HIS FORMER FRIENDS WITH tales of the insemination chamber and a plot to pass out poisoned oranges in the townships, Lets Pretorius agrees to meet with me. He is angry that the Boeremag is being ridiculed in the media, its beliefs openly scorned. He wants to set the record straight, publicly, for the first time since his arrest. Free on bail now because his wife, Minnie, 58, is suffering from depression and living alone, Pretorius has lost his medical practice and sold most of his property to pay legal bills. (Police allege he also poured about \$90,000 into the Boeremag's activities.) The onetime millionaire now faces life in prison with his sons.

On a mild winter evening in August, I drive out to the place he is renting 10 miles outside Pretoria. It's a forlorn bungalow, surrounded by a security fence, not far from a strip mall and a golf course. He greets me at the gate, wearing a burgundy sweater with matching pants and socks and clunky suede hiking boots. He is friendly and solicitous, asking whether I got lost on my way, cupping my shoulder. Inside, Minnie greets me with a warm handshake. (In court, she furiously highlights her Bible while muttering to herself.) A former beauty

with green eyes who earned degrees in math and psychology at the University of Pretoria, she kneels at the coffee table preparing herbal tea in a green set of Woolworth's china while Pretorius and I talk.

He repeats, in his Afrikaans accent, the question the judge leveled at him in his bail hearing: "Why did you create such monsters? Why did you bring up children in such a way that all three of them are in jail? Hmmm?" Now we get to the point of your visit." Pretorius says that his sons were born patriots, devoted to the Boers' God of Blood River, who helped their ancestors defeat the Zulus; to their family, and to the Boer Volk. In 1993, before the country's first all-inclusive elections, Pretorius gathered his sons on the front porch and laid out a terrifying vision of a bloody black apocalypse. He gave them three choices, which he had pulled from a handbook called *African White Tribes: How to Survive and Prosper*. He told them that if they stayed in South Africa, they would be persecuted. If they fled to another country, they would lose their cultural identity. But if they chose to fight, they might remain free.

"My sons chose to remain free," he says, his narrow eyes snapping with pride. "But I did not want to get involved in anything until God, who I speak to directly, gave me the green light to do these—to participate. And when I say

blacks from the country. But then again, he says, it would be "a fantastic idea to get rid of South Africa's blacks." With his wife sitting opposite him and nodding, the doctor leans back with his wine and asks, "What is English for the Greek *melanos*? Black. And the black man is a melanoma. He is a thing that wants what's not his. If you go to Paris, the center of Paris is black. Spain. Germany. Amsterdam. All black. The melanoma spreads to the whole body until it kills its host. He's a parasite. And that's what's going to happen."

Later, Pretorius played me some tapes of Wilhelm's songs over a pair of cheap computer speakers in his living room. Rather than perform the typical Dave Matthews alt-folk of the new South Africa, Wilhelm sings of the fatherland in the dreamy soprano of a 17th-century eunuch. In one song, Wilhelm takes his father's gun and marches into the bush. There, he falls into a rapture, imagining himself a Boer warrior, facing down the British. It is this same mixed-up fantasy that I find when I finally meet Wilhelm and his brothers, during an early-morning court recess. The prosecutor has instructed me not to talk to them, but rules in the court are rarely enforced, so we carry on a two-hour interview unnoticed.

"Being a Boer is in my blood," Wilhelm says. "And I do not want to lose that. It's something people don't understand." The police have told me that Wil-



THE FATHERLAND: Dr. Lets Pretorius (left) schooled his sons in Boer history and racist contempt. "The black man," he explains, "is a thing that wants what's not his." Right: Hardware police say belonged to Pretorius' inventive offspring, including gas canisters for bomb casings and crude triggers. Page 191: Evidence of Boeremag handiwork.

participate I must be careful. It was not really participation in a coup. It was participation in preparation to defend our own when the crisis comes. I was in the convoy, yes, but I believed the whole thing was only an exercise."

Pretorius recounts those evenings when the Boeremag would gather at his farmhouse to watch bootleg police videos filmed at the houses of murdered Afrikaner farmers. He reaches a near-ecstatic reverie as he ghoulishly chronicles for me the severed fingers, slit throats, and beer-bottle rapes at the hands of angry blacks. At a family prayer meeting, Pretorius recalls, he told his sons that God had instructed him to "prepare the way in the desert, to roll the stones out of the way." Those stones were, of course, black people.

"It's not that I'm a racist," Pretorius tells me after dinner. Minnie has prepared a meat pie made from a type of gazelle called kudu that a friend shot. (Earlier he explained that blacks in his country were inferior to American blacks, "because you took all the good ones.") As he pours us a third glass of red wine from a box, he says that the Boeremag never really planned to chase

helm, the would-be preacher who has written a book of nationalist poetry while in jail, is the ball-buster in the group. "The volcano is smoking a long time," Kobus says. His fierce eyes are ringed with bags, but he speaks in a soft, reasonable tone, and his captors have referred to him as a pussycat. "I'm totally surprised that it didn't erupt sooner. But you have people who build civilizations and then others who are like bacteria on the people. The bacteria must be destroyed, or else the people themselves will rot." Johan stands warily off to the side, pasty-faced, eating a plateful of his mother's kudu pie.

When I ask the Pretorius family if they're ready to face life in prison, Kobus recounts the story from the Book of Daniel about the three men who were cast into a fiery furnace after they refused to bow down to a golden idol, saying they would bow only before their God.

"Our goal is to save the Boer people," he tells me as his father nods in agreement. "It's not known if this court will find that we are guilty or not. That is not in my hands. But I will never bow before this government. I will go before God." ■