

Pit bull attacks in South Africa—a historian sheds light on the issues

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Pit bulls have been [in the news](#) in South Africa after a series of deadly attacks on humans by the dogs. There have been [revenge attacks](#) on the dogs and politicians have [called for](#) their ban—tapping into a history of dogs being used by their white owners to intimidate and attack black South Africans. A [racist incident](#) then made the news when a dog lover responded with fury to the call for a ban.

Sandra Swart is a South African historian who specializes in the history of dogs in society. We asked her to shed some light on the issues.

Is the pit bull a dangerous dog or is it being scapegoated?

A little of both. At the moment we are facing a real crisis coupled with a social panic. The attacks are a real problem and to solve it we can and must learn from history. History shows us the dangers of a social panic are two-fold: overreaction (to satisfy public outrage) and under-reaction (in favor of short-termism that avoids dealing with the bigger problem).

So first, we need to understand the history of pit bulls (which were bred, originally in England, for bull-baiting, a blood sport where bulls tied to an iron stake were savaged by dogs) and then imported to South Africa, mainly from the 1970s, where they were further bred—some as [guard dogs](#), some as pets, some for illegal dog fighting rings.

They have also been bred to have high pain thresholds. Their behavior is perhaps [60% genetic](#) but remember, dog behavior is flexible and can be

[drastically modified](#) by training and experience, especially between three and 12 weeks. Moreover, their training is often derelict or intentionally aggression-inducing—as they are often used as extensions of toxic masculinity, as status symbols with teeth.

That said, there are plenty who are genuinely family pets who are unlikely to inflict harm. If they have a personal history of unwarranted aggression towards people it is safer to euthanize. If an owner is worried (and they should be), they should get their dog assessed by the [SPCA](#) or a qualified dog behaviorist. But that does not solve the bigger societal problem.

What can we learn from history?

Whatever the state decides to do now, the public must realize that previously other breeds were also held to be too savage for South African society. In the 1920s, German shepherds—or so-called "wolf dogs"—were considered a scourge. There were later waves of concern over boerboels. In the winter of 1983, hackles were raised when the town of Parow tried to ban rottweilers, dobermans, bull terriers and mastiffs. Vets were quick to point out that Labradors and Pekinese were responsible for most bites though. In fact, any power breed (strong, muscular frame, broad head, bite-and-hold fighting tactic) and, indeed, most dogs can inflict harm or death to a human.

There are long term legislative actions that can be taken. The first is breed specific legislation (banning certain breeds), the other is dangerous dog laws (which target bad behavior rather than bad breeds).

Breed specific legislation is being strongly pushed for currently, but while it feels suitably dramatic, history suggests it simply [does not work](#). The concept has been around for a century—since 1929 when some parts of Australia banned German shepherds. After several maulings in

the 1980s, the UK imposed legislation in 1991 banning pit bulls but the number of dog bites [stayed the same](#)—as was the case in different counties in the US. People simply bought other vicious breeds.

Remember, "[pit bull](#)" is not a clearly defined genetic category. A lot of identification is simply perception. There are at least ten breeds frequently mistaken for a pit bull (which also leads to [over-reporting them](#) as perpetrators). Equally, if pit bulls were banned tomorrow and the cries for their immediate execution were heeded, many innocent dogs would be killed unnecessarily. Moreover, what to do with cross-breeds—half pit bull and half miniature schnauzer, for example: euthanize them too?. This would be an ethical outrage. But it would also be pointless, because a banned breed can simply be renamed something else and the danger continues.

Moreover, breed specific legislation ignores behavioral and other biological aspects: the aggressive dogs are much more likely to be male, be intact (unneutered), and most likely to be unsocialized (including kept on a chain usually) or actively encouraged in aggression.

So this legislation is both over-inclusive (it includes lots of gentle dogs) and under-inclusive (it misses a lot of vicious dogs). It is easy to legislate, but impossible to enforce. It is popular but provides a fake sense of security.

And dangerous dog laws?

Dangerous dog laws are complex, not such good public relations and they are expensive and require hard work. But dangerous dogs laws do work. They look at the prior behavior of the individual dog, and they can be tweaked to include more focus on dogs from "power breeds" or dogs over a certain size. They are not a quick fix but, over time, they work by putting the responsibility over the dog squarely with the owner. It is like

owning a gun—if you are negligent with that firearm, and someone gets hurt, you are criminally liable and face serious consequences including prison.

There are a lot of ideas to draw on here, including requiring special permits, requiring special liability insurance and mandatory sterilization for power breeds, or dogs over a certain weight, or known offenders. Micro-chipping and keeping a database of previous offenses would mean dogs would be punished for their own bad behavior rather than their breeds, which are hard to define genetically. Each case can be evaluated on its own merit then. It also requires private-public partnerships. Also, the state needs to vigilantly uphold anti-roaming laws, in partnership with the SPCA. They might not stop all dog bites, but they would greatly reduce fatalities.

What deeper historical issues does the subject trigger?

Something does linger in the South African mind about dogs. Our national psyche is troubled. Nothing remains as strong in the public's imagination as the snarling German shepherd straining at the end of the apartheid policeman's leash. There is a deep ambivalence about dogs in South Africa and we need to understand why that is.

There is a strangeness in the relationship between dogs and humans, and between humans and humans over dogs. I reveal the history of this strangeness through the police dog as a lens, in my forthcoming book—*The Lion's Historian*. Through misuse of police dogs (and also often privately owned dogs) as agents of control in the police and bio-surveillance in the suburbs, big dogs became signifiers of anxiety and stereotypes that white and black people have of each other, especially the terror of the police dog.

In fact, "police dogs" were only used on purpose for attack after 1961, for crowd control. For fifty years before, police dogs were only allowed to be smell detectives in the state's police—never attack or hurt anyone.

Something we can do is invert this old apartheid model and do totally different canine educational roadshows at schools. Most victims are children. Teaching both good dog ownership skills and safe behavior around [dogs](#) would help a little.

What else can be done?

The Hawks, South Africa's priority crime division, need to break the illegal dog fighting rings, working closely with the SPCA (who already do so much). Once dog fighting is stopped for good, there will be less incentive to breed for aggression, and more money in breeding pit bull lines that are family friendly. Breeding strictly with behavioral testing against aggression will [help](#). Other breeds, like the old English bull dog, also descend originally from fighting stock. Only once the authorities cracked down heavily on their fighting, was there was less incentive to perpetuate the aggressiveness in the [breeds](#)—and now they are famously gentle family pets. Of course, there are already breeders who focus on friendly, gentler lines in pit bulls, so the genetic material is there.

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